

**Submission
No 10**

**INQUIRY INTO GOVERNMENT'S MANAGEMENT OF THE
POWERHOUSE MUSEUM AND OTHER MUSEUMS AND
CULTURAL PROJECTS IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Pyrmont Action Incorporated

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The Director,
Select Committees,
Parliament House,
Macquarie Street,
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Director,

Inquiry into the Government's management of the Powerhouse Museum

Pyrmont Action Inc. has made submissions to the earlier Legislative Council Inquiry into Museums and galleries in NSW, strongly supporting the retention of the Powerhouse Museum on its current site in Ultimo, and our members have attended a number of sittings of that earlier Inquiry.

The findings of that multi-party Inquiry were quite clear, identifying the adverse consequences of the Government proceeding with the re-location of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta including:

- *The loss of synergies that the Museum's relationship with educational, digital and technological partners in Ultimo that have strengthened and are central to the Museum's core functions as a Museum of technology and learning being diminished*
- *The loss of significance and difficulty in repurposing the Museum's cultural and heritage assets that capture and interpret its relationship to the neighbourhood and local community*
- *Parramatta deserves a world class museum that reflects its own distinct history and culture, including its extraordinary history of First Nations peoples.... and its years that followed colonization as a major colonial centre...*

The earlier Inquiry, once it finally was able to access the 2018 *Final Business Case for the Powerhouse Museum in Western Sydney Project*, found that it did not include an examination of a status quo baseline option for consideration and comparison – required under Treasury guidelines. The Inquiry remained unconvinced that the relocation of the Powerhouse to Parramatta *represents good value for money, fulfils the needs of the people of Western Sydney, or responds to the various concerns raised by stakeholders* giving evidence to the Inquiry. These included many eminent people with deep knowledge of the museum sector, and the Powerhouse, in particular. The Inquiry also recommended the establishment of a satellite Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences in Western Sydney.

And now, a second Inquiry has been established to inquire into and report on:

- The proposed move of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, the Powerhouse Museum, from Ultimo to Parramatta;



- The Government's management of all museums and cultural projects in NSW;
- And other related matters

We will focus our comments on the first Term of Reference.

Government's Rationale for the Move of the Powerhouse from Ultimo to Parramatta

The rationale for the move is the sale of the Powerhouse site and adjacent tram sheds site to private developers, turning a public cultural asset into a private for-profit asset. The business case no doubt anticipates a huge windfall (all such now in doubt as the financial impact of the corona virus pandemic becomes increasingly apparent). This windfall is supposed to fund the construction of a new Technological Museum on a flood-prone site in Parramatta. Yet we all know the current Government's history of vast overspends and delays on such public projects.

The Powerhouse is located on the site of the Ultimo Power Station which powered the early tram system running along Harris Street. This building was Australia's first industrial steam-powered electric generation station. Much of the original structure has been retained and transformed into an exhibition space which showcases not just early Australian innovation but British technology, including the Boulton and Watt steam engine, restored in the 1980s as a result of a public appeal, which is the oldest working engine of its kind in the world. Also on display, within a kilometre or so of its terminus, is the very first NSW train. Much of the Powerhouse collection of archives and artefacts very relevant to the area, were donated by the Harris family, the first European landowners of the Pyrmont Peninsula, after whom Harris Street is named. Dr John Harris settled in Ultimo in 1800 and the Harris family has been a major force in its development.

The original Technological Museum building is now part of the Sydney Institute of Technology campus in Harris Street, close to its relatively new home, the former power station, and sheds housing the trams. The Powerhouse is also very close to UTS and the ABC, significant educational and cultural institutions. It is located in its historical, but also current technological innovation contexts – and part of the GSC's Innovation Corridor.

To remove the Powerhouse to Parramatta would be to remove it from the birthplace of Australian technological innovation, and from the precinct which hosts one of, if not the area of greatest density of technology enterprises in Australia.

And do the people of Western Sydney want a technological museum? Having attended a community workshop on the proposed move of the Powerhouse and listened to evidence given to the first Inquiry, it was clear that the people of Parramatta want a museum which reflects the history of Western Sydney, its First Nations connections to the area, Parramatta's significance as the early hub of colonial government, its agricultural history, and, more recently, its migrant and multi-cultural story. And they certainly don't support a Museum built on the former DJs carpark site if it condemns 2 magnificent heritage houses to demolition.

The Business Case for the Move of the Powerhouse to Parramatta



As the first Legislative Council Inquiry found, the 2018 *Final Business Case for the Powerhouse Museum* failed to determine the pros and cons of moving the Museum to Parramatta. Expert evidence given at the Inquiry made it quite clear that the estimated costs of removal, transport and re-installation of the very large, and fragile exhibits would be exorbitant, even if this was feasible. Tom Lockley, in *Heritage of the Powerhouse Museum*, outlines some of the issues which would arise in such an exercise:

- *The cast-iron components of the Boulton and Watt machine were never robust and have become more frangible with age. They would need to be handled like eggs. The heavy wooden frame is showing signs of decay and there is an engineer's opinion that it will need to be replaced*
- *The Saturn 5 rocket engine cannot be rested vertically: the exhaust flange is too weak. It has to be manipulated in a very complex way to remove it*
- *Moving the Catalina flying boat is obviously a huge problem. Based on previous experience in aircraft relocation, it will cost at least a million dollars to move and reassemble. However, the Beech Queen Air (our world pioneer aerial ambulance) is even more difficult to move. The wing stubs and engines are integrated with the fuselage construction. This section is very frail and will need a specially made cradle, again at huge cost.*

And the new building would require strengthened floors and ceilings in many areas – again, at additional cost.

The first *Inquiry* found that the 2018 *Business Case* was not a genuine attempt to cost all the options. In particular it did not compare the price of moving the Museum with the cost of keeping it in its present location in Ultimo, providing a baseline option for consideration and comparison. This is **required** under Treasury guidelines for assessing public infrastructure projects and the *Business Case* is therefore fundamentally flawed. It should be noted that an earlier (2014) *Final Business Case for the Renewal of the Powerhouse Museum* stressed that the relocation of the Powerhouse Museum was not a viable project option and stated unequivocally that the relocation of the Powerhouse Museum was *not a viable project option for further consideration*. What changed?

Can we have Both?

There is strong community support for the establishment of a cultural institution in Western Sydney. There is already a facility in Castle Hill and consideration could be given to the repurposing of heritage or other property located more centrally, more safely, economically, and conveniently than at the former David Jones carpark. We all saw the footage of the recent torrents which swept through this carpark and were bemused that the NSW Government considered this an ideal site for a Museum housing precious exhibits. Who would visit it at such times which are predicted to become more frequent as the world heats up?

This support is always accompanied by support for the Powerhouse to remain in Ultimo. Dr Grace Cochrane, former Powerhouse Senior Curator of Australian Decorative Arts and



Design, in evidence given to the first Inquiry stated that the Powerhouse Museum *is long-established and well-regarded... albeit destructively underfunded in recent years*. She argued that if *adequate refurbishment and development capital and recurrent staffing and program investment* were provided to the Powerhouse Museum it could stay where it is known, wanted and needed. She questioned why Parramatta would not 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.

The NSW Government has a very poor record in bringing projects in on time and on budget. And some projects have left communities, including Parramatta, the poorer with the loss of community amenities. Professional sport appears to be a far greater priority than culture or community facilities. Parramatta is still waiting for the replacement swimming pool to be delivered (or even started?). The much-loved pool was demolished to make way for a large sporting arena, which might turn out to be a white elephant, noting that the corona virus has thrown the future of some large sporting codes into doubt. Similarly, we can now gaze on the empty space where the Football stadium near Moore Park used to be. With the ARL's future viability in doubt, will the NSW Government return the space to parkland? Perhaps a decision to not proceed with a replacement white elephant of a sports ground at Moore Park, could provide the money to refurbish the Powerhouse in Ultimo **and** build a new Museum in Parramatta, perhaps as part of the swimming pool redevelopment.

Recommendations

- *The Powerhouse Museum should remain in Ultimo and be revitalized and properly staffed to enable it to again be a world class technological institution;*
- *The site of the Powerhouse Museum and tram sheds should not be sold for private development*
- *The NSW Government should work with local governments and cultural and educational institutions in Western Sydney to develop a cultural centre with exhibits of both historical and modern-day relevance to Western Sydney, situated in an easily accessed and safe precinct;*
- *The NSW Government to re-examine its priorities for major investments in sporting, cultural and community facilities in partnership with the people of NSW, in the light of the severe financial impact of the corona virus pandemic, and make public the revised business cases for all such projects.*

We applaud the Government's acknowledgement that more must be done for Western Sydney in general and Parramatta, in particular. However, we do not believe that the way to do that is to strip the City of Sydney of the cultural assets that make it, arguably, the pre-eminent cultural hub of the southern hemisphere, and a magnet for tourism, business and finance.

Yours sincerely,

Elizabeth Elenius, Convenor

