

Submission  
No 44

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

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**Core visions: the Powerhouse Museum's collection**

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**1.0: Introduction, context for submission:**

**Re: (a: 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':

- **I very much support** the findings and recommendations from the first Inquiry into Museums and Galleries.
- **And I abhor** the dismissive response of the government in firstly delaying discussion in Parliament, and ultimately completely ignoring the Committee's recommendations.

My focus for this Inquiry will be on **Reference (a) (i)** the inadequacy of **'the core visions behind the move'**, and especially its relationship to the **Powerhouse Museum Collection**: its extent, significance, access, presentation, maintenance and development.

While I am very familiar with the issues pertaining to the current terms of reference, and will refer to them, I know **my colleagues (see PMA and others below) will make submissions dealing with them in detail.**

**2.0: My background, with relevance to Inquiry:**

- **Curator and historian of applied arts: decorative arts, crafts and design:**

My field of experience and 48-year continuing contact includes contemporary designers, craftspeople, artists, educators, students, curators, historians, researchers, collectors, dealers and benefactors, and other significant people in those fields, both individual and industrial, in the particular areas of ceramics, textiles, jewellery and metalwork, glass, fashion, furniture and woodwork, and their related objects, technologies and archives.

- **Relevant to a museum of 'applied arts and sciences'**, my interest includes the important relationships, across time, into the present, between imagination in designing and making, expression of ideas, changing tools and technologies, understanding of materials and the processes associated with working with them.

- I have worked in this field since 1972, including 17 as a curator and **senior curator of decorative arts and design, at the Powerhouse Museum (1988-2005)**. Over this time, I have written a major history and many other publications and continue to develop exhibitions, often for regional galleries.

- My professional contacts stretch across Australia, and to other countries. They include many long-established specialist and cross-media organisations and institutions across NSW, Australia and the world.
- **All these contacts respect the PHM's continuing collection and expect access to it:** to find the objects of interest, and the stories behind them, in a centrally accessible city location – such as the Powerhouse Museum location in Ultimo. Some of these local and NSW organisations became affiliated societies and met regularly in the Museum, where they recognised a close association with their interests.
- **Powerhouse Museum Alliance (PMA):** See: <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/>  
 Since the announcement of 'the re-location' in 2014, I have been an active member of this widely experienced professional museum lobby group, and for 4 years have maintained the PMA website which includes **all available documentation of the proposed relocation** of the Museum, including:
  - a news chronology and letters to editors from 2014;
  - research papers about PMA heritage and history
  - informed arguments for not moving the museum
  - other options for Parramatta
  - a record of all hearings and submissions to the first Inquiry
  - documents from the new PHM Business case, and critiques
  - as well as a Facebook page.
 Our PMA group works closely with other individuals and groups (eg. Save the Powerhouse; North Parramatta Residents Action Group; Pyrmont History Group – and many others). I have a personal mailing list of nearly 1000 selected professional people and organisations across NSW, Australia and other countries, who have had an association with the Powerhouse Museum, including about 100 Powerhouse Museum alumni and volunteers, and keep them up to date on current issues about the move.

**NO-ONE in this wide range of experience supports the move;** everyone wants the museum to stay in Ultimo, and for Parramatta to have an arts/museum cultural centre more specifically appropriate for its own communities, while respecting and celebrating heritage in both locations.

### **3.0: Terms of Reference: collections and 'core visions'**

**Refer:** (a) (i) the inadequacy of **'the core visions behind the move'**; and its **effect on the PHM Collection**

#### **3.1 The collection as the basis for 'core visions':**

- Responsibility for, and recognition of the significance and relevance of a museum's collection, should underpin all major decisions about the location of the museum, and the presentation of its collection. This is a 'core value'.
- I believe very strongly, as a result of considering the documentation of the hasty and non-transparent decision-making processes to 'relocate' the Museum, and the inappropriateness and inadequacy of consultation processes, **that the government and its planning agencies for this project have demonstrated that they have very little idea of what a museum is**, what is involved in managing a significant collection, and how a museum itself needs to be financially and philosophically maintained and supported.
- With regard to the PHM, however the 'core visions behind the move' may have been described in the current business case, the solutions offered are **not in the best interests of a state museum** such as the Powerhouse, with its established history, heritage, collection and audiences.

- Nor are they in the best interests of Western Sydney and Parramatta communities for the same reasons.

### 3.2 What is a museum, and what is the essential ‘core value’ of a collection?

- A museum is a continuing accumulation of collections of significant objects that provide cultural, social and historic records of who we are and what we have done and continue to do, over time. It usually has a specific thematic core: state/national, local/regional, and usually with a specific subject or media focus.
- But a museum is **more than a storehouse** – these objects and groups of objects have significant stories to tell, which need to be researched, recorded and presented with the objects.
- And in opposition to recent exhibition tendencies, exhibitions are also not just undocumented, **uninformed ‘art experiences’**. While objects may be visually appealing, they also benefit from background stories and contexts rather than simply ‘speaking for themselves’. Audiences want enticing and accessible clues to help them appreciate and consider the significance of what they are seeing and experiencing.
- **The physical presence of real objects, in context**, is of essential and primary importance, supported by substantial on-line documentation, and easy access to the stored collection.
- **The PHM has a good record of presenting collection exhibitions engagingly**, in context, with other visual and audio material, and archival material, and public programs.
- **Absolutely necessary, are appropriate and adequate spaces** to display special large objects, permanent and changing collection-based exhibitions, temporary exhibitions, and touring exhibitions. Pop-up spaces are not enough.
- **So professionally curated exhibitions are essential:** isolated ‘iconic’ individual objects, with limited information, are not always enough.
- Convenient **access to the stored collection is also necessary to staff** working on researching and preparing exhibitions, and those who transport the objects.
- Cafes, shops, libraries, lecture rooms, play centres, etc – are all important in encouraging audiences, but **cannot overwhelm the main purpose of the museum – to present the collection.**
- And a museum is most acknowledged and appreciated when it can **draw on experienced, knowledgeable staff** who can work together across all aspects of collecting, documenting, conserving, exhibition designing, education and promotion, according to the significance of the collection.

### 3.3 The Powerhouse Museum (of MAAS) as a significant example:

- The Powerhouse Museum, as part of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, is unique in Sydney, NSW and Australia for the relationships across 130 years, between its **collections of science and technology, applied arts (decorative arts, crafts and design) and social history**. While each field has many specific characteristics, it can also draw on the other areas for context and interpretation, according to the core purpose of the museum.
- The PHM is a museum that is **relevant to contemporary audiences** as it provides through its collection and location, social and cultural references, as well as technological ones, for contemporary practising designers, makers, scientists, researchers and those interested in Australian cultural history, both professional practitioners and students, as well as audiences interested in these relationships.
- **As a state museum with national and international significance, the MAAS was perfectly re-located as the Powerhouse Museum in the heritage-significant Powerhouse buildings and the adjacent Tram depot, in the Sydney CBD of the state capital where local, state, interstate and international audiences can easily access it.**

- **The 1988 award-winning architectural recognition** for adaptive reuse and extension of the buildings, excellently acknowledged the juxtaposition of past and present aspects of architecture.
- As well, the **integrated nature of the past and present buildings** has provided continuing research relevance for the broader museum collection, as it crosses arts, industry and society.
- When the MAAS reopened as the Powerhouse Museum in 1988 it broke away from ‘display storage’ and **launched a new example, internationally**, in the way it presented engaging, thoughtful and relevant exhibitions based on its collection.
- Significantly, it provided a range of audiences with compelling information in narratives about the collection, accumulated over more than 100 years, and further developing with philanthropic and government support.
- **From its opening in 1988 with about 25 exhibitions across all collection areas, the impressive extent of exhibitions from 1988-2018** is recorded here: <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/about-the-powerhouse-museum/powerhouse-museum-an-exhibition-archive/>
- The Ultimo Powerhouse buildings provided a totally relevant and engaging location for objects of **historical technical and engineering significance**, notably those requiring the scale of the old and new buildings.
- **The decorative arts and design exhibitions**, drawn from the collection, were well-attended because they were **relevant to contemporary practice and education**, accessible within the capital city, and unique because they were also presented in the context of science and technology. They ranged across industrial manufacture to contemporary designing and making and provided a unique and continuing interface between studio crafts, art and design, and industrial manufacture.
- **Social history exhibitions** provided a further significant context, from Indigenous Australia to migration stories and beyond.
- **The Museum has always been in a cultural and educational precinct**, and is appropriately located in current further development of an acknowledged central city design and technology precinct.
- **The current complete venue, before and including 1988 additions**, perfectly complements the purpose of the museum and its continuing collections.
- **I know very well that the Museum’s broad supportive field has no confidence in the future of the Powerhouse Museum and its unique collection if it moves to Parramatta, and takes on a different purpose and presence.**

#### 4.0 The move: overall issues in Ultimo and Parramatta

- It is clear to all, that the **‘relocation’ is inappropriate** for such a state museum for reasons of access, and cultural and heritage significance.
- **The Powerhouse buildings will be largely destroyed, and Parramatta’s important contemporary and historical cultural needs have been sidelined.** The **Parramatta Council’s recorded preferences at the outset were over-ridden** by the government. The ‘move’ decision was made for political and financial reasons: money in the city and votes in the west. See: <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/what-the-experts-say/parramatta-council-minutes-document-early-concerns-for-proposed-relocation-of-the-powerhouse-museum-tom-lockley/>
- **Heritage issues**, associated with significant buildings, **are largely ignored** in both locations.
- **Consultation**, when it finally occurred, has not included professional, experienced museum people; and preferences expressed later through token public consultation meetings have been fundamentally ignored, for both Ultimo and Parramatta.

- It is noticeable that the decision-making role of Museum's Trustees as being responsible for the collection, for the people of NSW, has been largely by-passed by government. There are **few, if any, museum experts now included on the Trust**, while there are several who can be argued to have or have had, conflict of interest in favour of government preferences.
- **At an estimated \$1.5b, the cost of moving is far more than would be needed to:**
  - a) **provide necessary investment in the now under-funded Ultimo site, and**
  - b) **provide a relevant western Sydney cultural facility in Parramatta**
- **The risks in moving all of the collection** to the Parramatta/Castle Hill locations, and other potential regional storage areas, are unacceptable for reasons of the flood-prone site, transport cost and safety.
- **As well, when considering increasing necessary subsidies** in both regional and city areas following 2020 **bushfires and the corona virus pandemic**, as well as the need for fair contributions to regional museums, galleries and art spaces, the overblown cost of moving this museum can, even more, **not be justified**.

#### 4.1 Issues in Ultimo:

Since its move to the Powerhouse buildings, the Powerhouse Museum maintained **a strong and active profile** across all its collection areas for over 20 years, while also supporting regional museums with touring exhibitions.

- However, over at least the last decade, the PHM has suffered from **declining government financial support**, largely through the efficiency dividend requirements, resulting in extremely serious depletion of professional staff, with diminishing exhibition presentation and related projects.
- It is evident that this museum, as well as others, has **suffered from budget cuts to running costs**, and that this situation **can accumulate into long-term, irretrievable deficiencies in** collection development, management and access, and the continuing loss of necessary expertise. The collections are owned by the people of NSW, who need to be confident that they are managed, developed and presented well.
- **Staff numbers were almost halved through** several rounds of redundancies, partly to enable programming because the program budgets had been consistently cut. This is an irrevocable loss of expertise and knowledge of both the historic collections and the contemporary museum field.
- **Exhibition programs were changed** radically to allow popular and entertaining exhibitions to displace the core collection displays and the temporary exhibitions contextualised by them, so that **some extremely significant aspects of the collection have no substantial continuing presence**.
- While exhibitions and events focussing on entertainment did bring in audiences (and entry fees) from those interested in one-off experiences, **there was evidence of disenchantment** from the key constituencies that the museum has always represented.
- About 30 **Affiliated Societies** representing many subject specialities, many of whom had previously met in the Museum and brought their support and influence to the Museum, eventually had to pay market rates to meet there, with the result that all moved away to meet elsewhere.
- **Collectors, benefactors and philanthropists** who saw a place for their lifetime research and acquisitions started to look elsewhere for places to donate their collections and funds.
- The Museum has **inadequate funds to maintain** a consistent acquisition policy, and therefore a continuing record of significant items.
- Its **exhibition spaces have also been** overtaken by eg. a UTS lecture theatre and a shop/café, so there is less room to maintain its diverse collection-based exhibition program.

- Earlier **submissions for responsible building and facilities maintenance support were hijacked** as a rationale for demolishing the museum and moving it elsewhere – while presumably **providing an excuse for intending to flog off the site** to city property developers.
- At the same time, the Green line and light rail have made the PHM buildings **even more accessible** for visitors to the capital city.
- And the PHM is within easy reach of what has now been identified as a new **Central tech hub**, near Central railway station.
- While it is recognised that it is better value to maintain the PHM where it is, the Ultimo venue will **need extra exhibition space, preferably in adjacent locations** where permanent changing exhibitions, as well as temporary exhibitions, can focus on aspects of the collection, while making links to others.
- The proposed **business case for the Ultimo site** has not yet been made public, but personal preferences expressed by former arts minister, Don Harwin, for a ‘creative industries presence’ in Ultimo which, according to earlier business papers, may simply be a Fashion museum with a Lyric Theatre, **have been ridiculed** because a Lyric theatre bears no link to the acknowledged overall purpose of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, and Fashion is only one theme of many in decorative and applied arts. And there is no link referred to regarding the relationship with the wider collection.

#### 4.2 Issues with the new Powerhouse Museum in Parramatta:

The winning architectural design for the ‘New Powerhouse’ in Parramatta was announced on 17 December, 2019, and the extensive stage 2 Brief, issued on 17 February 2020, included: ‘We envisage the Powerhouse Parramatta as a hyper-platform, a building with limitless potential which continuously evolves. The built form treads lightly on the site, creating a porous ground plane...’ And ‘A new curatorial strategy will focus on integrated and immersive programs that promote interaction and inspire and connect people of all ages and backgrounds.’ See 17 Dec 2019 and 17 Feb 2020 in <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/find-out-more/a-news-chronology/>

However, public concerns continue to be expressed regarding:

- **Cost:** The over \$1.5 billion estimated for the ‘re-location’, cannot be justified, given other cost priorities in the state, and better options consistently identified for both the Powerhouse and Parramatta.
- **Risks:** The risks of relocating to a flood-prone site, as well as the risks for moving – or storing elsewhere – both major engineering items, and the many other objects in the collection requiring special handling and environments.
- **Audiences:** The persistent emphasis by the Premier and former Arts Minister about the museum being ‘for the people of Western Sydney’, when it is clear it has always been a state museum with audiences that need to access it easily, in a capital city centre.

- **The building design in relation to the ‘core purpose’, ie. the PHM Collection**

The Powerhouse Museum Alliance noted (17 February) that the Brief also raised new issues. Some responses, apart from describing the building design as ‘milk-crates on sticks’, included:

- ‘Sorry, that’s a multi-purpose arts facility with a small museum on top, NOT the Powerhouse Museum. Save the REAL Museum in Ultimo!’
- ‘Concern for the 25% smaller space for exhibitions, not all with environmental controls’
- ‘It is clear that the government never intended to create a museum as it is commonly understood. What they are doing is a big commercial development with some

exhibition galleries attached that are far inferior and just a fraction of the size of the PHM...Class A asset stripping...'

- 'They have no interest in the collection or in doing properly curated exhibitions. That is why there is not one person with museum experience at any level of the project structure, ... nor the neutered MAAS Trust, nor on the design competition jury.'
- 'Concern for the potential triviality of an emphasis on 'iconic objects', 'immersive experiences', a constantly changing rolling program, grand art commissions, and extravagant screen-based content.'
- 'Inadequate attention to providing well-informed stories expressing the significance of the broad collection across science and technology, decorative arts and design and social history, for reference, research and appreciation.'
- 'In the Stage 2 design brief they ask for the building to have a 100 year life...These people have had an irony bypass. Trashing the PHM after just 32 years.'
- **Storage:** It appears that much of the collection will now be held in the storage facility, to be extended at the Castle Hill site, which is extremely distant and inaccessible for most audiences, including staff expected to work with it. Some objects may be redirected to regional museums, often without safe storage facilities.
- **Staff and planning:** There appears to be no recognition in the timetables, schedules and staffing reports that exhibitions need professional expertise and knowledge of the content of the collections, and that it takes considerable time to develop proposals and work in teams to develop storylines, plans and design layouts. Over recent years the number of professionals in the museum have halved; such inside experience and skill cannot easily or effectively be contracted in, or found in a different location; it is a relatively small specialist professional field of curators, conservators, registrars, designers, educators, editorial and IT professionals, especially those with long-term experience and knowledge of this collection.

### 4.3 What Parramatta people want:

At public consultation meetings on 26 and 31 July, 2017,

(<https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/find-out-more/community-consultation-meetings-august-2017/>) reports show it was clear that audiences were strongly in favour of:

- in Parramatta, a preference for **developing a local art/museum centre** (alongside the existing performing arts centre) with exhibition galleries relevant to local audiences (as in other regional cities); with potential for a science centre; and touring exhibitions and projects, perhaps from AGNSW, Australian Museum, MCA, MAAS and other CBD and regional institutions.
- At the same time, there was a strong argument to develop **museums in the North Parramatta Heritage precinct, that include local programs of local and state significance**, on such as Indigenous and colonial histories and heritage, and migration history.
- **These have remained continuing preferences for people in Parramatta.** However, supported from the outset by developers and other government advocates, the government over-rode the Parramatta Council's plans and the continuing recommendations for alternatives from local groups.
- From the announcement of the location of the new building, there has been serious local and state-wide concern for **the risks of locating a museum and its collection on such a flood-prone site.**
- Moreover, the **proposed demolition of some significant heritage buildings associated** with the design of the new building has very much disturbed local people who care about their history and heritage.



## 5.0: Solutions and recommendations:

### 5.1 Powerhouse Museum: Better to stay in Ultimo:

At the first ‘consultation’ meetings in 2017, reports show it was clear that audiences supported retaining the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo, while investing in expansion and development there; recognising its long-earned presence there in the context of audiences, access, education and tourism; with both historical and contemporary significance in its buildings, collections and programs; and contributing programs to regional centres as it has always done.

In 2020, despite the government’s lack of support for maintenance and development, it is still strongly argued that it would be **more cost-effective**, and far better for all constituents, for the government to:

- **better invest in the Ultimo location**, in sympathy with the existing 1988 adapted reuse of the original buildings
- **expand the range of collection-based exhibition spaces**, perhaps in adjacent buildings where links across the collection can still be made.
- **Replace lost permanent/changing exhibitions:** While from time to time significant temporary exhibitions have been held, largely based on the collection, these could not be presented in the continuing context of a permanent changing collection-based exhibition in that area.

**While maintaining the important installations of eg. aeroplanes and steam engines, among those collection areas that should be revisited are:**

- the permanent changing exhibition of decorative arts & design, ‘Inspired! Design across time’, installed after an 8-year project in late 2005, which came out in 2010
  - the permanent changing Community Places exhibitions for NSW’s multicultural social history
  - the Indigenous and Asian Galleries of changing exhibitions
  - ‘Success and Innovation, design for manufacture’, closed in 2011
  - The Migration Heritage Centre, which was forced to close in 2013.
  - Musical instruments...
  - and many others...
- **The collection should not be split thematically between Ultimo and Parramatta; there should remain clear opportunities to cross-reference between the collection areas.**

### 5.2 Parramatta: something of their own

It remains a better proposal for Parramatta follow up earlier Council ideas to:

- **Build a cultural centre**, near the performing arts centre, for local/regional art and design exhibitions, and incoming touring exhibitions – as with all other local centres such as Manly, Mosman, Campbelltown, Blacktown, Gosford etc etc....**Why doesn’t Parramatta have one of these already?**
- The flexible intent of the current architectural design and exhibition program, could suit this kind of locally-oriented community cultural centre.
- And with respect for Parramatta’s significant local history, from indigenous to colonial and recent migrations, to **follow up local preferences to establish a local history or migration museum**, ideally in the historic Fleet Street precinct, which can also benefit from incoming exhibitions from state and regional museums.