

**Supplementary  
Submission  
No 96b**

## **INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES**

**Name:** Dr Grace Cochrane

**Date received:** 20 August 2016

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## **For the Record: Request for review, and briefing paper to Premier, August 2015**

Grace Cochrane AM, August 2016

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### **Standing Committee 4: Museums and Galleries**

#### **Terms of reference:**

e) The sale of the Powerhouse Museum site in Ultimo and its proposed move to Parramatta; whether there are alternative strategies to support museum development (and most other terms of reference...).

#### **Point of view:**

I am an independent curator, writer, consultant and educator in the field of decorative arts, crafts and design. I have worked in this field for over 40 years, nearly 20 of them from 1988-2005 at the Powerhouse Museum as a former senior curator (CV supplied separately).

#### **The issue:**

To bring to the Committee's attention a briefing paper and request for review supplied to the Premier in August 2015, written by Grace Cochrane AM, in consultation with others.

- It was presented to the Premier by a well-known artist/craftsperson in his electorate, and two museum professionals, at a meeting on Monday, 3rd August 2015.
- The Premier referred the group to his cultural advisor/ambassador for Western Sydney, Elizabeth Ann Macgregor (director of the MCA art gallery in the CBD), and a subsequent meeting was held with her by three members of the PHM Alliance.
- Both the Premier and Ms Macgregor made it clear they had made the decision, and that no other options for either the Powerhouse or Parramatta had been seriously considered, as this was the best. Ms Macgregor added that her role was in western Sydney, and that she was not interested in other options for the Powerhouse in the city. It was evident then, and in later months, that consultation in Parramatta had not included an informed range of constituents.
- On August 12, 2016, one year later, Macgregor wrote (sic): 'The proposal to move the powerhouse arose from discussions with the western sydney lobby group around how to address the inequity of arts funding in the context of no budget increases and 90 percent of the funding being committed to 5 state institutions in the CBD. This along with a number of ideas were conveyed to the Premier and the deputy premier as minister for the arts. When the premier asked my opinion in my role as cultural adviser on western sydney I told him it was a ground breaking proposal and would go a long way to addressing the needs of western sydney.'

***Following, is the briefing paper and request for a review, discussed with the Premier and his adviser:***

## **The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences: Powerhouse Museum Request for Review: Briefing paper for Premier the Hon. Mike Baird, MP**

Presented to the Premier by a well-known artist/craftsperson in his electorate, and two museum professionals, at a meeting on Monday, **3rd August 2015**.

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### **Subject:**

The NSW Government's decision to demolish the building occupied by the Powerhouse Museum in Darling Harbour, the primary location of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS), to make way for sale of the property for high-rise development, and to transfer the contents and programs of the Museum to Parramatta.

### **Purpose: request for review**

- To advise that there are more visionary, practical and appropriate options for both this Museum and for Parramatta, that the Government could explore and consider, and for which it could be identified and remembered positively.
- To request that an expert and informed committee be appointed to:
  - review the current decision
  - research and document other options for both the MAAS and for Parramatta and the West
  - advise the Government on a more appropriate revised proposal.

This enquiry would draw on experienced professionals who know about the management and cultural significance of museums, who know their audiences and constituents, and who understand the cultural and economic implications for making serious changes, while being able to research and identify other options.

### **Issues:**

#### **1. *Significance: a place in the CBD***

- To note that the Museum has a 135-year connection with the CBD as the second-oldest state museum (from 1880 in the Garden Palace following the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition; to adjacent the Sydney Technical College in Ultimo from 1893-1988; and to the former Ultimo Power Station building redeveloped as the award-winning Powerhouse Museum which, in 1988, was awarded the Sulman Medal for its adaptive reuse design).
- With its 500,000 items in the fields of science and technology, decorative arts and design and NSW social history, MAAS is the only institution of its kind in Australia, and is therefore of state, national and international interest to both general and specialist audiences of all ages, who expect to find such an institution easily accessible in the centre of such a significant capital city.
- The extensive and well-researched collections in each of the three subject areas are recognised for their significance, while the opportunity to cross-reference them in one institution is unique.
- MAAS is one of the key state and city cultural institutions, all of which (eg. AGNSW, Australian Museum) have firm claims to their location in the city. The others are not being forced to totally relocate, and MAAS should also stay in the heart of the capital city where it was founded.
- MAAS has longstanding connections with related international museums such as the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Science Museum, London; the Smithsonian Institution, USA; Te Papa Tongarewa, Museum of NZ; and many

others. The primary venue for each of these institutions is in the main centre of their city.

- There are good cultural, social, educational, philosophical and economic reasons for extending the MAAS profile in the CBD, and investing in developing its presence and program there (depleted in recent years through declining resources but beginning to thrive again). Such investment is already occurring with the AGNSW and the Australian Museum, on their own sites.
- At the same time, both city venues, the Sydney Observatory and the Ultimo Power Station building, are important to the history of the city. The Powerhouse building is listed both on the National Trust's register and as a local heritage item in the City of Sydney. It is too significant to destroy for short-term gain. Governments and constituents alike must bear in mind the significance of these kinds of buildings for future as well as past and present generations, rather than destroy them without responsible consideration.

## **2. Options for the West**

- Importantly, as with other cities in the Western Sydney region, Parramatta deserves, and has been asking for, cultural institutions reflecting its own past and present cultural significance and activity, and has expressed concern for the continuing integrity of its heritage sites.
- Rather than transplant the MAAS, there are other, and better, options for both Parramatta and the Western Sydney Region that could involve all CBD cultural institutions, including aspects of MAAS, but without transplanting any of them completely and destroying their history and heritage in the process.
- For example, a common – and easily accessible – building in Parramatta could take temporary exhibitions, events and projects, some of which could be collaborative, from all of CBD state museums and galleries. (MAAS has already made its Castle Hill storage facility, the Powerhouse Discovery Centre, accessible to audiences, and in later 2015 this facility will be shared by the Australian Museum and Sydney Living Museums.)

## **3. Options for MAAS**

- The MAAS requires investment to retrieve its profile and programs, damaged in recent years through depletion of operational funding and human resources.
- It should be noted that museums such as MAAS that are forced to charge fees, cannot be compared by using audience numbers, with those that are free. And they should not have to respond by replacing engaging educational and collection-based exhibitions with income-generating popular entertainment.
- Ideally, to allow specific but also interlinking projects, the three strands of the Museum should remain on its Ultimo site, which needs further development to accommodate underused aspects of the collections – such as decorative arts and design – and bring back lost audiences.
- Among other possibilities that can be considered, one suggestion that is more manageable and effective than a total move to Parramatta, is:
  - Science and Technology: allocate all the exhibition space in the current Powerhouse building in Ultimo, enabling further exhibition and experiences in an appropriate building, while encouraging educational and tourism partnerships in Darling Harbour and the surrounding university, IT and creative industries precinct.

- Decorative arts, Crafts and Design: extract these extensive and under-utilised collections to be housed in a re-purposed government building as a MAAS-linked historical and contemporary Design museum as part of the precinct of cultural institutions in the Sydney CBD, accessible to key international, national and local audiences. Note: essential to stay in the city, linked to the existing institution and its audiences. (This idea has been developed since 2010, and a proposal has been documented.)
- NSW History and Society: deploy the MAAS's collections to establish a Museum of NSW in Parramatta, while still drawing on those collections for projects in the other MAAS venues when appropriate. This museum would incorporate regional history and contemporary cultures; have contributions from, and links to, other institutions; and could enable integration with Parramatta's social and cultural histories. Until recent funding cuts, the MAAS maintained very strong connections with regional museums throughout NSW.

#### **4. Reviewing cost-benefits**

- For those who know the extent of the MAAS collections, both in quantity and in some cases, size (aeroplanes, Boulton & Watt engine etc), it is estimated that the costs associated with the realities of preparing new storage and display facilities, as well as resourcing the packing and transfer of the collection held in the Powerhouse exhibitions and collection storage facility, would far outstrip the cost of more appropriate alternatives, as described in 3 above.
- Moreover, the MAAS would require an estimated 20,000 square metres of public space and 10,000 square metres of storage (other than the Castle Hill facility) with many specialised conditions (eg. steam), and be easily accessible to public transport. It is understood that current suggested locations and proposed funds are inadequate for these purposes.
- It is of considerable concern that there appears to be pressure to sell off parts of the collection.

#### **5. Public and professional opinion**

- To advise the Premier and Parliament of a very strong opinion and a growing lobby in the broadest public and professional communities, against what is seen as an ill-informed decision to service short-term economic and political gain.
- Despite full agreement that the West deserves cultural attention, the decision to demolish the current Powerhouse site and move the entire Museum out of the CBD is being criticised across cultural, educational and political constituencies as the destruction of a unique cultural asset located in the context in which it has evolved over a long time.
- A number of significant sponsors and past and potential donors to the collection are now actively discouraging benefaction to the Museum, generally expressing their mistrust of the Government's ability to fulfil its custodial responsibilities for a world class collection valued at \$400m and held in trust for the people of NSW. Although Government funding for acquisitions remains necessary, public sponsorship and benefaction is intrinsic to continuing to develop what is recognised as a world class collection.
- The Minister for the Arts is known to have had very limited advice; has not consulted widely enough with those who know the broad museum field, about cultural responsibilities, comparative costs or visions for other options; and

appears not to have consulted adequately with the Western organisations to find out what they want to meet their own perceived needs.

- While a number of professional approaches have been made to the Minister by informed people (past Trustees, past senior staff, museum professionals from the wider field) who know many of the issues and possible options that have not so far been discussed, the Minister has made it clear that he is not prepared to enter into discussion. His position is regarded with great concern.

**Recommendation:**

**That the Premier appoint an expert and informed committee to consult more widely to:**

- **review the current decision to demolish the Powerhouse building of the MAAS and relocate its content and programs in Parramatta**
- **better address the social, cultural, management and economic issues associated with the proposal**
- **research other existing and potential options for the MAAS as well as for Parramatta and the West**
- **and advise the government and constituents on a revised proposal for the future of both.**