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**INQUIRY INTO INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND
GALLERIES**

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The Hon Robert Borsak MLC
Committee Chair, Portfolio Committee No 4 – Legal Affairs
Re Legislative Council Inquiry into Museums and Galleries in NSW
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Submission from Kylie Winkworth, May 2018

The paper below was sent to the Cultural Infrastructure Program Management Office (CIPMO) in September 2017 to highlight some of the issues, risks and misconceptions in the government's approach to planning the PHM to Parramatta project. If not addressed they will likely have serious ramifications for the costs, sustainability and community support for the new museum in Parramatta.

Museum Planning 101: a beginner's guide to museum planning for the PHM to Parramatta Team

1 The concept of a museum is centred on the premise that it is a **permanent** institution.¹ Museums carry the promise of being there in perpetuity, with collections held in trust for future generations. That is what inspires donors and benefactors. People entrust their treasures to the *museum*, not to the government. A museum is an intergenerational commitment. This is why the foundation of a new museum requires very careful planning and analytical thinking.

2 The 'relocation' of the Powerhouse Museum (PHM) is a New Museum. Audiences, benefactors, sponsors and volunteers will not automatically transfer to Parramatta. Indeed, the museum's traditional supporters are likely to be lost given the acrimony over the effective demolition of the PHM.

3 Under the government's plans, moving the PHM to Parramatta entails the demolition of the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo. It will be the end of Australia's only museum of applied arts and sciences. There may be some other cultural use for the Ultimo site, and the shell of some heritage buildings may remain, but the Powerhouse Museum will disappear, along with its unique brand developed over the last 30 years. What the NSW government is proposing is a world-first museum demolition plan.

4 It is a huge mistake to predicate the development of a new museum in Parramatta on the 'relocation' of the PHM. Everyone knows that the Powerhouse Museum cannot be relocated. The PHM is indivisible from its architectural and heritage context, and from its 125 years of history and community associations in Ultimo and Sydney. A museum is not just a collection of assorted objects that can be packed up and moved to another location. Museums develop their collections as an integral part of their mission. Over time the collections develop deep connections to the museum's context, location and buildings. In the case of the PHM, the museum's power, transport and engineering collections are strongly connected to the former Ultimo Power House and the history of power and transport in NSW. While objects are movable heritage, a museum is much more than a building shell for assorted collections.

5 The PHM has highly significant social values and intangible heritage. The social value of the Powerhouse Museum is evidenced in the petition to the NSW Parliament, signed by more than

11,000 people, and the sustained community protest since Premier Baird announced the museum would be moving in November 2014. The experience of visiting the Powerhouse Museum is in the treasured memories of a generation of families. Hundreds of thousands of children have grown up visiting the PHM and they have vivid memories of family excursions and discovering its great spaces and objects. The PHM is a community cultural organisation that has developed through long engagement with its visitors, donors and benefactors. The museum is not recognised as a government asset, it belongs to the community. The connection between the PHM and its visitors, donors and supporters is deeply felt, which is why the government's idea of 'relocating' the PHM has met such strong resistance.

6 The new Parramatta museum will face enormous hurdles in building community support if it entails the destruction of a much loved museum which is part of the cultural history of Sydney and NSW, and the memories of generations of families and museum visitors. The risk is that the new museum's foundation narrative will be tainted by its associations with the loss of a much loved museum. It will be a generation before visitors stop comparing the new museum with what was lost at Ultimo. Notwithstanding the barracking from the Daily Telegraph and certain business lobby groups in Parramatta, there is no community acceptance that the PHM must be demolished to build a new museum in Parramatta.

7 Building a MAAS museum in Parramatta is a **new museum**, not a museum re-location. It should be obvious that one cannot take a nineteenth century concept of an applied arts and sciences museum and drop it in a new community which is nothing like the historic and community context that gave rise to MAAS and the PHM. An ambitious 21st century city like Parramatta needs a 21st century museum, free of the expectations (and sense of loss) that would come with the closure of the PHM and removal of most of the applied arts and sciences collections to storage.

8 This does not mean that the PHM as an applied arts and sciences museum has had its day and needs 'reinvention'. Has the V&A had its day? No. MAAS was reinvented as the PHM in 1988. In its first twenty years its unique museology gained international acclaim². Yes Powerhouse exhibits need updating and staff capacity needs to be rebuilt, but the museum is in fit-for-purpose, accessible, well designed, high quality facilities that were built for a century and more of working life. The museum's power and transport collections in particular are in spaces that are uniquely appropriate for the scale of these objects, and resonant with meaning.

9 All new museums start with consultation on the themes, form, purpose and rationale of the museum. Why is the museum needed? What is its purpose? What will the museum contribute to its community? These questions go to the heart of the relationship between the museum and its community. When these questions are thoroughly explored in community conversations they help to ensure that the museum's concept and rationale fits the community's needs, aspirations and idea of itself. So far none of these questions have been answered in public documents for the proposed Parramatta museum.

10 A new museum is a forever institution; it is a cultural promise from one generation to the next. A museum should not be conceived as a trophy, a reward, an infrastructure project, or an economic development strategy. A new museum may generate economic benefits, but this is not of itself a justification for creating a museum, or moving one. The 'return on investment' in a museum development should first be measured in cultural, community and education outcomes.

Communities expect governments to be custodians of the cultural legacy of previous generations, and where possible to add to that legacy. The closure and demolition of the PHM will break this basic trust and expectation. There will be no cultural enhancement from 'moving' the PHM to Parramatta. Indeed the new museum will be smaller, less accessible, it will show fewer objects and have inferior collection facilities.

11 All new museums need a compelling narrative that synthesises its founding idea or concept, its rationale and purpose. Nearly three years on from Baird's announcement that the PHM would be 'moved' to Parramatta there is still no founding idea or narrative for the Parramatta museum. A museum cannot be built around a narrative of cultural disadvantage or the demolition of a much loved museum. And a museum cannot inspire its community and new supporters if it is built around empty clichés of the type that currently litter the project's selling documents – as in *a new iconic, world-class museum...*

12 Planning a new museum is a different project from planning the extension or renewal of a museum in its historic neighbourhood. A museum that is moved or expanded in its historic neighbourhood retains its supporters, donors, benefactors, sponsors and volunteers. A museum that is moved to a new city, or develops a new satellite museum, has to build a new support base of benefactors, donors, sponsors and volunteers from the ground up. It does this through community conversations based on its compelling narrative about what the museum is about, why it is needed and how it will contribute to the life of the community. This is what is conspicuously lacking in the Parramatta museum proposal; see also my notes on additional questions for the business case.

13 Planning a museum is **not** the same as planning an art gallery. While museums and galleries share some similarities in the way that aspects of their interpretation practice have converged, in other respects they are very different cultural facilities. The differences between planning a museum and planning a gallery need to be thoroughly understood by the project team. This includes issues around audiences, development processes and engagement. A gallery is essentially a set of flexible empty exhibition spaces. A museum is two infrastructure projects in one that need to mesh seamlessly together, that is - the building envelope and facilities, and the exhibition design and installation. This is why museums are around 50% more expensive to build than galleries. The operational costs for a museum are also higher to allow for the higher cost of changing exhibitions which are essential to attract return visitation. All museums including science centres need changing exhibitions.

14 Planning a new museum is an exercise in community engagement. It has to be 'owned' by the community and knitted into its fabric. And the museum needs to be conceived and planned in a way that embodies or projects the community's idea of itself. A museum is not primarily an infrastructure project. It is firstly based on, and developed through community engagement so that the resulting content and building embodies the museum concept, projects something of the character of the place and its stories, and of course meets the community's aspirations for what they want to see and do in the museum.

15 The government should look at the option of building a gallery and temporary exhibition space on the DJs carpark site. This would present fewer constraints on the design of the building and allow for something approaching the iconic building that has been promised. A gallery has long been a cultural priority for Parramatta, re-iterated in its new cultural plan.³ Even if the government spends \$1.2b on

a new museum, Parramatta will still need a gallery that will reflect the city's aspirations for its future as a creative place, and enable it to exhibit the creative cultures of western Sydney.

16 Who is the museum for? Audiences for new museums must be clearly identified. Is it for people in Parramatta or for people across western Sydney? Is the museum for Sydneysiders or all the taxpayers of NSW? Is it for interstate and international visitors? Is the museum for schools? Is the museum for young people in western Sydney? Is the museum for the migrant communities of Parramatta and western Sydney? None of the material about the PHM to Parramatta project has explained who the new museum is for. This is one of the most basic and important elements that must be clear at the start in any planning for a new museum.

17 If the aim for the Parramatta museum is to attract international visitors then the museum should be centred on Indigenous culture and history, especially the history of the Aboriginal people of NSW. Ideally this should be in the World Heritage listed Fleet St precinct, saved from high rise development. World Heritage is the biggest brand in international tourism. A World Heritage listed precinct with a museum about Aboriginal culture and contact history would draw domestic and international visitors to Parramatta. And as the recent debate over statues as history demonstrates, there is a powerful case for a museum that tells the story of settlement since 1788, interpreting the impact of colonisation and settlement on Aboriginal communities and their resilience and survival.

18 The recent census results showing that the Parramatta region has more than 75% of its population born overseas should also prompt deep thinking about the form of museum that will best knit this diverse community together. It is difficult to see how a modern Asian community will bond with a museum of mainly obsolete British technology and applied arts if the relocated PHM model is delivered. Certainly a case could be made for a new gallery of Asian art and cultures in Parramatta. Parramatta's cultural plan expresses pride in the cultural diversity of the city. And the economic potential of Sydney's culturally diverse population is well understood. The case for the Parramatta museum is based on the proposition that western Sydney is culturally disenfranchised. But what about all the migrants that live in Sydney, especially western Sydney? Where do they find their culture and stories reflected in Sydney's museums? Their journeys, their stories and their faces are barely seen in our cultural institutions. If the new museum is for the 76% of people in the Parramatta region who were born overseas then they should leave the PHM in Ultimo and build a contemporary 21st century museum that expands the narrow scope of the state's cultural institutions, currently missing an Aboriginal culture and history museum, a museum of NSW history and a museum of settlement and migration history since 1788.

19 It appears that the NSW government has been poorly informed about migration museums, their popularity and the place of migration history and themes in all but one year of the K-12 curriculum. It is not true that migration museums do not attract return visitors. All museums need changing exhibitions and public programs to attract return visitors. There are really successful migration museums and some that are not so successful. The successful ones have great relationships with their communities and a program of events and changing exhibitions. Of note is the increase in visitation to the Paris immigration museum when attendance at other museums in Paris has fallen.⁴ When the Museum of the Riverina presented the *Faith, Fashion and Fusion* exhibition, developed by the MHC and PHM about Islamic dress, it drew big audiences and the public programs were booked out. The exhibition had a profound impact in building cross cultural community networks. We need cultural institutions that build cultural bridges, especially museums which are safe spaces for cultural

adventures. Elsewhere it has been reported that Sydney has been marked down because it does not do enough to integrate new migrants. A Museum of NSW in the Fleet St precinct would finally recognise the reality of Sydney as a culturally diverse city since its foundation in 1788.

20 There has been a lot of discussion of the proposed museum on the DJs car park site anchoring a cultural precinct. This needs much more careful analysis, especially in relation to the audiences for the museum. Co-location synergies are important in cultural precincts. This includes the other things that visitors can do when they go to the museum. In my view the co-location synergies between museums and theatres are very low. Generally people go museums and theatres at different times, on different occasions, and the audiences are not shared. If the target audience for the Parramatta museum is families, then the co-location synergies with the Riverside Theatre will likely be low. Western Sydney families are a very price sensitive market. Many will not go on to eat in Church St. Few families would go to the theatre after visiting the museum. Moreover most western Sydney families will not catch public transport to the museum. They will drive. The absence of parking around the DJs car park site will be a major barrier for family audiences from western Sydney. Parramatta City Council's original vision for the riverside precinct was for a night-time entertainment precinct. It would be a serious error to plonk a museum aimed at families and schools in the middle of a night time entertainment precinct.

21 If the plan is to build a family friendly science museum then the DJs car park is the wrong site. A new family museum would be better located in a precinct with plenty of parking and open space for a family playground. This could be in a university precinct with an interactive science centre that also partners with the university to develop a national centre of excellence in teacher training for STEM subjects.

22 One of the most successful family spaces in western Sydney is the Sydney Olympic Park Adventure Playground. Everyone who is working on the Parramatta museum should go there on Sunday morning to see the place heaving with people. The car park is full from 9.00am. It is a magical picture of Sydney's culturally diverse community at play. If you want to build a successful family museum in Parramatta put the museum in a park. Look at the Adventure playground on the river and think about this picture in the Fleet St precinct, offering families a range of popular cultural and play activities, cafés, picnic places and river views. This will work if it's not overlooked by bland high rise units.

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1 September 2017

¹ A **museum** is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.

<http://icom.museum/the-vision/museum-definition/>

² Aspects of the PHM's museology unveiled in 1988 and developed over the following 20 years included accessible interpretation, outstanding design, multimedia, interactives and science learning through play, sensory and participatory components in all exhibitions, cutting edge social and cultural history exhibitions developed with community consultation, ground breaking access to collections online.

³ <https://www.cityofparramatta.nsw.gov.au/culture-and-our-city>

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/travel/in-a-country-that-stresses-assimilation-this-paris-museum-highlights-the-contributions-of-immigrants/2017/07/27/98b7744a-5d8e-11e7-9fc6-c7ef4bc58d13_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.78bbc2c77a38