

Submission
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INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

Organisation: International Council for Museums; Australia

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The Parliament of New South Wales

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NSW Legislative Council: Inquiry into Museums and Galleries

Submission on behalf of International Council of Museums, Australia (ICOM Australia)

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am pleased to offer the following comments on the Upper House Inquiry into Museums and Galleries on behalf of ICOM Australia.

The comments are organised according to the published terms of reference

a) General Comments on policy and funding etc.

ICOM Australia is pleased that the New South Wales Government has recognised the importance of the Museums and Galleries Sector in the cultural, social scientific and economic life of the state.

New South Wales has some of the finest museums in Australia, ranging from those that have a truly international reputation to those that play an important part in the life of their local communities – and of course some that do both.

At a time when our society faces so many challenges, and when tolerance and understanding are at a premium, museums and galleries are particularly well-placed to explore issues of identity, belonging and community. Large museums such as the Museum of Applied Art and Science are particularly well-placed to do this, but equally, museums and galleries at the heart of their local communities, such as the Casula Powerhouse have built an impressive reputation in this area.

A phrase that, if not coined, was at least affirmed in New South Wales, is that museums are safe places for unsafe ideas: this epitomises the role that museums can play in an uncertain world and their importance at the heart of our society.

Importantly, Australian museums in the 21st century are working much more closely with their public and with their stakeholders. More than ever, they explore and represent the interests of all Australians, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, as well as the many more recent migrants to Australia. This approach is vital for museums and galleries if they are to be relevant to a broad constituency.

Similarly, as we face the prospect of environmental change and, in some cases, degradation, whilst addressing the need to feed and sustain a growing population, the combination of sound environmental research combined with science education and public engagement is critical. Such work is carried out by a number of NSW institutions but, possibly, nowhere more comprehensively than at the Australian Museum which brings so many of these aspects together, notably with its championing of citizen science.

In the period of *Centenary of Service*, the role of Museums in terms of both commemorating and reflecting on the sacrifice of generations, with, and on behalf of, their communities has been considerable. In Sydney, the work of the Australian National Maritime Museum (perhaps outside the strict terms of reference of this study, but an important part of the museums ecology of New South Wales) has been exemplary.

It is a fairly well-established fact that the establishments most visited by tourists to any major city are the major museums and galleries. The potential is demonstrated by the great establishments of the world – the British Museum is Britain’s most visited indoor attractions: similarly, the Smithsonian in Washington can claim the same accolade for the USA. New South Wales museums and galleries have similar aspirations.

The economic benefits of museums and galleries in both defining a place, and in attracting people to it, are considerable and have been quantified in many economic studies.

In a state the size of New South Wales, the role of museums and galleries across the whole state should not be underestimated. Whilst it is tempting to become fixated on Sydney, Museums and Galleries across the state from Newcastle to Wollongong to Broken Hill constantly demonstrate their value, as community assets, visitor attractions and economic drivers.

Similarly, the economic impact of a range of cultural facilities in the *Evocity* councils of Albury, Armidale, Bathurst, Dubbo, Orange, Tamworth and Wagga Wagga was demonstrated in the 2014, Museums and Galleries of NSW report *‘Adding Value!’*, and its 2009 predecessor *‘Value Added!’*.

b) Impact of Council Amalgamations

ICOM Australia would not presume to comment on specific local issues as the range of circumstances involved is often complex and subtle. We would, however, emphasise the points above in relation to the role of museums in terms of exploring issues of identity and belonging.

Often, a local museum or gallery will have established such a strong link with a particular community, or group of communities, that amalgamation of facilities can be socially counterproductive: similarly, the economies of scale that may be sought through such amalgamations can challenge both economic and social sustainability.

There may of course, be other circumstances where certain institutions may not be viable, but could be made to be so through just such amalgamations.

In short, each proposal must be judged on particular circumstances and, we would hope, taking into account the wishes of the respective communities.

c) Opportunities for revitalisation

Obviously, one of the major possibilities offered by such a review is the ability to revitalise operations, management and governance structures. One would hope that adequate consultation with the stakeholder communities for this important sector is carried out. Change can usually be beneficial if it is well planned and implemented; however, poorly conceived change, or 'change for change's sake, is to be avoided.

d) Access to Collections – Physical and Digital

Providing wide and equitable access to collections should be at the heart of the mission of any public museum. Principles of digital access are now well developed. We would merely highlight the importance of 'third-party providers' as a major point of access which means that whilst institutionally hosted websites, for instance, remain important, collections will often be accessed through other means (for example, natural science collections through the *Atlas of Living Australia*.)

e) The Sale of the Powerhouse Museum and the move to Parramatta

In the first place, ICOM Australia wishes to recognise that the Powerhouse is part of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS), which, of course comprises more than one site, including the Sydney Observatory and the Discovery Centre. ICOM Australia has welcomed the re-assertion of the MAAS identity which is true to the historic philosophy of the Museum.

In the second place, we are aware of the range of views about the proposed closure of the Powerhouse and the move to Parramatta. There are many who oppose the move, whilst there are many others who are excited by it. The management team at MAAS is working diligently to plan for and execute the move.

We understand the disappointment of some at the prospect of losing a major cultural attraction from the centre of Sydney; equally, we also recognise the regenerative potential and socio-economic benefits that a major cultural development in Parramatta can offer to local communities.

Given these facts, it would be inappropriate for ICOM Australia to argue for a particular outcome. What we would ask is that prior to a final decision:

- A comprehensive options analysis is (or was?) carried out to evaluate the costs and benefits of each approach;
- Realistic cost-planning and appropriate resource allocation should underpin the selected solution;
- Due regard should be paid to the cultural considerations that impact on the proposed development site;
- Should the Parramatta proposal be developed, ready access to core collections for the people of Parramatta and its environs should be a priority.

f) Development of transparency of advice

We have no specific response to this.

g) Impacts of Efficiency Dividends

Efficiency dividends will not be unfamiliar to anyone reading this response. Consequently, they are a fact of life for most publically funded institutions. We would, however, make the following observations:

- Efficiency dividends, if applied, should be calculated on, and restricted to, cash appropriations from funding authorities, and should NOT be applied to depreciation calculations and, more specifically, should not be applied to costs covered by externally earned income from commercial, charitable, philanthropic, or grant-funded sources. To include earned income in efficiency dividend calculations is unfair, illogical and discourages innovation and entrepreneurship.
- Where possible appropriate funding for capital maintenance and dilapidations should be preserved and, again, should be quarantined from efficiency dividends because inadequate investment in this area represents a false economy which results in increased costs for both institution and funding provider, in the long term.

h) Economic impact of museums and galleries

See comments under a), above.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Alec Coles

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