

**Submission
No 24**

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

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This submission draws attention to **serious shortcomings in the selected design** for the Parramatta Museum. Whereas the Minister had promised that the new museum would be bigger and better than the Powerhouse Museum, the proposed site and design fall far short of the Powerhouse in both size and potential to showcase the MAAS Collection (which it holds in trust for current and future citizens of NSW) and to provide worthwhile experiences for visitors.

In particular, **the proposal fails to reproduce, or effectively replace, the major 'destination experience' offered by the Powerhouse** and not available anywhere else outside the UK: a unique group of working steam engines, including the highly significant Boulton & Watt and Maudslay beam engines, the latter displayed within the original Engine Room of Ultimo Power House where it helps to tell the story of Australia's Industrial Revolution. **Whatever ersatz experiences are dreamed up for Parramatta's 360 degree screen, they cannot replace the real engagement with historic machinery in motion, and the understanding that flows from this, that is provided by the real Powerhouse Museum.**

The **proposal also fails to take account of expert advice**, provided to the Museum in the 1980s, that the Boulton & Watt engine should never be moved again, and that the Governor's carriage (in the Transport exhibition) should only be moved by rail, which is impossible now that the tracks along the Goods Line have been rendered unusable. Moving either of these objects out of the Powerhouse would be a very risky venture, doubly so if they were moved first to a temporary site (as is proposed for certain large objects) and later to a more permanent venue.

The submission also takes issue with **the very poor decision to dismantle the Powerhouse Museum's exhibitions in 2020, years before a new museum is ready** for exhibitions to be installed. Recently **the people of NSW have seen a sports stadium destroyed with no replacement on the horizon, and the Parramatta War Memorial Swimming Pool**, built on the back of painstaking fund-raising by the local community in the 1950s, **trashed by the State Government but not replaced**. We should not be seeing this Government make the same mistake yet again.

The move as proposed would lead to loss of the following.

- **The sympathetic (and high-value) public use of an important group of heritage buildings as a vibrant museum that focuses on creativity across a wide range of human endeavour.** This visionary adaptive re-use project saved from destruction buildings that are key to understanding the development of Ultimo, the early history of electricity generation in Australia, and the beginnings of Sydney's very popular electric tram system. The proposed alternative package of private-public uses involves: selling off large chunks of this heritage to be replaced by blocks of flats that would dwarf the remaining buildings; gifting a sizeable part for a risky theatre venture (by a boom-and-bust industry with a long history of selling its venues to developers) that would hide heritage internal features behind curtains, stage machinery, sound and lighting equipment and dark, sound-absorbing surfaces; and using the remaining part for a 'fashion and design' museum that would rip a small selection of clothes deemed fashionable out of MAAS's rich textile industry collection while

displaying only a small fraction of its multifaceted design collection (or, as proposed by the current Director, reusing the leftover spaces as a 'creative industry' venue, which sounds more fashionable than a fashion museum but would be much narrower than the Powerhouse's proven history as a showcase of creativity writ large.)

- The **architectural design of the 1988 Galleria to create suitable spaces for the Boulton & Watt engine and Locomotive no. 1 exhibitions, and the design of spaces within the original power station buildings to hold the Steam Revolution and Transport exhibitions.** These four exhibitions complement the site's heritage and afford impressive vistas across time and space; they also complement each other, providing insights into the past and helping visitors understand how our city, our nation and our world developed.
- The **display of rich contextual material in the Galleria, which brings to life the stories of the engine and locomotive and of the people who made and used them.** It has been suggested that the engine be placed in a circulation space at Parramatta, divorced from its own stories and from the longer history of steam technology and its impacts that is revealed in the Steam Revolution exhibition.
- The **educational value of the four engineering exhibitions, to students from primary to tertiary levels.** The current pandemic has exposed the weak structure of Australian manufacturing, which has been in decline for decades. As most children today lack role models who design or make things for a living, museum exhibitions about real-world engineering and innovation are more important than ever in sparking their interest and possibly spurring them to become designers, makers and innovators themselves.
- The **tourism value of having the world's oldest rotative engine steaming beside the Stephenson locomotive** (which was made just 25 years after Stephenson's famous Rocket) in the Galleria, **other working engines in Steam Revolution, and a hugely impressive Transport gallery.** These objects and experiences attract visitors from across Australia and the world, both those with a general interest in how the past shaped the present and those with a deep interest in the development of technology.
- **Heavy investment in building services and exhibition infrastructure,** including bespoke engineering systems that support the steaming of the Boulton & Watt engine and of engines and interactives in Steam Revolution. **It has been suggested that the Boulton & Watt engine be driven by electricity or compressed air at Parramatta, turning on its head the truth that steam engines have long driven both the generation of electricity and the compression of air.**
- **Carefully controlled environmental conditions,** which protect the Museum's own objects from deterioration and allow it to borrow artefacts from institutions that insist on high display standards. The proposed porosity of the Parramatta Museum, along with the risk of flooding, would lead to much lower standards and hence endanger objects on display and impede borrowing to complement the Collection. **It is crazy that the ground floor of the proposed museum sits below the Probable Maximum Flood level, and that one of the winning design drawings depicts heavy, hard-to-move engineering objects on that floor and in the potentially very humid airspace above.**

- **The security of objects on open display** (at a time when there is a trend for Directors to favour this mode of exhibition). **High profile art thefts overseas demonstrate that security should not be forgotten in the rush to design 'iconic' and 'porous' museums and galleries that fail to consider the possibility of criminal and careless behaviour.**
- **The skills needed to maintain and run heritage engineering objects.** These skills would be lost over time, and **with them would go the Museum's ability not only to care properly for its own Collection, but also to advise rural and regional museums on caring for their heritage objects,** including the agricultural machinery, animal husbandry material and food processing equipment that tell stories of how we have interacted with the land to feed and clothe ourselves.

Early closure of the Powerhouse Museum would lead to the following

- An **unnecessary gap in the Museum's educational offer, a consequent gap in students' learning,** and loss of the Museum's reputation as a provider of educational experiences.
- An **unnecessary loss of tourism value** (once the pandemic eases, allowing travel and gatherings to resume).
- **Extra promotional costs to re-build school visit and tourist numbers** after a long gap.
- The **extra cost and risk of double-handling large objects,** whether they are eventually moved to yet-to-be-built facilities at Parramatta or Castle Hill.