

**Submission  
No 57**

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

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**Date Received:** 30 April 2020

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Dear Chair, The Hon Shayne Mallard MLC

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the Inquiry into the State Records Act 1998 and the Policy Paper on its Review.

I make this submission as a member of the public, a resident of New South Wales, and as an individual with a keen interest in the arts sector and cultural institutions.

I am wholly supportive of the recommendation to establish a singular institution that absorbs the legislative responsibilities, and existing collections, of the NSW State Archives and Sydney Living Museums. The decision to unite the two organisations under one agency, has the potential to be a landmark moment for the people of NSW, bringing a new, exciting vision for the incredible, diverse stories of our shared past as a state.

The current (albeit dated) arrangement as two separate organisations has served well in the past, but if we intend to keep their collections (and the stories within them) relevant, engaging and interesting as we move into the future, it requires a bold, brave decision, such as that proposed in the Policy Paper.

Through university, I have been fortunate enough to spend a great deal of time studying the successes – and failures – of cultural institutions in Australia, as well as abroad in France, Switzerland, Netherlands and Germany. Consistently, the institutions that struggled to attract wide and diverse audiences all shared one main shortcoming: a glaring lack of diversity and adaptability.

For so long – too long perhaps – many cultural institutions have relied heavily on the loyal patronage of a specific type of visitor or stakeholder group, usually with homogenous interests and perspectives. As a result, the operational bias of these cultural institutions saw them blindly focus on satisfying the demands and expectations of this selected audience, almost exclusively. Internally-focused audience engagement strategies (if any) only serve to gatekeep the institutions and their collections, effectively restricting access to a select few that the institution determined to be their ‘core audience’. However, with changing population demographics, consumer spending habits and attitudes towards arts & culture, a great deal of these institutions are realising that their modus operandi can not be sustainable for much longer.

In 2020, cultural institutions are increasingly concerning themselves with engaging new audiences, particularly younger adults and families, while making sure not to abandon their loyal fan base and distinguished donors. Even before the current pandemic forced most institutions to reconcile their digital illiteracy and broader resistance to change, the sector has been rapidly shifting towards becoming more accessible, engaging and relatable to diverse audiences. One need not look further than the innovative and exciting achievements of Victoria’s Australian Centre for Moving Images (ACMI), Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA) and Tasmania’s Museum of Old and New Art (MONA).

As individual organisations, the continued separation of state-owned Archives and Museums stand to represent the obsolescence of partitioning ‘heritage’ according to defined and rigid definitions. The average citizen, to whom these institutions essentially belong, doesn’t care for the esoteric categorisation that divides culture according to institutional parameters. Nor should their access to history and heritage depend on whether or not they are of a certain demographic, age, class, profession or academic background. An institution will succeed at telling the stories of the past when it can do so through as many mediums as possible. A collection’s diversity ensures

greater ability for it to resonate with wider audiences through multiple points of access, be they archives, architecture, photographs, journals, gardens, interiors, farm equipment, maps, furnishings, digital records, cookbooks - the list really goes on. A successful institution isn't restricted by its own narrow scope and limitations, instead it will succeed when it is empowered to be agile and adaptable, meeting the ever-changing needs of the public it serves, utilising its resources to provide maximum value for more audiences, and responding to a variety of demands.

In light of this, a combined institution, as proposed in the Policy Paper, is necessary to ensure the stories of our past continued to be told for future generations. While I can only speak for myself in this submission, I strongly believe it will be enjoyed and appreciated by many people across the state, providing a source of rich engagement, education and enlightenment.