

**Supplementary  
Submission  
No 148h**

## **INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES**

**Name:** Dr Lindsay Sharp

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**Submission IX to the Upper House Inquiry into museums and galleries in NSW, August 22, 2016.**

**Submission IX: A modest proposal to establish a non-political appraisal of the 'Powerhouse Museum move' to Parramatta project in terms of consultation, location, planning process, cost and scale through the creation of an independent Committee of Review, in November 2016, to report back to Government in May, 2017.**

**[Relevant terms of reference: (a) (b) (d) (e) (f) (g) (h)]**

**Dr LG Sharp**

**Founding Director, Powerhouse Museum, 1978-1988.**

**PLEASE CALL ME AS A WITNESS FOR THIS AND OTHER SUBMISSIONS**

**Key words:**

Severe politicised context from project start; deliberate creation of geographic and community divide east versus west; but a centuries-long perspective rather than a few months or days is required; museums are about engagement with cultural lives in deep time; reboot the project now; look at the realities of potential cost blow-out, heritage destruction, demeaning scope reduction and find a new, more creative approach; following the findings of this Upper House Inquiry and its recommendations, set up an independent body to consult, research, analyse and propose more appropriate options- or double down on a variant of the present project if it emerges as the most viable, cost-effective and supported by communities in greater western Sydney.

**Key Concepts:**

Cultural projects which succeed almost always reflect individual passion, community ownership, conceptual creativity and not political close management; they usually have a long-term referential frame; museums are one of the longest serving types of cultural institutions; they are best when planned well, but not mechanistically by external, commercial consultants; instead by museological professionals listening to regular people, after wide consultation following professionally mandated processes; transparency, wide consultation, open discussion and shared planning lead to community buy-in; an Independent Review entity, chaired and staffed by experienced professionals and tasked with finding creative options to create an iconic institution in Parramatta can generate a result which has been thoroughly tested with those communities it will represent. In all this, avoiding short term political bias and hidden motivations leads to a much more sustainable result.

**Commentary:**

On 25 February 2016, a short debate in the NSW Parliament took place in response to a Petition signed by over 10,000 citizens asking that the Powerhouse Museum not be 'moved' to Parramatta. The response by the principal Government spokesperson, Dr Geoff Lee- MP for Parramatta and Parliamentary Secretary- is quoted below in full from Hansard [2]. The

politicisation of this core cultural element is clear from Dr Lee's comments. All his major points have been comprehensively rebutted in other submissions to this Inquiry, notably (among many others) by Ms Kylie Winkworth, Mr Lionel Glendenning and Ms Jennifer Sanders. The aim of this submission is to suggest that the whole process is de-politicised so as to enable a long term, more creative, far more sustainable option is developed to assist Government to amend the costly, sub-optimal project it currently seems to be unable to navigate around [1].

Dr Lee's speech contains one key assertion which Government knew to be unlikely as early as July 2015 [see FOI released minutes from MAAS Board of Trustees for that month] where it was reported that the then anticipated cost of the museum project was between \$450 and \$500 million in 2015 \$s.

"Why not build another Powerhouse? Responsible government understands there is not an unlimited budget. Responsible government understands that we must live within our means. That is why the money from the sale of the Ultimo site will be used to build the new Powerhouse in Parramatta."

The same set of FOI released documents also notes elsewhere that the sale value of the site will not exceed \$250 million. Such a value would depend on the cleared site, minus existing buildings of heritage value, being available for dense redevelopment (see this author's other submissions). Recently an official spokesperson commenting on heritage matters made the following comment about the site clearance issue in correspondence to another Witness to this Inquiry:

"I refer to your letter to Dr Geoff Lee MP, Member for Parramatta, about the heritage values of the Powerhouse Museum buildings at Ultimo and your concerns that the buildings may be demolished. Your letter was referred to the Minister for Heritage, the Hon Mark Speakman SC MP, and I have been asked to reply.

Regarding your concerns about the demolition of these buildings, I can advise that the NSW Government has announced plans to sell the Ultimo Powerhouse buildings into private ownership to fund the transfer of the Powerhouse Museum collection to a purpose built building on the banks of the Parramatta River at Parramatta. However, there are no current plans for the demolition of the buildings.

Pauline McKenzie, Director Heritage Division" [date: Mon, Jul 25, 2016 at 3:12 PM]

Since it has been established that the new facility in Parramatta, if partly comparable to the existing museum in Ultimo, is likely to cost in the region of \$1 billion in 2016 \$s (see this author's submission 1) there is no possibility that sale of this site cleared or otherwise can fund the new museum. Government has stated to the Inquiry Chairman it will provide a project costing to this Inquiry in November 2016- it should be more than capable of doing so now based on Cabinet documents dating from March/April this year. The delay is probably caused by a desire to hamper this Inquiry. Moreover, the recent decision by the Federal Government to disallow the Chinese based bid for NSW Electricity infrastructure must also give cause for concern to the Treasurer and Premier: how can they afford this \$1 billion project and justify that expense? In a phone call to the Witness noted above, logged in notes at the time by him (after 28 April 2016), Dr Lee stated directly that:

"Phone Call: (1) Favoured the building of the new residential tower on top of existing PHM building [in Ultimo] (2) Recognised that more money would be needed than could be raised by sale of Ultimo site...An amazing phone call..."

This conversation demonstrates that Government has deliberately hidden from the people of NSW the cost of the new museum project in Parramatta and now finds itself in a quandary: how to find a creative solution which will not cost unfunded extra hundreds of millions of dollars but which also satisfies the genuine motivation to help Parramatta and greater western Sydney develop an iconic cultural centre which reflects the demographic and community facts and needs well understood by Dr Lee and the Premier:

"... For far too long governments have treated the people of Western Sydney with contempt; for far too long governments have concentrated funding for arts and culture in the Sydney central business district. That is now going to change. We are going to address the imbalance. Western Sydney deserves a world-class arts and cultural institution. It is no secret that I am disappointed by some segments in the community. Some say we should have an annex of the museum. We are not the little brother or the poor cousin of Sydney central business district [CBD]; we will not accept second best... Most disappointing are those elitists who say Western Sydney does not deserve the Powerhouse. Let us look at the facts. One in 10 Australians currently lives in Western Sydney; they deserve access to a world-class institution. Two million people live in Western Sydney and this number will grow by another million in the next 20 years. Parramatta is the centre of population growth in Western Sydney. Parramatta is the geographic heart of greater Western Sydney...." (ibid, Hansard)

If we take away the loaded, politically motivated language here which is deliberately misleading, venomous and mis-directional and look at the core issue then there is a powerful kernel of truth and equity inherent in this statement: greater western Sydney absolutely deserves such a facility. All those trying to assist the retention and reenergising of the Powerhouse Museum in its present site also fully support this core idea; ergo, they support one of Government's prime motivations.

So, how can this Inquiry assist Government achieve this outcome without avoidable destruction of heritage and valuable existing assets worth about \$460 million and an end project cost of \$1 billion? Or, if the cost is kept to \$450 million avoid the inevitable minimisation of exhibits and public experience and the substitution of innumerable small objects for the majestic ones currently on display- quantity for quality as it were (please see my other submissions for support for these statements). How can we assist Government pivot towards a course which provides community buy-in and long term sustainability while realising some asset value from existing facilities? The answer has been suggested by Dr Lee already- see below. Let us turn towards an appropriate mechanism which is supportive of Government's stated motivation above.

### **A Modest Proposal:**

The present Upper House Inquiry if conducted and engaged in by its members in a non-partisan fashion can actually do the Government and the people of NSW a great service. By recommending that an independent Committee of Review, chaired and staffed by professionals, carry out a full community consultation exercise, review all plans and documents to date, canvass creative options with initial costing of same, compare these with the existing project costings and plans and then make evidence-based recommendations to Government- the present Inquiry can outline a road map forward which is non-political, professionally mediated and evidenced and non-pejorative to any party, person or stated point of view.

Ironically this would mirror the three year review process mandated by the Premier in 1979/1980 and regulated by Mr Gerry Gleeson, the then Head of the Premier's Department, leading to absolutely final approval of the Powerhouse Museum as late as March, 1983. The full project was delivered by mid-1988.

This Committee of Review will need to be resourced appropriately and operate according to Government dictated protocols. If commenced in November 2016 it must report back by the end of May, 2017. Its processes should be open and transparent. Its purpose is entirely positive, supportive of the key motivation and completely non-political with the aim of recommending a way to realise some site-value financial contribution from Ultimo, if possible, to assist in the creation of an iconic, world class, community-centric cultural facility in Parramatta. If a community tested variant of the present project plan proves to be the most cost effective and beneficial option without destruction of the present museum, that would be seen as a positive outcome by all concerned. Whatever the eventual recommendation there is the shared aim: creating a cultural destination of compelling power and fascination to local communities and visitors alike in Parramatta, utilising the world class collections of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences and other State collections.

[1] See Guardian Australia articles:

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/aug/23/culture-goes-west-could-parramatta-really-become-australias-next-great-city>

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/apr/11/when-powerhouse-museum-is-torn-down-a-vital-part-of-sydneys-history-goes-with-it>

[2] Hansard: NSW Parliament, 25 February 2016, Petition debate, POWERHOUSE MUSEUM ULTIMO

“Dr GEOFF LEE (Parramatta—Parliamentary Secretary) [4.35 p.m.]: The Powerhouse is moving to Western Sydney—to Parramatta. We make no apology for moving the Powerhouse, a national iconic institution, to bring it to the people. It is the right place for people, for access, for Western Sydney and for the whole of New South Wales. The Powerhouse Museum will be an anchor to a larger, vibrant new arts and cultural precinct in Parramatta. For far too long governments have treated the people of Western Sydney with contempt; for far too long governments have concentrated funding for arts and culture in the Sydney central business district. That is now going to change. We are going to address the imbalance. Western Sydney deserves a world-class arts and cultural institution. It is no secret that I am disappointed by some segments in the community. Some say we should have an annex of the museum. We are not the little brother or the poor cousin of Sydney central business district [CBD]; we will not accept second best.

TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Ms Melanie Gibbons): Order! I remind members that some of them are on three calls to order.

Dr GEOFF LEE: We deserve better. We are going to build an iconic institution in Parramatta. Some say that Parramatta is too far away. I invite all those critics to visit Parramatta; it is a short train journey from the CBD and that may surprise some. Some say: [Why not build another Powerhouse? Responsible government understands there is not an unlimited budget. Responsible government understands that we must live within our means. That is why the money from the sale of the Ultimo site will be used to build the new Powerhouse in Parramatta.](#)

TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Ms Melanie Gibbons): Order! The member for Clarence will come to order.

Dr GEOFF LEE: Today I heard on radio the member for Sydney saying that the moving of the Powerhouse was politically motivated. [We make no apology for funding arts and culture in Western Sydney. We make no apology for giving the people of Western Sydney access to arts and culture. We make no apology for supporting arts in Western Sydney and other parts of New South Wales.](#) To those who signed the petition, I say that I appreciate your views. This is a great democracy. Most disappointing are those elitists who say Western Sydney does not deserve the Powerhouse. Let us look at the facts. One in 10 Australians currently lives in Western Sydney; they deserve access to a world-class institution. Two million people live in Western Sydney and this number will grow by another million in the next 20 years. Parramatta is the centre of population growth in Western Sydney. Parramatta is the geographic heart of greater Western Sydney.

The New South Wales Government is investing billions of dollars in Parramatta, which is a fast-growing central business district. The Powerhouse Museum will provide the catalyst for an arts and culture precinct and is great news for families in Western Sydney who will no longer have to travel into the city. It will be a destination that will draw families, and excite younger audiences to the great treasures and experiences that only a Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences can provide; an experience that is immersive and interactive. Whether the feedback is from local schools or local communities, it is overwhelmingly positive [evidence?]. Establishing the Powerhouse Museum in Parramatta provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity to create a museum for the future, a museum that showcases the changing shape of Sydney, new methods of content delivery, design innovation, learning and collaboration.

[The Government is going through a process of looking at various sites and has narrowed it down to two sites: the David Jones car park along the waterfront or the old golf course in Parramatta. We are undertaking a cost-benefit analysis to find the right solution. We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to get it right. We are moving the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta.](#) I say again that the people of Western Sydney deserve access to great arts and culture experiences. Parramatta is the right place for this museum. I thank the Deputy Premier and the Premier for their leadership and commitment to this important move.

TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Ms Melanie Gibbons): Order! People in the public gallery will remain silent.

Dr GEOFF LEE: [The relocation of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta should not be hampered by politically driven, elitist attacks but supported by Labor](#) that has done enough to burden the region with its failure to deliver vital transport and infrastructure projects. This Government will not let Western Sydney down.

TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Ms Melanie Gibbons): Order! I remind people in the gallery that clapping, booing or shouting is disorderly. We welcome you to the Parliament but please do not disrupt the proceedings.