

**Supplementary
Submission
No 142g**

**INQUIRY INTO INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND
GALLERIES**

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The Hon Robert Borsak MLC
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General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4,
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Parliament House
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Upper House Inquiry into museums and galleries No. 4

Submission from Jennifer Sanders, 8 August 2018: Terms of reference: 1e)

Response to released Business Case papers

Commentary: assessing the Business Case papers:

The proposal to move the Powerhouse Museum from its historic Ultimo location where it has been since 1893 to a flood prone riverside site in Parramatta will lead to the unprecedented and unwarranted destruction of one of Australia's, indeed the world's leading museums. Billed as 'a once in a generation opportunity' to create a 'fit for purpose museum for the 21st century' – a 'cultural beacon' for Parramatta, the move seems to be little more than a real estate opportunity and a Western Sydney electoral ploy arising out of the Powerhouse's prime location adjacent to Darling Harbour.

This is the introduction I wrote for my August 2016 submission on 'Moving Museums' which outlined options for developing a 'cultural beacon in Parramatta/Western Sydney without destroying the Powerhouse Museum.

Since then, I and my colleagues, with between us more than the equivalent of 200 years of museum industry knowledge and experience in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia and internationally, contributed as best we could to discussions and consultations in order to achieve cultural solutions that were visionary not blinkered, cost effective not wasteful and equitable in terms of all the Powerhouse Museum's constituencies, and the people of NSW. **Given what has been produced to justify the unjustifiable**, this was clearly a waste of time – **the Government has not listened.**

With the release of a redacted Business Case and sundry papers, it has become clear that the Government is persisting with its flawed plan with the only change - a nod to the thousands of voices raising objections to this plan - to assess the potential of 'an arts and cultural presence' on the Powerhouse site. **This is tokenistic and culturally superficial.** Worse, it is contingent on the destruction of a world class, award-winning museum with the divestment and then demolition of the 1988 Wran building and Harwood building (former Ultimo Tram Depot) to pay for the 'presence.'

This latest 'thought bubble is particularly insane – The Powerhouse Museum is already there as an established and world recognised cultural presence on the Ultimo site – in fact its leadership in the precinct has defined the area as a unique cultural destination fostering creativity and design with a strong educational presence in concert with neighbouring universities and TAFEs.

Evicting the Museum's collection, including the nationally and internationally significant technology objects – Catalina Flying Boat, Boulton and Watt beam engine, No 1 Locomotive, Governor-Generals carriage - from the soaring volumes and vast spaces of the Powerhouse Museum – a complicated task at great cost and risk and with no guarantee of future public display is madness and irresponsible.

Why is the Government destroying one of NSW's greatest cultural assets only to then try to conjure up a ghost of the magnificent Powerhouse Museum? Why is it wasting so much money on these deeply flawed 'thought bubbles'?

Specifically NOT considered were:

- The option of a **campus or satellite**, a proven model for energising urban areas/smaller cities by involving key cultural institutions where there is a recognised 'fit' with the community and, the museum's purpose and collection was **not** examined.
- The option of tailored **PHM Science and Innovation STEAM campuses across Western Sydney and regional NSW** was **not** examined even though the potential to link with institutions like the University of Western Sydney could be a game changer in engaging a far wider audience in the challenges of the future. An S&I Centre at Campbelltown focussed on health and medicine, agriculture and land & water management would foster synergies in a public realm and encourage far greater involvement from students and families of all ages.
- **Nor** was the **home grown model**, the second time honoured way to build culture is to work from the ground up involving the local community in the founding and development of **an arts and cultural precinct with gallery/museum** which best reflects their history, contemporary culture and, their aspirations.
- This is a **serious weakness** in the business case because, as cited in the report by Elton Consulting (The MAAS Project Communications and Engagement Strategy 26 Oct 2017, p10):

'Participants believed the New Museum should promote Western Sydney and reflect its unique identity, culture and heritage. It was also suggested the New Museum could feature Indigenous arts, culture and heritage; Australian innovation and history and multicultural heritage through exhibitions, artefacts, performances and other activities.'

This is **not what the Government's has envisioned for the NMWS** on the flood prone Riverbank site.

- Thus another **glaring omission**, given the National Heritage status of the **Fleet Street precinct**, is the **failure to develop the model of a cultural and heritage precinct** exploring the **distinctive stories of Indigenous and colonial experiences and, the contemporary cultural diversity of the Western Sydney region** – an opportunity to engage a wider audience in the stories that would give us a deeper understanding of our past to envision the future.

- **Nor** was the business case for **leaving the flagship Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo** examined – a study which among other aspects, would have examined the cultural , educational and economic impact of ripping out one of the state’s major cultural and tourism attractions from its education, creative and business precinct.

What is most alarming about this benighted plan is its insistence on the **destruction of the Powerhouse Museum** – its reduction to a mere vestige of the power of its history, collection and stories – now a unique and distinctive combination which has inspired generations over its 138 years.

Major deficiencies of the plan:

1. New Museum for Western Sydney: ‘A new future-focused contemporary science, technology and innovation museum’ (p7 Integration Brief) is **not** a flagship Powerhouse Museum – **85% of the Museum’s Collection is NOT directly related to ‘Science and Innovation’**. **This is one theme amongst many.**
2. As quoted in Building Services Masterplan Assessment, 8 August 2018, Steensen Varming, the combined Floor area of the PHM buildings is approximately **42,594 m2** (p13, 3.2) **which exceeds** Government’s smaller footprint at **Parramatta (Option 3) by over 20,000m2** thus refuting the Government’s claim that it is ‘moving the PHM to Parramatta’ and that it will be bigger than the Powerhouse Museum. Nor will there be the 60,000cubic m of display volume the Powerhouse has in its Boiler and Turbine Halls, Galleria and the vast vault of the Wran building.

There cannot be more of the Collection on exhibition unless the number crunchers are counting ‘thimbles in drawers’ – hardly an exhibition with storyline and interpretation and labels.

3. ‘arts and cultural presence in Ultimo: ‘....a new museum.....showcasing the best Australian and international practice across fashion, creativity, design, architecture, photography and screen....’ p10 op cit) is **a focus on a small percentage of the Museum’s Collection**. For example, the Museum cites 30,000 items in the “fashion collection’ which is **just 6% of the total collection of 500,000 (2012)**; actually this number represents the broader definition of dress with strength in everyday dress and provenance historical dress – it is more significant than just fashion and unique in Australia. Narrowing it down to fashion is a dumbing down of the dress collection. Furthermore if fashion were around even 7,500 items –that is **just 1.5% of the Museum’s Collection**.

This ‘new museum’ is apparently the Minister’s pick following the lobbying of a particular individual who has a very public interest in fashion and architecture. This emphasis on a small part of the collection is **not sustainable nor sensible** given the very

diverse Museum stakeholders, benefactors, researchers etc whose interests and continuing support are alienated by the reduction of the range of the Collection on exhibition.

4. The collection of the Powerhouse Museum is **NOT** a '.....collection of art and science.' (p1 NWSM Att A Vision Statement). The Powerhouse Museum's collection is **applied arts and applied sciences** in an historical context. **Applied means practical** - it is a collection which fosters innovation, creativity and ingenuity but it is not an art museum. Yet increasingly, this is the direction being pushed by the senior staff whose curatorial background is from art galleries, not museums.
5. The scope of the Museum's Collection is **far greater** than the 8 disciplines identified as strategic for some unknown reason several years ago – technologies, health and medicine, physical sciences, engineering, architecture, design and decorative arts, fashion and contemporary culture.

The Collection is uniquely comprehensive and encompasses the fields of Science, Technology, Design, Decorative Arts and History. The attached list specifies **36 subject areas** within those fields. Much of this collection will be away in storage if the 'visions' for Parramatta and Ultimo are realised.

6. **NOT safe, secure and accessible:** Safe, secure and accessible is the guiding principle for managing a museum's collection. Yet the Government's plan is putting one of Australia's most significant collections at risk of loss and damage by its plan to close and sell the fit for purpose collection store at Ultimo and move the Collection to the Museum's store at Castle Hill where it will be less accessible for the public.
7. **The risks are manifold:** loss; damage through poor handling and difficulties of packing and transport; lack of expertise – around 180 additional staff would need to be recruited – a tall order given the specialised nature of the tasks. The Museum has readvertised the position of Manager of Conservation after being unable to fill it and has specified that the position no longer requires 'direct conservation experience'!

The collection 'dislocation' project is a herculean task given the numbers of objects, complexity and fragility of many objects. Why is this happening? There is no 24hour security at Castle Hill. Moving the rest of the collection there will overcrowd the stores. In fact the whole collection, minus objects on exhibition, **will not fit at Castle Hill – nor will there be any room for collection growth.** In addition this 'dislocation' requires the decanting and rebuilding of already full stores at Castle Hill.

8. The 'Very Large Objects' – **which are many of the most significant objects in the collection, including the priceless Boulton and Watt 1785 steam engine, will be evicted** from their safe, secure and accessible exhibition positions and put into temporary storage NOT yet identified and NOT at Castle Hill. (6.2.3, NMWS 3 Final Business case 14 Feb 2017).

Most galling is that it is likely that **only one or two of the Very Large Objects** will be on display at Parramatta – there is simply not the room nor does the ‘vision’ of the NMSW suit these marvels of technology.

This is the **irresponsible consequence of the Government’s ‘thought bubble’ - unaccounted costs and unmanaged risks – and a disdain for the Museum’s valuable Collection.**

9. ‘Unparalleled opportunity’ to digitise and make accessible.....’ Only because no museum with a collection of this size and complexity would undertake such a massive program of **collection dislocation – not relocation**, unless forced to by factors beyond its control - the eviction from purpose-built safe, secure and accessible storage, onsite adjacent to the Powerhouse Museum’s exhibition galleries.

Collection digitisation is best undertaken as a normal sequence in collection management as it has been done to date. This rushed and intense program involves far greater dislocation and risk, and - from the work processes described, does not allow for the cataloguing of uncatalogued objects so their digitisation will be of little use as the their searchability on the database will be restricted.

10. **The Collection at Castle Hill:** The risks and costs of having almost the entire collection in a store up to 40km away – 80 km round trip (Ultimo) are amplified because of the frequency of collection movements to service temporary exhibition programs at the other sites.

In a recent year **at the Powerhouse Museum there were 53,000 object movements between the Harwood Building store and the Museum’s exhibition galleries.** When effectively all the collection is at Castle Hill, this will mean **much increased and expensive resource** will have to be dedicated to safe and secure object movements. **Note:** there is an incomplete underground connection between the Collection Store and the Museum which would mean objects can be moved ‘indoors’ in a dedicated tunnel – lessened risk, less costly task, more accessible.

11. **Flood risks on Parramatta Riverbank site:** The Taylor Thomson Whitting Flood Study Nov 2016 recommends that ‘Development proposals will need to consider **an internal emergency evacuation route up to level 1 from the ground floor**, basement and the public space to the river.The ground floor level will not be protected against the PMF (peak major flood). (p13) what about priceless objects? It is inexplicable that with the knowledge of flood risks and climate change the Government would even contemplate building a Museum on this site **not only putting people at risk BUT also the Museum’s priceless Collection.**
12. **Loss of benefactors and donors:** As I and others warned when this Government’s destructive plan was announced, benefactors and donors have lost their trust in the

Museum as a safe and reputable repository for their treasured possessions. Already, **donors have written and asked for their donations to be returned** as the Government's plan will destroy the Powerhouse Museum – the cultural institution to which they entrusted their gifts to the people of NSW.

Benefactors are the lifeblood of a museum and the Government's actions have threatened and shaken the very basis on which a state cultural institution – the Powerhouse Museum – can flourish and be an essential part of the cultural landscape.

Summary

This plan is a 'thought bubble' that is now rivalling the fat Trump baby balloon – full of hot air and fake news but grossly more expensive, risky and potentially destructive – destructive of our shared cultural heritage, anathema to the people's cultural aspirations expressed by their support for the Museum and its collection over 138 years.

As a result of the commitment to transparency and openness by a majority of MLC's the redacted 4,500 odd pages of business cases, extended final and summary business cases, supplements, appendices and reports were unceremoniously tipped into the public debate. This avalanche of papers was generated over 3 years of consultants' and public servants' (with no museum expertise) well paid toil with an apparently limitless capacity to produce tables, statistics, regurgitated government policies and plans, options, rhetoric, massing of development opportunities, analysis of real estate opportunities, preliminary budget estimates, governance modelling, planning due diligence reports, managed/edited records of stakeholder and community consultation, limited risk analyses, speculations of-workforce needs, and the **most florid spin doctoring** this author has encountered for a cultural initiative. And all for the princely sum of \$10m +++ - not including the hours of Museum staff time harnessed to give some shape to this rapidly expanding 'thought bubble.'

What is most disturbing is the way in which the Government is continuing to pursue, contrary to expert advice, a plan that is so deeply flawed – mediocre, costly, wasteful, risky and unfounded in community. This whole exercise of 'business case' preparation reveals **a dossier that is process driven, vacuous in content and full of platitudes** – much of it parroting Government policies and plans.

The role and purpose of a great Museum is to inspire and to stimulate exploration and thinking - not to tick the boxes of the Government of the day. The Powerhouse is the people's museum with an outstanding and unique collection that echoes through the ages and across the world, telling stories through objects – the collection – of people who have tested the boundaries, explored new horizons, built new lives in foreign lands, succeeded against the odds, had modest achievements that matter, made world changing discoveries, pursued beauty, function and form, shared experiences, searched for better ways to live lives - to make a better world.

Yet the 'visions' and 'project definitions' revealed in the papers are facile marketing-speak which could be describing any range of shared public experiences – educational, recreational, leisure,

entertainment, performance, crowd sourced etc . The gravitas and enduring contribution to our society that has characterised the Powerhouse Museum since 1880 is evaporating under the weight of property development options, real estate deals, economic appraisals etc.

However this multifaceted 'thought bubble' is dressed up, it is nothing less than the **evisceration and dismemberment of one of the world's great museums in mistaken pursuit of a cultural engineering solution to an acknowledged need to invest in cultural initiatives in Western Sydney.** There is no heart and no soul because the Government's plan does not come from sound and thorough community consultation nor is it founded on the potential of a magnificent and inspiring collection that speaks of individuals, generations and cultures across time and across space.

Writing this paper at this time to the Parliamentary Inquiry as a professional, experienced, internationally recognised museum professional is a surreal experience, almost as though one were in a 'parallel universe' dealing with aliens.

Jennifer Sanders

I am happy for my submission to be published with my name.

I am happy to appear as a witness at the Inquiry.

Brief Resume: Jennifer Sanders BA Hons Anthropology, USyd

Jennifer Sanders had a long and distinguished career at the Powerhouse Museum where she was Deputy Director, Collections, Content Development and Outreach from 2001 to February 2009. Appointed to the Powerhouse in 1978, Jennifer was a curator then senior curator, decorative arts and design for a decade.

A key member of the team for the Powerhouse redevelopment, in 1988 Ms Sanders was appointed Assistant Director Collections responsible for the Museum's curatorial, registration, preservation and regional NSW outreach programs and, for several years, exhibitions, education, publications and library services as well. In 2001 Ms Sanders was given responsibility for the NSW Migration Heritage Centre and later also Sydney Observatory and the Powerhouse Discovery Centre. Ms Sanders regularly deputised for the Museum's Director.

From 1999 to 2008 Ms Sanders was a member of the National Cultural Heritage Committee and, in 2001 she was a member of the NSW Centenary of Federation Committee (archiving, cataloguing, and preservation of historical materials). From 2007 to 2012, Ms Sanders was a member of the External Advisory Panel, Design Research Institute, RMIT University, Melbourne and Chair, Design Archives Advisory Panel, RMIT University.

From 2009, Ms Sanders has undertaken range of heritage, museum and curatorial consultancies.

1981 Churchill Fellowship: public access to museum collections, North America and Europe

1987 Museum Management Institute, Berkeley, CA, USA. Getty Leadership Institute.

In 2003 Jennifer was awarded a Centenary of Federation Medal.