Submission No 158

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

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Date received: 24 August 2016

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Submission from Bernice L. Murphy, August 2016

Upper House Inquiry into museums and galleries No 4

Term of reference (1e):
[T]he sale of the Powerhouse Museum site and its proposed move to Parramatta and whether there are alternative strategies to support museum development.

This submission addresses the proposal to sell the Powerhouse Museum site and move the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences in its entirety from central Sydney to Parramatta. It has three main themes.

- The submission questions significant presumptions, consequences, and shortfalls in both process and long-term outcomes for what has been undertaken as a major state government initiative destined to change the cultural life and museum facilities that have shaped the history of Sydney over two centuries.

- The submission highlights some irreversible consequences in the break-up of physical linkages between museum institutions and amenities in the capital that make up its character as a major city in national and world comparison. It argues that only through the co-location of the various buildings and bases of these institutions (with boards, audiences, supporters and philanthropic patrons concentrated nearby) can they maintain the 'critical mass' and direct professional interactions needed to provide a strong cultural architecture in Sydney.

- The submission advocates alternative serious planning needed to build a similar architecture of related facilities (including a full range of different types of state collections and public programs, encompassing natural history and art collections) for direct access, stimulus and enrichment of communities radiating around Parramatta.

PART ONE – ANALYSIS OF THE PRESENT POWERHOUSE RELOCATION PLAN

1. Negative factors and irreversible loss to long-term heritage investments, physical access, and cultural amenities in NSW

1.1 The proposal threatens to create a new but large 'cavity' in the suite of museums and heritage facilities in Sydney, and long-developed cultural memory and physical interaction of related institutions, linked since the late-nineteenth century in the cultural and social history of the state.

1.2 As the capital of New South Wales, and a major city within national and international tourist circuits, Sydney needs to protect its history, state collections and interrelated heritage, of which a city-located museum of applied arts and science and technology forms a crucial component.

In protecting this heritage, New South Wales can better access the interconnected resources to all communities making up the state of New South Wales – the far inland communities towards Broken Hill and the SA/NT borders; the northern communities stretching towards Queensland; and the southern communities extending to the Victorian border. A Parramatta location for the MAAS provides no guarantee that these geographically dispersed social communities making up New South Wales will better be able to access their cultural history and heritage by contacting or physically travelling to state facilities located exclusively in far western Sydney.

1.3 The capital city location arguments are not merely ones serving metro-centric privilege. They shape a more rational concentration of heritage resources that can be better connected, cross-related, and then more fairly accessed and circulated further afield, when mobilised from a long-developed suite of state institutions based in Sydney.

2. New South Wales museums' history – peculiar in national comparison

NSW pursued a different structure and division of museum institutions in its colonial period (in comparison, for example, with Victoria or Tasmania), leaving a long legacy of some difficulties of integrated linkage ever since.

The Powerhouse relocation proposal promises to deepen and further deform awkward structural divisions between the state's heritage collections. It risks pursuing this course against current trends nationally and internationally, ignoring professional wisdom, performance outcomes, and financial implications.

2.1 Victorian comparison

In Melbourne, by contrast, Victoria has the following superior check-points:

a. Victoria's premier applied arts and design heritage is long-collected, preserved, handsomely interpreted and presented in fine displays and short-term exhibitions as part of an integrated 'arts' spectrum of collections within the **National Gallery of Victoria** (projected to Wikipedia audiences as 'Australia's oldest, largest, and most visited art museum'). The NGV's nationally unsurpassed concentration of fine art, design, furniture and decorative arts has steadily enriched that institution's audiences since its founding in 1861.

b. Meanwhile Victoria's natural history, social history, science and technological heritage collections and programming are constellated and handsomely showcased within **Museum Victoria** (originally co-located with the NGV and State Library on Swanston Street; but today housed in a purpose-designed building adjacent to the World heritage-listed **Melbourne International Exhibition Building** of 1880, which MV manages). Sydney lost its own International Exhibition Building of 1879 in the tragic fire a few years after it opened. Museum Victoria today further manages metropolitan branch museum facilities located elsewhere in metropolitan Melbourne.

c. One of the subsidiary museums within Museum Victoria's campus of museums is the **Immigration Museum**, handsomely located in Flinders

Street in the historic former colonial Customs building. New South Wales, by contrast, has in recent years abandoned a migration museum (which, being virtual, never existed in a physical home in fact). And Sydney has similarly abandoned programming or presenting the story of migration as a special part of the social history of the state – a surprising omission, given the continuing importance of this theme and its continuing contribution to cultural diversity in contemporary social communities in Sydney and across the state.

Museums documenting the experience and contributions of migrants are on the rise internationally – Paris provides a recent striking and successful case of a new museum devoted to this theme in an historic, repurposed cultural building. Adelaide's Migration Museum, founded as a state government initiative in 1983, has now long been part of the interconnected heritage facilities in South Australia. Again, New South Wales offers weaker comparison, and seems to be pulling against the tide of cultural heritage development and provision in other capitals.

d. **Indigenous social and cultural history's place in the interrelated facilities and public impact of museum institutions in Victoria** has been increased intensively in recent years. This ensures that Indigenous people's contribution to natural history and the cumulated social history of Victoria – as well as cultural achievements presented in the state Gallery – are accessible in more ample and interconnected facilities in the capital city. New South Wales presents weaker contrasts to this picture, and Indigenous cultures' diverse histories would be demoted even further on a national comparison by the Powerhouse relocation scheme. Evacuation of the Powerhouse from its Ultimo site, close to the heart of the Eora nation and its original lands and clans historically, creates further breaks in the sequence of museum facilities caring for, interpreting and showcasing Indigenous contributions to Australia's history and contemporary heritage.

e. Abandonment of an historic location since the foundation of MAAS: The holus-bolus **removal of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences** from its historically rich location promises further deterioration of the mutually reinforcing relationships between Sydney's museums, their collections and interrelated public amenities – which are long-secured in other states. Such interrelationships provide the tools, infrastructure, and physical presence of interconnected museum resources (and exhibitions and public programs). They shape an intelligible and interrelated heritage and history of the state of NSW, for broad engagement of local and visiting audiences in Sydney.

f. The particular successes of **large-scale exhibitions in Melbourne** in recent years, notably through the Winter Masterpieces international exhibitions series, have been notable for the Gallery and Museum reinforcing their mutual cultural connections across state institutions located in close proximity in the capital, including the **State Library** (which itself staged the blockbuster exhibition, *Les Misérables: From Page to Stage*, drawing huge audiences in 2014). Melbourne's exhibition facilities also include the **Victorian Arts Centre** and its growing permanent collections and active exhibitions programs. Meanwhile Victoria's **Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI)**, adjacent to Federation Square, also provides a focal point for film, video, and moving-image technologies and artforms. ACMI also stages hugely successful international exhibitions, especially deploying new media – a further facility of which there is no comparable institution in Sydney or NSW.

2.2 Queensland comparison

It is noteworthy how successful and beneficial to Brisbane have been the major facilities expansions and interrelated concentration of the state's **Queensland Museum**, **Queensland Art Gallery**, **Gallery of Modern Art** and newly re-housed **Queensland State Library** within a close 'campus' arrangement in Brisbane. These developments have strikingly benefitted the social impact, cultural attractions, educational impact, and income-earning potential of these institutions in their programs development.

3. Needed interrelationships between museum collections and programs for an enriched educational and audience experience

In all other state, National and Territory capital cities, collections and displays of arts, science and historic heritage in Australia are similarly interconnected: spanning social history, design, art, natural history, science, applied arts and technology within the principal capital city's heritage and museum facilities.

Sydney's latest move to dilute such concentration – in comparison with the two more recently facility-concentrating capitals of Melbourne and Brisbane – and instead adopt a far-reaching **dislocation initiative**, tearing a vital institution out of its physical home precinct since the 19th century, is hard to comprehend by contrast.

Sale of the Powerhouse's site, destruction of its purpose-built facilities opened for the 1988 Bicentenary, and relocation of the whole institution to Parramatta, would make it impossible to experience many of the critical interlocking relationships within the state's museums and collections since their founding. The long history of their connected developments since the colonial era would be obscured – that is, without necessitating a substantial journey away from the capital henceforward, to encounter collections no longer accessible in Sydney.

4. International comparisons

In its self-imposed downgrade and 'ripping' of the linked fabric of long-developed museums in their mutual proximity, civic support, and historical connections, NSW would be taking a unique direction – contradicting national and international comparisons concerning capital cities and their concentrated linking of cultural and heritage amenities.

Compare the above scenario with any major capital city in the world, by examining the related eco-system of cultural and scientific institutions on which cities today build their 'cultural capital', conserve and showcase their history and heritage, provide a range of exhibitions attracting large-scale audiences and tourism, sustain their leisure amenities, consolidate their identity, and assure their recognition and high profile internationally.

The NSW plan just doesn't make informed sense by international comparison. It is heading in the opposite direction from global indicators, ignoring recent development outcomes for intensified cultural and social experience in cities. Without evidence, it disregards distinguishing features sought – and generally being intensified – in high-profile capital cities, supporting a vibrant civic life, multiple museum, gallery, and other cultural amenities, and related commercial and business infrastructure.

5. Facility destruction, audience fragmentation, and loss of capital investment in key state resources

a. The proposed relocation to Parramatta would entail wastage of a purpose-built museum facility in Sydney, in which government, the education sector, and the population of New South Wales have long-term resources vested and invested.

b. The MAAS/ Powerhouse museum history already represents a large and long-term cumulative investment by the public and taxpayers in the cultural facility and resources in Harris Street and Ultimo. This investment has been tailored to the former historic power station complex, which itself conserves a significant record of Sydney's social history through its physical form and location.

6. Loss of support base

The planned move would uproot a major state institution, its resources and associated 'cultural capital', forcing it to a distant location where it would be physically and socially separated from school audiences and long-standing supporters – many of these patrons modestly resourced but generous and loyal volunteers, providing support and patronage over many years, who have long-developed ties to the museum and its institutional history. Nothing would be left in its place. The move also risks alienating crucial philanthropic support developed through the longevity and status of the MAAS as a Sydney museum; an historic institution devoted to a particular bandwidth of the state's cultural history and heritage.

7. Severance of the Powerhouse from a newly developing precinct

It is ironic that the current state government initiative plans to divorce the Powerhouse from an upsurge in related local facilities in Ultimo that are comprehensively becoming more sympathetic and closely aligned with the MAAS mission, exhibitions and programs-delivery for public benefit.

The abrupt departure from the Ultimo facilities would sever the Powerhouse from a recently intensified series of new design, university, exhibition-related activities and creative centres of learning and new businesses in the immediate neighbourhood and catchment areas of its physical location.

The Powerhouse is poised to capitalise on these new alignments in the city and related cultural developments from Central Station to Ultimo, with the national broadcaster/ABC's headquarters close by. These developments of recent years have most successfully created new pedestrian and local transport networks, forming a natural 'precinct', 'critical mass' of interacting activities, and a hub of applied art, new technologies and design-related crossovers to attract audiences and support institutions mutually in the area.

There are two universities nearby (UTS and University of Sydney), which provide degree courses in architecture, arts, technology, engineering, and design; and a third university (UNSW) also providing architecture/design and arts training within the local catchment area. This newly intensified constellation of facilities, forming an innovative hotspot and design precinct, promise natural 'turnaround' opportunities for the mission and institutional re-settings of the Powerhouse in audience development, programming, educational access, and service to multiple social constituencies.

8. Impact on education and curricular connections for Sydney's metropolitan schools

The composition of audiences visiting the Powerhouse site includes schools and other educational institutions in metropolitan Sydney, who could no longer readily access the resources of the state's Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences as part of

their learning, development, and leisure amenities that incorporate multiple metropolitan museum visits across a given year.

PART TWO

Comparative reference concept: A 'Smithsonian Institution' model of multiple museum institutional facilities and interconnected cultural, educational and heritage amenities for western Sydney.

Commentary and proposals in this part are deliberately brief, because the crucial work and planning underpinning the comparative possibilities for Parramatta and western Sydney have not been undertaken.

Consultation with major institutional and local community stakeholders has not occurred. This would be crucial to examine alternative scenarios for more distributed location and access of many of the state's museum and gallery collections and associated resources, utilising the potential of western Sydney facilities or venues. Such access could be designed in possibly linked but discrete facilities; or in facilities distributed across a group or series of sites; or also spanning (including) some consolidated, linked-purpose facilities and concentrated, leading-edge exhibition and cultural centre provision, at a high-visibility, high-use site designed for public access – incorporating related services and leisure amenities.

The 'Smithsonian Institution' prototype of a series of interconnected museums, cultural and historic heritage facilities in Washington DC is raised not as a literal model or prototype for western Sydney's potential in museums and cultural facilities planning. (In Washington's case, some 19 distinct museums are linked within the Smithsonian's architecture, and all report ultimately through their boards to a federal Secretary and the US Congress.) The 'Smithsonian for Western Sydney' idea is raised simply for a convenient and quickly-grasped concept that could be explored for local application, through detailed and long-range cultural planning for western Sydney.

The Smithsonian is therefore offered simply as a resonant concept and 'rapid prototyping' model (as in 'design thinking'). It instantly arouses consideration of the multitude of alternative possibilities that could benefit western Sydney's long-range development: through far-reaching planning of cultural and educational facilities that could be directly enriched by the full range and extent of the state's collections owned in New South Wales.

Such a multi-institutional potential opens out a series of possible facilities, audiences, educational benefits and potentials for western Sydney's development in a useful 'starting concept'. It is significantly more wide-ranging, substantial and far-reaching than the short-term 'snap solution' of an uprooted Powerhouse, masquerading as a positive cultural enrichment that western Sydney 'deserves'.

Comments on possible benefits to all the NSW state museum/gallery institutions

Below is offered a short sketch of just a few of the potentials in cultural planning in New South Wales, with a special focus on western Sydney. These are no more than preliminary comments and concepts – to mobilise a broad picture of what could be developed through alternative, and carefully explored, consultative approaches.

Some last points, only preliminary – needing consultation.

i. All state museums and cultural and heritage institutions have collections expansion and storage challenges to face in their present management of resources and long-term development planning.

ii. Nearly all have major parts, if not all, of their collections in some cases, which – if not currently used in permanent displays or temporary exhibitions – are already located in off-site storage facilities. Some of the greatest riches of some of these institution's collections are currently unable to be displayed, and therefore are scarcely known – for example the world-leading Pacific cultural collections and Indigenous collections owned by the Australian Museum, but almost never seen; or the long-developed (but now undisplayed) decorative arts and social history collections of the Powerhouse – and that institution's huge technology collections; and many fine works of art in a broad range of media owned by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, including contemporary art and photography, which are infrequently shown. All of these 'hidden' resources have the potential to be interrelated and brought into public use and reach wider audiences through new, purpose-designed and constructed facilities and programs located in western Sydney.

iii. The potential exists for new expertise and facilities to be developed in and through a western Sydney focus, development plans and resource-gathering. There are as-yet-un-analysed opportunities for resources use, which could ultimately yield increased collections access and a remarkable series of new exhibitions and displays in the west. Most important, these unique resources could serve all local and neighbouring schools in western Sydney, in support of all parts of their K1-12 curriculum development and life-long learning. This merits including parts of the full range of state museum collections.

iv. The potential further exists for cultural resources development and exhibitions facilities to be provided through which internationally-developed, so-called 'blockbuster' sized exhibitions could be sourced; or alternatively developed from within Australia for public presentation. Such exhibitions would have the potential to draw large audiences from further afield, including from metropolitan Sydney, and thus provide a new focus and reputation for unique and high-quality cultural expertise and experience provided directly from within a central facility in western Sydney. Needless to say, such developments have far-reaching corresponding commercial multipliers and promise to create a huge boost in tourism to Parramatta and its manifold social communities, meanwhile supporting other local cultural and heritage facilities in the broader western region.

How this vision and potential might be achieved needs enlistment of the direct expertise, careful planning and authority of each of the state institutions concerned, their directors, staff and boards.

It is to be hoped that the state government will not proceed with a short-term proposal concerning the Powerhouse, entailing a broad range of directly negative consequences and many unproven cultural claims of future advantage.

This submission argues an alternative vision and approach that would begin with thorough local consultation involving western Sydney authorities, institutions and stakeholders – many of which are indicated in this submission's contents. It would equally undertake consultation with all of the major state museums, galleries and cultural institutions located in central Sydney within state-owned buildings and responsible for state collections and their access.

Most importantly, such consultation would need also to be connected with a larger and longer-range vision for the cultural, educational, infrastructural and social development of western Sydney, and its multiple and diverse communities.

(Bernice L Murphy, August 2016)

(Brief personal resume follows):

Bernice L. Murphy is the former National Director, Museums Australia (Canberra), and served seven years as Chair of the Ethics Committee of the International Council of Museums/ICOM, co-located with UNESCO (2004–2011). She served nine years (six as Vice-President) on ICOM's Executive Council (1995–2004), and three years as a founding member of ICOM's Legal Affairs Committee (2001-2004). Bernice Murphy worked for fifteen years with a small team developing what became Australia's first museum of contemporary art, serving as Curator, Chief Curator and finally Director of the MCA Sydney (1984–1998); and became an alumnus of the USA's MMI/Getty Leadership Institute program in museum leadership (Berkeley, 1997). In addition to a long career as a curator, and coordinating Australian and international art and exhibitions exchanges, she has published extensively since the 1970s on historical art and exhibitions, museum architecture, artists' training, art museums, and contemporary art (including Indigenous art) from many countries. She is general Editor and a contributing author for the recently-released ICOM 70th anniversary publication*, Museums Ethics and Cultural Heritage* (published Routledge, UK, 2016); and is currently assisting UNESCO in planning of its first High Level Forum (in Shenzhen, China, Nov. 2016) – as an international strategy in implementing UNESCO's significant Recommendation on Museums, adopted at the UNESCO General Assembly in Nov.2015. Bernice Murphy received the Australia Council's *Visual Arts Emeritus Medal* in 1999, the ICOM-Australia Award for International Relations in 2009, was made a Life Member of Museums Australia in 2015, and Honorary Life Member of the International Council of Museums (ICOM, Paris) in 2016. She current edits *Museums Australia Magazine* and continues to be involved with museum developments, ethics, and training internationally.