

Submission
No 42

**INQUIRY INTO STATE RECORDS ACT 1998 AND THE
POLICY PAPER ON ITS REVIEW**

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**Submission to the
Standing Committee on Social Issues
Regarding Review of the SARA Act 1998**

I was the Deputy Director of the Historic Houses Trust of NSW (now known as Sydney Living Museums) from 1990 to 2008. In this position I was responsible to the Director Peter Watts AM, with whom I worked very closely. I had direct responsibility for the operation, conservation and interpretation of 11 of the Trust's 14 properties and their collections for 18 years.

The Historic Houses Trust (HHT) was set up to preserve and interpret places and their collections of outstanding significance for the state of NSW and ensure their ongoing integrity through public ownership and with excellence of interpretation. The HHT's portfolio includes major public buildings such as Hyde Park Barracks and the Mint, modest domestic properties such as Meroogal in Nowra and Susannah Place in the Rocks and major historic houses in substantial grounds such as Vaucluse House and Rouse Hill House and farm, Rouse Hill.

Each property is conserved and interpreted according to its own Museum Plan - a document that distills the primary significance of each place and determines its unique museum approach. The collections of these individual museums, with a few exceptions, are objects with provenance to each museum. They are part of the "fabric" of the place, part of its significance and able to illuminate the cultural histories of the buildings and their gardens and grounds and their inhabitants.

Responsibilities for conserving these properties, their buildings, gardens and collections, for interpreting their stories and connecting with the broadest public audiences of all ages and cultural backgrounds require very specific expertise. This includes curators and managers with expertise in the repair and maintenance of historic buildings, curators of historic gardens, curators of historic furnishings and furniture, expert understanding of interiors throughout the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries in Australia, expert curators of ceramics, glass, metals, musical instruments and photographs to name just a few categories. Interpretation of these places needs specialist educators to develop and implement the range of interpretation programs for primary and senior schools, for adults and families. It requires exhibition curators and designers to undertake research and create scholarly exhibitions and books to further expand audiences and public understanding of these very special places. . It also requires expertise in cultural event development for community public programs. These are a specific and outstanding success of the HHT now Sydney Living Museums. Some examples include The Fifties Fair at Rose Seidler House celebrating 1950's culture is in its 26th year, Sydney Open, and The Festival of the Olive at Elizabeth Farm celebrating the oldest olive tree in Australia and Parramatta's contemporary Mediterranean culture.

In addition and very importantly, the success of this organization relies on expert professional senior management working with these specialists at the coal face, shaping and supporting the institution and respecting and protecting its charter.

The Review of the State Records Act 1998 in parallel with a Review of the Historic Houses Trust Act 1980 by the Standing Committee does not explain why these two very different cultural institutions, with very different charters and employing very different expertise would be looked at together by this committee.

I understand that at present both organizations are currently managed as two institutions by the same Executive Director (from SARA), after the sudden resignation of the Sydney Living Museums' Director last year. It was assumed, by those interested in the cultural institutions of the state, that this would be a temporary measure until an appropriately qualified new Director for SLM could be recruited in a formal manner.

Reading between the lines, there is an inference that this review is to canvas or justify the formal merging of the State Records Office with the HHT now Sydney Living Museums.

In my opinion this would be to the detriment of both the HHT and to SARA. It would lead to the blurring of their separate charters, to the changing of their characters. It would dilute the rigor, and would dull the intellectual integrity of each, severely compromising their focus, independence and excellence.

Any proposal to merge cultural institutions in NSW should sit within an overarching, State-wide planning strategy for the museums sector in general. It should be done by independent experts, in collaboration with arts and museum professionals to inform and encourage debate and discussion of any new ways forward.

Helen Temple

17th April 2020.