

Submission
No 36

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

Organisation: Engineers Australia (Sydney Division)

Date Received: 2 May 2020

30th April 2020

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL



Sydney Division

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

Submission made by Engineers Australia.

Prepared by Engineering Heritage Australia, Sydney Division

TERMS OF REFERENCE

1. That a select committee be established to inquire into and report on:

- a) the proposed move of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, the Powerhouse Museum, from Ultimo to Parramatta, including:

- i. the core visions behind the move,

These have not been properly revealed. The discourse has been reduced to slogans: "Move the Powerhouse to Parramatta", "World-class Museum for Parramatta".

Now it is slowly being revealed as a performance, concert, exhibition, residential, research, first nations, food & beverage centre, and a "museum".

For our members it is critical that we preserve knowledge in all of its forms for the benefit of future generations. Our particular interest is in scientific and technological knowledge.

Successive NSW governments have neglected scientific and technological heritage and this will reduce their commitment further.

- ii. the governance of the project, including the effectiveness and adequacy of planning, business cases, design briefs, project management, public reporting, consultant selection and costs, project costing and cultural and demographic justifications,

There has been unacceptable secrecy surrounding the project. There is no evidence of governance. There may be a plan but it appears that this is only revealed in snippets long after decisions have been made and locked in.

- iii. the risks in the move, including damage to collections, cost overruns and the future cost of operations at Parramatta,

The risk to the collection's technology artefacts is of concern.

- Many, especially the larger, complex items, are fragile and will inevitably experience some damage during relocation and storage.

- The lack of space available at the new site will result in many artefacts remaining in storage indefinitely.
- Those artefacts that are or displayed for temporary exhibitions will experience increased risk of handling damage each time they are moved.

Past performance suggests that the NSW government will not be capable of delivering the project on time and on budget.

The current MAAS is encumbered with large overhead and depreciation costs. This new facility will increase those costs.

- iv. the consequences of flood at the site at Parramatta in light of the flood event in February 2020,

The effects of climate change will only increase the level of the Parramatta River downstream of the weir and, therefore increase the risk and severity of flooding at the proposed museum site. The risks and effects can be reduced but we don't believe that the costs required to achieve this can be justified when other sites (including the current Powerhouse site) are available.

- v. the impact on the heritage status of the site at Ultimo and heritage items at Willow Grove and the Fleet Street precinct at Parramatta,

The Ultimo Power Station buildings and Tram Sheds must be retained. Willow Grove and its grounds are amongst the last green "islands" remaining within the Parramatta CBD and should not be replaced by sterile paved space or a tower building.

- vi. the use of the proceeds from the proposed sale of the site at Ultimo,

This has not been adequately disclosed, nor has the fate of the Harris St site or the third parties involved. There is widespread community cynicism which is unhealthy.

- vii. the Government's response to the previous recommendations of the Portfolio Committee No. 4 in Report 40 entitled 'Museums and Galleries in New South Wales',

The recommendations made in the previous report were quite weak but even these were ignored by the government.

The previous enquiry was successful in giving attention to the plight of smaller museums. The Lithgow Small Arms Factory Museum is an example of a small group of dedicated volunteers who have achieved remarkable results in spite of apathy or opposition from local and state authorities. Their voice was finally heard and they have received some well-earned support.

- b) the Government's management of all museums and cultural projects in New South Wales, including

- i. current Government policy, funding and support for museums and galleries across regional New South Wales,

Current funding is inequitable. This project is an extreme example of recent policy whereby a huge amount is to be spent in one part of Sydney focussing on the entertainment sector while regional communities, the museum sector in general, and technology museums in particular, are neglected.

The money would be much better spent refurbishing the existing Powerhouse Museum and sharing resources throughout NSW.

NSW will not have an acceptable science and technology museum.

ii. whether there is equitable access to collections across New South Wales, including at the Powerhouse Museum and Australian Museum

Our comments relate to collections of objects of applied science and technology.

The NSW government provides virtually no support for science or technology heritage

The Powerhouse and, indirectly, the Rail Transport Museum are the only publicly funded technology museums in NSW. The Powerhouse has been allowed to deteriorate for decades. This can be seen through a decline in the level of technological expertise of management and staff, the lack of acquisitions of technological items and the subjects of "blockbuster" exhibitions.

Most technology heritage is held and cared for by private individuals or local community organisations, around 50% in regional areas. In NSW 100,000 people own or belong to organisations which own technology heritage objects, attracting over 1 million visitors and contributing \$600 million to the state's economy. They receive less than 1% of income from non-member sources. There is a growing feeling amongst this large number of voters that they are being discriminated against.

The Powerhouse Museum, through its outreach programmes, has been the only source of expert advice and has even this has reduced in quantity and quality as the Powerhouse's technology expertise has dwindled.

Regional museums and art galleries have fared better but they also largely overlook technological items. There is great potential to integrate technological heritage into broader social heritage but there is a great lack of technological heritage expertise within the general museum sector at management and operational level.

iii. whether comprehensive consultation with communities and experts has informed cultural policy and projects across New South Wales, such as that applying to heritage arms and armour collections,

The initial proposals concerning heritage arms and armour were ill-considered and did not adequately seek input from those organisations directly affected.

The very constructive alternative proposals made by the custodians of the armour collections were only considered after public outcry.

The final position is acceptable but is an appalling reflection on government consultation and decision-making whereby an ill-considered edict is given and only modified if the community complains loudly.

- iv. the continuing impact of the efficiency dividend on the budgets of museums and galleries over the last 10 years,

This has little effect on technology organisations as they get no institutional support.

The Powerhouse Museum's problems are far more extensive than the efficiency dividend.

- v. funding levels for museums and galleries in New South Wales compared with other states,

In general, science and technology is neglected in all states

- vi. whether there are other more cost effective strategies than the sale of the Powerhouse Museum site at Ultimo to support museum development across New South Wales, including consideration of the new Parramatta site and the proposed standalone Western Sydney Museum at the Cumberland Hospital site,

We believe, based on the limited information available that the proposed Parramatta institution will further erode the focus on technology heritage. The attempt to be a multi-purpose, multi-focus place will inevitably lead to it becoming an entertainment/exhibition centre for western Sydney.

Adding more functions whilst reducing the space available to the institution will only dilute the coverage of each component. The 200 staff will now be responsible for additional roles requiring additional expertise. This must reduce the attention paid to technology heritage.

We support a "world-class museum" for western Sydney. The proposed stand-alone Western Sydney Museum at the Cumberland Hospital site appears to be a sensible proposition.

We do not believe that this should be achieved at the cost of New South Wales' only state sponsored technology museum.

- c) any other related matter.

NSW must also have a world-class technology museum.

As an organisation of members whose reason for existence is to understand and apply science and technology for the benefit of society, we are appalled that this project will further devalue and "dumb-down" the role of science and technology in creating the society we have today.

This current pandemic only serves to highlight the value of science and technology in eliminating disease in society through, for example, clean water, sanitation and manufacturing of basic products and medicines.

It is vital that current generations understand what life was like without these, and other, technologies that we take for granted and neglect at our cost. This is a message, not only for children and not only as entertainment.

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