

**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

### Review of the SARA Act 1998

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From: Jennifer Sanders

#### Background:

I have held senior positions in the Powerhouse Museum as Senior Curator, Decorative Arts; Assistant Director Collections; Associate Director Collections and Exhibitions; then Deputy Director Collections, Content Development and Outreach. From 1999 to 2008 I was a member of the National Cultural Heritage Committee and, in 2001, a member of the NSW Centenary of Federation Committee (archiving, cataloguing, and preservation of historical materials). From 2007 to 2012, I was a member of the External Advisory Panel, Design Research Institute, RMIT University, Melbourne and Chair, Design Archives Advisory Panel, RMIT University. I am now a heritage and museums consultant.

#### Statement:

Based on my extensive experience of the cultural and heritage sector, especially in NSW, I was very surprised and puzzled that there would be a proposal to merge the State Archives and Records Authority with the Historic Houses Trust of NSW, (HHT) also known as Sydney Living Museums.

These two organisations have distinctly different roles and purposes and almost opposite goals for public engagement and outcomes. All SARA's records and archives should be digitally accessible as the primary record of the governance and business of the NSW government. HHT's significant sites are best communicated through their professional custodianship and, the stories drawn from the places and their in-situ collections – the lives of the people who lived there.

#### In brief:

HHT's purpose is to control, manage, interpret and conserve historic places and their associated collections in accordance with best practice heritage preservation, interpretation, and access.

HHT is a place-based organisation which both preserves and makes accessible significant examples of NSW's built, landscape and movable heritage. The institution has an important role in communicating our heritage to a range of stakeholders and audiences. The organisation also has a responsibility to earn income in accord with its professional standards in order to contribute to its operations and activities. HHT is an outwardly focussed organisation with responsibility for sites of great significance to NSW and its people.

HHT has an enviable record of success and innovation in the way in which it cares for, interprets and makes accessible its sites and their related collections. Although hampered in recent years by budget cuts, poor leadership and the loss of experienced staff, HHT has the foundation to

strengthen its unique role and, more effectively fulfill its purpose, with the addition of qualified, knowledgeable and dedicated executive and staff and, an appropriate budget. HHT has a proven record of working in partnership with sister cultural institutions as well as a range of other state, national and international partners in order to present the stories of its sites, and the people who lived and worked in them, in a wider context and to wider audiences. Its relatively medium size, (compared to NSW's other state cultural institutions), and specific role and purpose mean that it has been flexible and responsive to opportunities to fulfill its goals.

SARA's role and purpose is first and foremost as the NSW's Government agency for the creation, security and preservation of the State's business records. It is an agency which has an important role to support government accountability and, continued business and community access and use.

SARA is a records-based organisation with a singular role critical to the responsible management of the State's records of governance and business. SARA must be focused on this responsibility and funded so that it can carry out its duties to ensure government transparency. The essential outcome of this responsible management should be increased accessibility of the State's archives and records to researchers across NSW ranging from the general public to historians, to amateur and professional researchers for specific matters related to the governance and business of the state of NSW.

SARA's records are a unique source of documents, objects and visuals relating to the history and contemporary governance and business of the NSW Government and, in my experience, these records have been a wonderful resource for exhibitions presented by NSW's cultural institutions as well as for a period, exhibitions presented by SARA itself. (in SARA's now closed exhibition gallery in The Rocks.) The ability for cultural institutions and related historical organisations to have access to the SARA Records and Archives adds to the pool of resources to draw on to present the history and life of NSW. The digitisation of SARA's records and archives should be funded to the level required for the citizens of NSW to have access to items in its collection.

SARA should be an independent organisation with leadership experienced in and focused on its singular and important role as both guardian and public portal for access to NSW's records and archives. SARA should be focused on ensuring the State's records are collected, preserved, documented and then made widely accessible, primarily through digital access. SARA should remain independent and be funded to the level required for it to successfully carry out its core business.

#### Conclusion:

The proposed merger between the HHT and SARA would be a retrograde step as it would merge two organisations with little in common in terms of their roles and purposes and, as a result, subvert core functions to deliver programs which are, in the case of SARA, superfluous to its core business and, in the case of HHT, which would dilute its capacity to carry out its core business to the standards required for its continued success.

If both organisations were independently strengthened in their ability to fulfill their roles and purposes, then the dividends for the people of NSW would reach beyond the Sydney basin. HHT, in particular, has had a role in delivering programs to and interacting with communities across NSW where HHT's expertise in place-based management has been of assistance and, where HHT's properties have a wider reach because of their location and histories.

SARA is well placed to similarly reach across NSW by providing access to state-wide records and archives which enable it to where appropriate, to partner with local communities through councils, libraries, museums, galleries to cooperatively share stories of towns, places and districts. These programs do not have to be expensive or complicated and would go a long way in making SARA's records and archives accessible. Similarly, SARA could have a lead role in building expertise in the management of archives such as those belonging to councils, historical societies etc. Any improvement in the documentation and accessibility of NSW's archives will foster greater understanding of our history, laying a better foundation for informed decisionmaking about our future.

The NSW Legislative Council is holding an Inquiry into the Management of the Powerhouse Museum and their Museums and Cultural projects in NSW. The deliberations and results of this Inquiry would be relevant to the considerations raised by this Review of the SARA Act.

In my view, the proposed merger of HHT and SARA is ill conceived and would be extremely detrimental to the interests of both organisations, diverting and weakening both in their capacities to fulfill their respective roles and purposes, and, lessening each of their abilities to fulfill their obligations to the people of NSW .

Yours sincerely,

Jennifer Sanders