

**Submission
No 113**

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

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The Hon Robert Borsak MLC,
Committee Chair,
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4,
Legislative Council,
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Submission to the Upper House Inquiry into Museums & Galleries

This is a submission to the *Inquiry into Museums and Galleries (General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4)*.

1. Introduction

The Submission specifically addresses paragraph 1(e) of the terms of reference, namely the:

'... sale of the Powerhouse Museum site in Ultimo and its proposed move to Parramatta, and whether there are alternate strategies to support museum development.'

As part of this, the Submission also considers the transparency, or lack of it, in the advice given to Government on priorities for NSW museums and galleries within the context of the decision referred to above (paragraph 1(f)).

The author of the submission was a Trustee of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (henceforth **Powerhouse Museum**) between 1999 and 2010 inclusive, a total of almost twelve years. For the years 2003 to 2010 inclusive, the author served as President of the Museum's Board of Trustees.

The author was made a Life Fellow of the institution in 2011, an honour bestowed on persons who have made a lasting and special contribution to the Museum.¹

2. Statutory framework

The governing statute is the *Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences 1945 (the Act)*.

Relevantly, by s.11(1) of the Act, the Trustees 'have the control and management of all property vested in them.' They constitute a body corporate and may dispose of real property, but only with the approval of the Governor.

¹ The author, with many other museum advocates, was a vocal opponent of the NSW Government's 'decision' in 2007 to merge the Powerhouse Museum with the Australian Museum, another example of the dangers of blindly following bureaucratic decision-making in the cultural sphere. Thankfully, that misconceived plan was aborted after community outrage – and staunch Trust opposition.

The Trustees, as custodians of not only the real estate of the Museum, but also of its substantial collection, are, in effect, trustees for the people of New South Wales. Collectively, they lend an important sense of independence to the long-term governance of the Museum. As is the case with other government agencies established via a statutory trust, the underlying intention of the legislature was to ensure that Trustees act with a view to the long-term interests of the State and its people, rather than the whim of government from time to time.

For the reasons that are articulated later in this Submission, it is the view of the author that the Trustees of the Museum, in particular the Trust President at the relevant time, abdicated their responsibilities under the Act in that they failed to protect and advocate the Museum's best interests, as was their fiduciary obligation.

3. Relocation to Parramatta

On 3 April 2016, the Government announced that a site on the banks of the Parramatta River had been chosen for the Museum. This had followed an earlier broad-based decision to 'relocate' the Museum from its Ultimo site to Western Sydney, ostensibly to service the cultural needs of Sydney's burgeoning population.

One would have expected a thorough process at Trust level about these momentous decisions for an institution that has its origins over 135 years ago in the Sydney International Exhibition hosted at the Domain's Garden Palace in 1878. As I wrote in the Foreword to *Yesterday's Tomorrows*, the commemorative book published in 2005 to coincide with the Museum's 125th anniversary:

Few organisations in Australia can boast a history of achievement spanning 125 years. Within the context of the relatively short timeframe of European settlement, that accomplishment comes into even sharper focus. Allied to this temporal milestone is the fact that the Powerhouse's existence has run in close parallel with Australia's evolving interest in innovation. In brief, the Powerhouse has become a window through which a young nation's quest to become part of, and, in some cases, to lead, the world in technology and design comes to life. ²

All of this is closely aligned to the Museum's location, the Harris Street precinct where in 1893 the then-named 'Technological Museum' first opened and where the Museum has resided ever since.

4. The Trust's deliberations

Contrary to the expectations of many, the Museum's Trust hardly turned its mind to the pros and cons of relocation. Most alarmingly, the then President, whose primary function was surely to uphold the fiduciary obligations imposed upon him and his fellow Trustees by the Act, seems from as early as March 2015 to have become the relocation's staunchest advocate. His call to Trustees at their 4 March 2015 meeting to keep a 'unified public position' and to work 'collaboratively with Government ... to achieve the outcome' (ie a new museum in Parramatta) betrayed an early sense of abdication of responsibility.³

² *Yesterday's Tomorrows: The Powerhouse Museum and Its Precursors 1880-2005*, Powerhouse Publishing, 2005, p.10.

³ References to Trust Minutes in this Submission are drawn from the Minutes of the Board of Trustees Meeting No. 620-4 held on 4 March 2015 obtained under the *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009* (NSW).

Even more unusual was the appearance of Mark Paterson AO, Secretary, Trade and Investment, at that same Trust meeting at which Trustees were firmly cautioned by him *against* opposing the relocation. Such a step would be 'counterproductive', Trustees were told by the Premier's despatched representative. Never in my twelve-year history with the Trust can I recall such pressure being brought to bear on a statutory board by an emissary of the NSW Government.

From then on, the tone having been set, the Trustees, as one, seem to have meekly complied with every beck and call of Government. Despite the establishment of a so-called 'Project Steering Committee' to oversee the relocation (on which only the then Museum Director and one Trustee were asked to participate), Trust Minutes sadly reveal that there was not one iota of consideration given to the significance of a major cultural institution abandoning both its historic precinct and the touristic hub created by the city's existing cultural infrastructure. To the contrary, the whim of government, motivated no doubt by the immediate lure of a lucrative land sale, but carelessly ignoring the massive expenditure a new museum will entail, dictated this Trust's deliberations – or lack of them.

And all of this overlooked, of course, the massive impact this flawed plan would have on the collection itself which, as former Deputy-Director Jennifer Sanders once commented, represents the 'DNA of our nation'. To treat the bequests of thousands of people over more than a century with such disdain is as alarming as it is cavalier.

Museums are not departmental offices that can be abruptly shifted *holus bolus* to new localities for reasons of efficiency or savings, or even for reasons more mischievous. Rather, they are our secular shrines where we silently reflect on human endeavour. And, over time, their attachment to their *place* becomes as significant as the collections they house. This is the case with the Powerhouse Museum.

5. Readiness to be called

Naturally, given the tone of this submission, and my previous role with the Trust, I am ready and willing to be called to give evidence to the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Nicholas G Pappas AM
10 August 2016