

**Submission
No 42**

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

Name: Dr Peter Watts

Date Received: 6 May 2020

SUBMISSION TO
SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE GOVERNMENT'S MANAGEMENT OF THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM AND OTHER
MUSEUMS AND CULTURAL PROJECTS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

BY

DR PETER WATTS AM, EMERITUS DIRECTOR, HISTORIC HOUSES TRUST OF NSW

This submission relates to Part b) of the Terms of Reference which state 'the Government's management of all museums and cultural projects in New South Wales'. It relates specifically to the management of the Historic Houses Trust of NSW (HHT), which now trades under the name Sydney Living Museums.

It consists largely of a submission made to the Standing Committee on Social Issues Review of Sara Act 1998 which is attached in full. At the time of writing this that Committee is still receiving submissions and has not yet begun its deliberations.

My credentials are outlined on the attached submission. I would add to this that as the Director of one of the State's major cultural institutions for nearly 28 years (1981 – 2008) I have a very good knowledge of the workings of the cultural institutions in NSW and across Australia. I have also sat on numerous boards and committees and acted as a consultant on many arts infrastructure projects since my retirement from the HHT. My CV can be made available.

As background to my attached submission to the Standing Committee on Social Issues Review of Sara Act 1998, and as evidence of the mismanagement by Government, of the Historic Houses Trust, I draw attention to:

- The past two Directors of the HHT have been parachuted into their positions (in 2013 and 2019) after the removal of the previous Directors. There was no advertising for the position and therefore no competitive selection process. The appointees would appear to have been handpicked by the then Minister with little regard to the requirements for the position. This is poor governance and, as I understand it, contrary to NSW Government rules relating to senior appointments. This has coincided with an appalling decline in visitation, productivity, scholarship, membership, philanthropic support and activity.
- The proposal to merge the HHT with the State Archives and Records Authority (SARA) is a dramatic change and should not be hidden behind the Parliament's Standing Committee on Social Issues, especially as there is no substantive information given to justify why such a significant change should take place. It smacks of a thought bubble and policy on the run for reasons that are impossible to understand and not justified.
- The Historic Houses Trust changed its trading name to Sydney Living Museums in 2013 *'to refresh and unify our diverse range of properties and highlight our role and relevance for current and future generations'*¹ There was a subsequent slide in almost all metrics. I understand this change of identity was at a cost of some \$1m. The current Executive Director (who is also Executive Director of SARA), who has been in position at the HHT for some 9 months has advised he has *'engaged an independent creative agency to deliver a clear articulation of the future for SLM and SARA'*. This seems to be jumping the gun and spending state funds in a totally inappropriate manner when two Inquiries are underway and no merger has taken place.

Dr Peter Watts AM

¹ <https://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/about-us>

SUBMISSION
TO THE
STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES
REVIEW OF SARA ACT 1998

BY

DR PETER WATTS AM, EMERITUS DIRECTOR, HISTORIC HOUSES TRUST OF NSW

Note on nomenclature

The name **Historic Houses Trust (HHT)** is used in preference to Sydney Living Museums (SLM) since this is the formal name of the institution as reflected in the Historic Houses Act 1980.

The name **State Archives and Records Authority (SARA)** is used since this is the formal name of the institution as reflected in the State Records Act 1998.

BACKGROUND

I was the Inaugural Director of the HHT from 1981 until my retirement in late 2008. I have held the position of Emeritus Director since 2008 though I have had no involvement with the HHT for the past 11 years. During my years at the HHT I led its development from its initial two properties to a complex organisation that owned and operated many museums and historic sites; restaurants and cafes; shops; major public programs including exhibitions, public events, education programs and publications; many major conservation projects including the redevelopment of The Mint, Hyde Park Barracks, Museum of Sydney on the site of first Government House, Rouse Hill Estate and Farm, Government House, Justice and Police Museum; six Endangered Houses Fund properties; a significant public library; Government House; Members; Foundation and much more.

As the Director of the HHT for some 28 years I believe I have a unique knowledge of the organisation. I have limited knowledge of SARA. My comments are therefore generally directed to matters relating to that part of the review that relates to the proposal for some form of merger of SARA and the HHT.

LACK OF JUSTIFICATION FOR A REVIEW OF A MERGER OF SARA AND HHT

1. It is apparent from the Terms of Reference and the accompanying Policy Paper that this review commenced as a review of the SARA Act 1998 – even the very titles of the two documents do not mention the HHT. Somehow, albeit clumsily, the Terms of Reference have been extended to include options for a proposed merger between SARA and the HHT. If this was a genuine review of a potential merger of these two cultural institutions the Terms of Reference would have been very different and the Discussion Paper would have canvassed all the relevant issues. The documents as they stand assume the position that the merger is a foregone conclusion.
2. Any form of merger between cultural institutions should be considered in the context of a properly considered state strategy for the museums sector. This was the number one recommendation in the review I was commissioned to undertake for Arts NSW - *Museums and Galleries NSW*, February 2010. It would appear the recommendation was not acted on. Unfortunately, in the absence of such strategic frameworks, ‘thought bubble’ proposals such as mergers of this sort will be given oxygen without the proper analysis or justification. This defies logic.
3. The clumsy extension of the review to include a merger presumably follows the direct appointment, in July 2019, of the Executive Director of SARA to head up both organisations after the sudden and

unexpected departure of the previous Director. Surely, in this era of transparent government an important appointment of this kind should have followed a formal recruitment process. To then use this appointment to propose a merger is hardly a sensible - particularly given that the previous Director of the HHT was also appointed to the position in the same manner and was subsequently dismissed in a similar manner.

4. I presume that since SARA lost its research and exhibition space in The Rocks in 2012 it is keen to have places in which to show its own materials, assuming display and exhibition is a core function of the institution. Again this is hardly a justification for merging with an organisation that has about 20 properties, the vast majority of which have no temporary exhibition spaces.

I would respectively suggest that SARA could more appropriately partner with multiple organisations that offer appropriate space for exhibitions that are related to, and appropriate to, their respective location, interests and circumstances. This might include locations in the city, suburbs and regional areas; be large and small; galleries, museums, libraries and other public and private facilities. The range of exhibitions possible using the SARA collections, especially if combined with other collections, is large.

If the HHT properties are to retain their integrity as historic sites they cannot be viewed as neutral spaces for any type of exhibition without the context that underpins, and has regard to, the significance and opportunities of each property. The current SARA exhibition *Marriage: Love and Law* is a good example of this, as it is not especially appropriate at any HHT exhibition space or property. Section 8 below for further explanation.

HISTORIC HOUSES ACT 1980

5. The Act gives as the *Principal objects of [the] Trust* as:

(a) to control, manage, maintain and conserve historic buildings or places, having regard to the historic, social and architectural interest and significance of those buildings and places,

(b) to collect, manage, maintain and conserve objects and materials associated with, and of significance to, those buildings and places,

(c) to research and interpret the significance of those buildings, places, objects and materials, having regard to their historic, social and architectural interest and value,

(d) to provide educational, cultural and professional services (including by way of research, publications, information, public programs and activities) in respect of those buildings, places, objects and materials that, in the opinion of the Trust, will:

(i) increase public knowledge and enjoyment of, and access to, those buildings, places, objects and materials, and

(ii) promote their place in the heritage of the State.

The emphasis is very clearly on specific places – their history, significance, conservation, collections, interpretation and access. The HHT was clearly established as a place-based organisation.

DECLINE OF THE HHT

6. In the past 12 years I have watched the decline of the HHT as the leading historic place management agency in the country. It was once widely admired and respected for its boldness, nimbleness, creativity, efficiency and for finding appropriate and economical solutions to difficult conservation problems. That is no longer the case.

The HHT has lost much of its expertise and scholarship, its energy, staff morale, profile, support base and revenue streams.

Major bequests have been withdrawn. There has been a massive decline in paid visitation, a decline in numbers of activities including exhibitions with almost no publications.

Support from some 8,000 members of the Friends of HHT was lost when the HHT evicted the organisation from its premises and the HHT Foundation appears to provide minimal financial support.

Apart from the recent revamp of the Hyde Park Barracks there has been almost no new initiatives, directions or major projects within the organisation in the past decade.

7. All these matters are redeemable but need focus and attention. That will be much more difficult to achieve in a merged organisation with very different primary objectives. The past decade has left the HHT diminished in critical areas of expertise, experience and therefore confidence. This makes it vulnerable to this sort of 'machinery of government' proposal which provides no guarantee of solving its problems and resurrecting the organisation to the preeminent position it once enjoyed. Unfortunately, the HHT has been eroded to a point where very few within the organisation would understand what place-based curation and management means, the very cornerstone of the Historic Houses Act, 1980.

SKILLS REQUIRED IN THE HHT

The Nature of Placed Based Institutions

8. Historic places are about materiality and spatial experiences – this is a distinctive way of knowing – quite different from the world of the archives. Historic places tell stories through experience with place and things. This might be informed by archival information but the archive is not core to the experience. The place is the primary artefact.

Understanding this requires a very different attitude and approach to that taken in an art gallery, library, archive, and indeed most other types of museums where most often connoisseurship and/or classification take primacy and the building becomes a box in which to undertake its work. In an historic place it is the box that should have primacy. This is generally poorly understood by those not familiar with historic place making and management.

The HHT has few equivalents around the world, the closest being Historic Royal Places, UK; English Heritage UK; The National Trusts, UK; Historic New England, USA. These are all places whose total focus is on the important historic places they own and manage and they give primacy to the conservation, presentation and interpretation of the places in their care.

It follows that very different skills, attitudes and approaches are needed in the management of historic places and these are not generally found, and indeed are often antithetical to, the core principles used in organisations that specialise in archives and other cultural material.

Rebuild Skills Within the HHT

9. The HHT needs to build and strengthen its knowledge, skill and experience in the following areas if it is to regain its preeminent position:
 - Historic place making and management;
 - Scholarship in architectural, garden and social history and in the decorative arts;
 - Planning, architecture and urban design;
 - History of Sydney and NSW;
 - Building and garden conservation principles and practice;
 - Museum practice – collections management, exhibitions, publications, public events etc;
 - Research capability.

These attributes would give it the capacity and the confidence it needs to take risks, make bold decisions and exercise refined judgement.

It needs to have these skilled professional areas supported by excellence in other disciplines that are integrated into, and respectful of, those above:

- Financial and people management;
- Philanthropy;
- Commercial activity including leasing, retail, publishing, cafes and restaurants and venue hire;
- Marketing;
- Public administration.

It follows that the Director and leadership team, and especially the Director, should have as many of these requirements as possible, especially in the more specialist professional areas so that these remain the dominant factors that drive the organisation.

ISSUES RELATED TO ANY AMALGAMATION/MERGER BETWEEN SARA AND HHT

Different Knowledge Skill and Experience Required in SARA and HHT

10. While I imagine there is some overlap with the knowledge, skill and experience required within SARA I imagine the primary professional expertise required would look very different from that listed above. SARA plays vital roles in preserving the state's records and needs to respond to rapidly changing circumstances as acknowledged in the *Policy Paper*.

To combine the two organisations that require very different professional disciplines, attitudes, approaches, expertise and experience seems senseless and will only diminish the focus each organisation requires.

11. Management of archives requires a very different set of skills and expectations than managing properties. The management of archival collections is largely internally focussed. It is generally process driven and governed by regulation. It is challenged by constantly changing technology. I understand that in SARA the arrangement and description of its collections is far from complete meaning that substantial parts of its own collection are inaccessible to scholars and the public. It would seem preferable to get its own house in order before contemplating merging with another agency.
12. The role of SARA, which focusses on collection, management, protection and access to its collection, is very different from the much more outwardly focussed nature of the HHT which has to engage in a significant way with the tourism and hospitality industries and the education sector to drive its commercial revenue streams.
13. With its wide range of properties the HHT manages many very different dimensions in its operations including:
- Multiple local government areas and therefore multiple LEP's, DCP's, issues and networks;
 - Multiple facilities including parks, gardens, buildings, beach, CBD, regional, suburban, CBD etc;
 - Multiple conservation and collecting policies to reflect the history and significance of each property;
 - Multiple stakeholders for each property;
 - Wide variety of programs;
 - Multiple retail, food and beverage outlets;
 - Large Volunteer workforce.

These create a complexity in management that is not well understood outside the HHT. In my view one of the great successes of the HHT, recognised internationally, has been its ability to respect this diversity

while at the same time delivering a consistently high standard in all areas of its operations. In my view this requires knowledge and skills to be honed and focussed. I can only imagine that SARA has similar but very different and complex dimensions. To dilute these by amalgamating two organisations that have, mostly, very different objectives, would weaken the focus required for the proper functioning and delivery of services of both organisations.

Strength in Diversity

14. A community's '*social, historical and cultural identity*', as expressed in the Minister's commissioning letter to the Standing Committee of Social Issues, is enriched through diversity. Think for example of:
- AGNSW vs MCA vs Casula Powerhouse;
 - Sydney Theatre Company vs Company B Belvoir vs Griffin Theatre vs Bell Shakespeare;
 - Australian Ballet vs Sydney Dance Company vs Bangarra;
 - Australian Opera vs Pinchgut Opera;
 - Brandenburg Orchestra vs Australian Chamber Orchestra vs Sydney Symphony Orchestra;
 - SARA vs State Library of NSW;
 - etc etc

Each pair or group have overlapping purposes and activities. But each has its own personality and specialities. How much poorer would be our creative endeavour if they were to be amalgamated. To contemplate such would be to accept a huge loss in diversity, creativity and fruitful competition and therefore a loss to the community

A Word of Warning from an Experienced Hack

15. I have observed over a lifetime of professional work in conservation and museums how organisations and individuals have a strong desire to own and manage historic properties. There is a strong desire to 'play house'. It is a common view that this is fun and easy to do. It is not. National Trusts and local government have been plagued by this for many years to their great detriment. The HHT demonstrated that, with political support and high expectations, focus, expertise and commitment the development and management of historic sites and museums can be done at the highest international standards. That was the governments' expectation when it established the HHT. That focus would inevitably be significantly weakened by amalgamation with SARA.

Exhibitions

16. As a relatively new cultural organisation which grew rapidly under the direction of successive governments the HHT had to develop an extensive exhibition program, especially at the Museum of Sydney *on the site of first Government House*, Justice and Police Museum, Hyde Park Barracks and previously at Elizabeth Bay House. To do so relied to some extent on its positioning in the Arts portfolio and loans from our sister institutions, especially the State Library, AGNSW, Powerhouse Museum, Australian Museum, and SARA.

This large exhibition loan program was strongly supported by the then Minister for the Arts, The Hon Peter Collins MP and his successors, who instructed other NSW State institutions to loan to the HHT with no lending fee. This enabled the collections of those institutions, almost all in storage, to be used in a wide range of HHT exhibitions over many years. These were highly collaborative projects, many of them resulting in major publications which gave the public ready access to these State collections.

Likewise HHT exhibitions borrowed collections from many other NSW government agencies, regional museums and galleries, commonwealth and interstate cultural institutions, countless other organisations and many private individuals.

Overseas institutions, especially the Natural History Museum in London; Brenthurst Library, South Africa; Peabody Essex Museum in Salem Massachusetts, USA; Auckland Art Gallery, New Zealand, have also been important lenders and collaborators.

17. SARA was one of the least important among these since its collections are primarily archival and museum exhibitions need three dimensional objects to 'bring them alive'. Also, works on paper, which form the large percentage of the SARA collection, are problematic for long term exhibition because they can generally not be shown for more than a few months due to light exposure. For these reasons SARA loans, significant as they were, were generally used as a complement to other objects and were not the primary 'draw card' objects.
18. To expect that a large archival collection such as SARA would provide major support to the HHT programs is wrong. It can provide important support through research capacity and loans. This is, and has always been, available to the HHT, as it is to everyone in the community. That is the function of SARA. But since the SARA collection is predominantly archival it has limitations for museum type exhibitions. To imagine otherwise would be to condemn the HHT's exhibition program to certain failure.
19. It follows that collections do not need to be held by an institution to be used for its exhibition program as proven by the HHT over many hundreds of exhibitions. Indeed the best exhibitions generally draw their collections from multiple sources.

One of the great strengths of the HHT exhibition program was the sourcing of material from a wide range of lenders. Indeed the HHT had an enviable reputation for its ability to work with many organisations and institutions to develop its exhibitions. This was a significant contributor to the delivery of its rich program.

Limitations of Place Based Properties

20. As explained at 8 above the HHT properties are place-based. One of the consequences is that they have very specific collecting, display and management frameworks, all of which arise from the significance and particular circumstances of the place itself. Most of the houses are furnished with original, or appropriate, furniture and collections that belong in that place. Likewise the public museums have very specific collecting and exhibition policies based very specifically around the significance of the place. While these may change in time it is hard to imagine the presentation of these places will not remain 'place-based'. That means their collections, presentation and exhibitions will generally be related to the place – as they all are now. This limits the opportunity for exhibitions and displays. The value of the SARA collection for these places is largely for research.

Research

21. The collections held in SARA and the State Library of NSW have been equally important for research and for informing the conservation and presentation of the properties and also for the programs of the HHT. A number of other institutions and private family archives have also been important including the National Library of Australia, Macleay Museum University of Sydney, National Archives of Australia and specialist libraries of other cultural institutions in Australia. Overseas institutions have also been important especially a number of UK institutions including The National Archives; National Maritime Museum, Greenwich; The Royal Collection and Archives, Windsor; Linnaean Society and the Royal Academy of Art, London. Each of these collecting institutions brings a different perspective and context to the properties and programs and each complements the other. It is quite inaccurate to portray SARA as having some special link to the properties, collections and work of the HHT and to use this falsely to justify an amalgamation of the two organisations.

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

22. It is noted that the Legislative Council has recently announced this inquiry. It would seem far more appropriate for the government to examine more broadly the management of its cultural institutions and consider any amalgamations in the context of the findings of that Inquiry.

CONCLUSIONS

23. The HHT is a highly specialised organisation. Though it has lost some of its credibility in the past decade its underlying role requires specialised skills and focus. It would be a tragedy if that role was diminished by being merged with another organisation, which is also highly specialized, but has very different primary objectives.
24. It is difficult to envisage how the Principal Objects of the HHT would be advanced in any substantial way by the proposed merger. On the contrary, in my view, they would be significantly diminished.
25. The diversity and different perspectives, interest and programs of NSWs major cultural institutions is a significant factor in the State's cultural offering. Anything that homogenises or reduces this diversity cannot be good for the Arts in NSW, nor for the community.
26. Given all the foregoing it is impossible to agree with the assertion in the Policy Paper that *"Having two separate organisations fails to exploit potential synergies that would deliver richer, more heterogeneous stories about our social, historical and cultural identity."* The statement is given without any analysis nor proper justification. It appears in the review documents as an afterthought bubble. Moreover, it is simply not true.

Dr Peter Watts AM