

Supplementary  
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## INQUIRY INTO INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

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## **Powerhouse Museum: Concerns about the collection: exhibitions, staff and audiences**

These comments refer to copies of Final Business Case (FBC) documents released to the Legislative Council in April 2018, and which can be found on the Powerhouse Museum Alliance website as '2018 Business cases: access to documents', here:

<https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/find-out-more/business-cases-access-to-documents/>

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### **1.0 Context for issues:**

Despite all the now-exposed issues of costs of removal, audience preferences, heritage issues, site/flood concerns, lack of informed consultation, different options for revitalisation in Ultimo and consideration of other local Parramatta priorities, the government planners are driving forward with a 'New Museum' of STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics) for Parramatta, 'focused on science and innovation', with an expensive-entry Planetarium.

Under duress to retain the museum on its current site, the government is now also considering plans for a 'creative industries presence' in Ultimo which, according to these papers, may simply be a Fashion and (digital) Design museum with a commercially-run Lyric Theatre that has no connection at all with the museum's purpose. See:

[Powerhouse Business Case Summary](#) released on 28 April, 2018; and [Ultimo Presence Project 1 Project Definition](#)

- But why does a long-established and well-regarded museum, albeit destructively underfunded in recent years, need to be reconceived as a 'new' museum, with a different focus, and in a different place? Why not fund it appropriately where it is, and allow a return to its long-established and continuing collection, and innovative, educative and responsible program?
- And why can't Parramatta develop its own gallery and museum like other regional city centres, especially when constituents are asking for both historical and contemporary local-content cultural institutions.

## 2.0 Who is a state museum for?

The document, [New Western Sydney Museum 3 Final Business Case Gate 2 Review 140217](#) (3.1.3) identifies the significance of the collection, and its importance locally, nationally and internationally, stating:

'The Museum 'holds in Trust' for the **people of New South Wales** an invaluable collection, representing over a century of industry, innovation and social progress. There is well over 500,000 items in the Museum's collection, which is in high demand with active regional, national and international loan and touring programs. As Australia's only museum of arts and science, MAAS holds the nation's largest and most significant collection of science, technological and design advancement. This extraordinary collection is unique in placing Australia on the global stage to tell the remarkable story of human ingenuity.

The Museum is acknowledged internationally for the calibre of its collection, scholarship and exhibitions. The collection spans Australian and international history, science, technology, design, industry, decorative arts, music, transport and space exploration. It is home to the material heritage and stories of Australia's diverse communities and cultures, providing insights into Australian history and society...Through collecting, preserving and documenting Australian material culture and its global context, the Museum advances our understanding and valuing of the past, inspires creativity and innovation, and increases our ability to respond to present and future challenges.'

- However, in the 10th hearing of the Upper House Inquiry, former premier Mike Baird said the 'iconic' 'new' museum would be for the children and families of Western Sydney. But he, and his successors, don't seem to accept that the Parramatta City Council and residents had other plans (see: <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/what-the-experts-say/parramatta-council-minutes-document-early-concerns-for-proposed-relocation-of-the-powerhouse-museum-tom-lockley/> ); and that Parramatta has its own histories and contemporary activities to celebrate.
- Moreover, an already 'iconic' state museum such as the Powerhouse has far wider audiences, as well as local families, who expect it to remain in the Sydney city centre with other state institutions: designers, makers, scientists, engineers, historians, researchers, benefactors, educators and interested and informed members of the local, state, national and international audiences who have special interests in the collection. They are making it clear that they will not support a transfer to Western Sydney, and that Western Sydney needs an institution for its own audiences.
- And it is clear now, as evidenced in the Business Case documents and Upper House Inquiry transcripts, that the former Premier made this decision with limited cultural advice and without a business plan. The current Premier and Arts Minister are continuing the process without acknowledging legitimacy of informed questioning.

## 3.0 Who is a local/regional museum for?

The Final Business Case says of Parramatta community preferences: 'The exhibition themes that were attributed most value were space travel, science, technology and engineering, screen based culture, applied arts and mathematics. These results indicate a high level of support for a museum focused on STEAM.' (4.3.1, p 40)

However, at public consultation meetings on 26 and 31 July, 2017, (obviously not able to inform the government announcement on 28 July which confirmed

the relocation) unofficial reports show it was clear that both audiences were strongly in favour of:

- **in Ultimo**, retaining the Powerhouse Museum, while investing in expansion and development there; recognising its long-earned presence there in the context of audiences, access, education and tourism; with both historical and contemporary significance in its buildings, collections and programs; and contributing programs to regional centres as it has always done.
- **in Parramatta**, a preference for developing an art centre (alongside the existing performing arts centre) with exhibition galleries relevant to local audiences (as in other regional cities); with potential for a science centre; and touring exhibitions and projects, and perhaps satellite venues, from MAAS and other CBD institutions. At the same time, there was a strong argument to develop museums at the North Parramatta Heritage precinct, that include local programs of local and state significance, on such as Indigenous and colonial histories and heritage, and migration history.
- **Other issues** included the need for wider professional consultation in considering different options for each location; comparative costs for those different options; importance of adequate recurrent funding in any major institution; risks of a flood-prone site; and the questionable current priorities of political gains and building development income over cultural and social needs. See: (<https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/find-out-more/community-consultation-meetings-august-2017/> )

These points were later confirmed in the official project reports: The MAAS Project team posted summaries of both meetings on their website on 21 August. See: <https://new.maas.museum/consultation/>

- But it is not evident in the FBC conclusions that the Western Sydney communities and Council were asked just for their own gallery and museum ideas; they were told that they were to receive a relocated Powerhouse Museum, and then asked what they wanted it to do (not necessarily understanding its current role).
- It appears in later meetings and surveys, leading questions were asked, where respondents were led towards expected answers.
- Did the government team explain what applied arts were, or were people led to guess it was 'arts' broadly interpreted?
- What happened to consideration of the significant and inter-related collections associated with social history?
- Where does mathematics fit in to this brief?
- Whose idea was the Planetarium?
- Where is evidence of the consideration of local preferences, Council policies and concern for Parramatta history?

#### **4.0 Acknowledging significance of collection-based exhibitions**

Collection-based exhibitions are central to the museum's purpose and role. The FBC acknowledges that: 'MAAS Act requires the Museum to "effectively minister to the needs and demands of the community in any or all branches of applied science and art and the development of industry by:

- i. the display of selected objects arranged to illustrate the industrial advance of civilisation and the development of inventions and manufactures;
- ii. the promotion of craftsmanship and artistic taste by illustrating the history

and development of the applied arts.” ([New Western Sydney Museum 1 Final Business Case 080118](#), 4.4.2, p45)

For the last 30 years, since re-opening in the Ultimo Powerhouse building (after nearly 100 years in an adjacent city location), the Museum has presented a stunning record of well-researched exhibitions and events, largely from its evolving state collection and with related touring exhibitions, that express important stories within and across these fields about our identities, histories and ideas for the future. The Museum was notable internationally for its shift from 'display storage' to information-rich narrative exhibitions, with audience engagement and involvement.

However, while the FBC does say 'At its heart will be the MAAS collection, applied as a powerful storytelling instrument in an experiential setting to engage and encourage lifelong learning' (p3) a strong concern is the inadequacy of consideration in the documentation for planning the 'new museum', for the important stories of ideas, imagination, creativity, skill and enterprise that should be told about the collection, from past to present.

The combined floor area of PHM at Ultimo is **42,594 m<sup>2</sup>** (see: [Ultimo Presence Project 4 Site Infrastructure Assessment-2](#), p.13)

But the favoured Option 03 for Western Sydney 'includes the NSW Planetarium, 1,350 m<sup>2</sup> additional Function/Events Space, 1,150 m<sup>2</sup> additional Education Facilities, a Family Makers Space, 11,500 m<sup>2</sup> gallery space and **21,200 m<sup>2</sup>** of net museum area.' ([New Western Sydney Museum 2 Final Business Case Supplement 240418](#) 1.5, p4)

Of this the gallery provisions of 11,500 m<sup>2</sup> are clearly inadequate for this museum, with the greatest space for incoming ('blockbuster') exhibitions, with a small percentage for temporary collection exhibitions (with little interpretation?), and with only **5,200 m<sup>2</sup>** allocated to long-term exhibitions that must provide a context for everything else. (In contrast, the Ultimo Wran building's exhibition space alone is 1,800 m<sup>2</sup>.)

The FBC had claimed that: 'In its existing condition, the Ultimo site is not able to adequately respond to the demands of a dynamic approach to collection management, nor is it conducive to furthering the MAAS ambition of being the world's leading museum of its type, where technology, varied spaces and sophisticated building services are a prerequisite. If change is not forthcoming, the Museum's reputation as a unique, innovative and inspirational cultural icon will be significantly undermined.' (FBC 3.4 p27)

Yet FBC p67, says of Option 3 that 'The significant amount of gallery space within the option represents a significant additional recurrent expenditure cost to enable frequent turn-over. If the museum offering is not dynamic and changing there is a risk that visitation levels will not be maintained. Dependent upon the final design outcome, the floor area within the option and building footprint may not enable sufficient space for Government to realise planned development for the site necessary to off-set the capital costs.'

- Regarding the statement above, it is argued that 1) as well as temporary exhibitions there must be permanent changing exhibitions, not constant

'pop-ups'; and 2) the gallery space should not be sacrificed to 'to off-set the capital costs'.

- Instead of moving the Museum to Parramatta, it can be argued that investment on the Ultimo site is a better solution; the Museum has reached this 'existing' condition (p27 above) because of vastly reduced budgets over recent years, constraining staffing, project development and maintenance.
- Significantly, in the planning schedules and rationales, there is little evidence or recognition that the collection – and its value for wider audiences around the state, the country and the world – is a priority for the future in the 'new museum'.
- In the 'new museum', it is clear that gallery space for exhibitions will be inadequate. In fact, in the space allocated, the emphasis is clearly on incoming touring exhibitions, and not on the collection.
- And while education and visitor spaces are also necessary it is noticeable that there appears to be no mention in the community consultations about a desire for a planetarium; this appears to have been added as an option by planners later – taking up space and increasing entry fees. It has never been central to the Powerhouse Museum, whose emphasis has been on Space Travel, with specific activities at the Observatory.
- Some recent exhibitions have tended towards 'art experiences' or 'display storage' with little expanded information, while the government advisers' emphasis for the future appears to be on entertainment and income generation (as well as money for developers and votes in the west!)
- And it appears that much of the collection will now be without exhibition narratives, in the storage facility, to be extended at the Castle Hill site, which is extremely distant and inaccessible for most audiences, including staff expected to work with it.

### **5.0 Recognising the breadth of the 'applied arts' collection:**

The 'applied arts' of the Powerhouse Museum have a history of relationships between art and industry, social history, designing and making, decorative arts and crafts, and science and technologies. The historical collection is an important reference for contemporary practice, and it is imperative that acquisitions in both areas can be continued.

Within the museum's exhibition program there has been an impressive sequence of long-term and temporary exhibitions that reflect the depth and breadth of the collection including furniture, textiles, ceramics, glass, jewellery and metalwork, musical instruments, graphic design, fashion and photography. Some have been specialist in their focus; others such as the *Inspired! Design across time* exhibition from 2005, were designed as permanent changing exhibitions that provided a context for other exhibitions and galleries, including those in science and technology, social history, Aboriginal, Asian and industrial design.

- But it is noticeable that the government and its advisers have a very limited understanding of what 'applied arts' are, and social history appears to be ignored.
- They mention 'art' and 'arts' in a very general sense and could even be meaning the 'art gallery' that Parramatta has curiously never established.
- The personal preferences of a current Arts Minister and Premier are not the basis for a long-term state museum (ie Fashion and Lyric Theatre).

- 'Fashion' (which has been isolated as a future specialist museum in Ultimo) is just one aspect of this part of the extensive collection, alongside furniture, textiles, ceramics, glass, jewellery and metalwork, musical instruments and many more.
- And 'digital design' (also identified for Ultimo), is just one aspect of designing and making processes across time, from industry to studio; all of which are significant.
- And yes, Parramatta should have an art gallery (as well as its own museum) but that is not the Powerhouse Museum's role.
- It is argued that it is better to invest in the Ultimo site to continue to allow the intended integration of collection areas, with some changing satellite exhibitions elsewhere (alongside those from other state institutions).

## **6.0 Scheduling for exhibition development; permanent professional staff**

There appears to be no recognition in the timetables, schedules and staffing reports that exhibitions need professional expertise and knowledge of the content of the collections, and that it takes considerable time to develop proposals and work in teams to develop storylines, plans and design layouts. Schedules cited are all to do with building development and shifting the collection into storage and in the FBC, one year only is allowed for 'museum fitout' which may only be architectural, and not include exhibition development, design and installation. (FBC, p11)

It is extremely concerning that the FBC (p67) should say: 'The proposed Project Options require workforce transition. This includes the transitioning of staff from the existing Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo, to a new place of work, either at the New Museum in Western Sydney or the MDC at Castle Hill, and may also require a change in duties and task allocations.'

This demonstrates absolute ignorance of the necessary professional expertise required to research, understand and manage such a diverse collection, and to plan the best exhibitions to represent it.

Over recent years the number of professionals in the museum have halved, and more reductions are likely with increasing 'efficiency dividend' requirements. Such inside experience and skill cannot easily or effectively be contracted in, or found in a different location; it is a relatively small specialist professional field of curators, conservators, registrars, designers, educators, editorial and IT professionals, especially those with long-term experience and knowledge of this collection. To find solutions in changes in 'task allocations' betrays absolute ignorance of the collaborative professional work involved.

- Now, with the absence of an experienced museum director, conversant with the scope of the Museum, who will plan and oversee overall exhibition planning and development?
- How will this be scheduled on the planning timetable?
- Will there be enough professional staff familiar with the collections, to develop appropriate exhibitions and related programs?
- And who will work on future museum exhibitions if staff are involved in the interim in transferring the collection to remote storage, and touring exhibitions to regions, as has been identified in the MAAS schedule – and have the regional institutions the money to show them?

- With further government financial 'efficiency dividend' reductions in future commitments to recurrent management, staffing and project costs, how do they think either PHM / MAAS venue will achieve what the museum was established to carry out?

## **7.0 Recommendation**

As so many people have argued from the outset:

- it would be better to develop a museum and art gallery *in Parramatta for Parramatta*, as in other city centres
- and provide the Powerhouse Museum with adequate refurbishment and development capital and recurrent staffing and program investment to stay where it is known, wanted and needed.