

Submission
No 79

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

Organisation: Australian Museums and Galleries Association

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Australian Museums and Galleries Association New South Wales

15 May 2020

Submission to the Select Committee on the Government's management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in New South Wales

The Australian Museums and Galleries Association (AMaGA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the *Inquiry into the longstanding issues concerning the Powerhouse Museum and other museum and cultural projects in NSW*.

Before making specific comments, we will outline who we are and what we do.

Who we are

AMaGA is the national membership association and peak advocacy body representing museums and galleries. We encompass a wide and diverse range of national, state, regional and community museums, art galleries, historic sites, botanic and zoological gardens, research centres, Indigenous cultural centres, and Keeping Places across Australia. Our 1400 members represent thousands of individual professionals through the large institutions, and thousands more individual volunteers.

All of our members are linked by a shared dedication to culture and the communities they serve. They understand that Australian cultural life is a dynamic ecosystem that generates creativity and innovation and contributes to the social and economic wellbeing of the country.

AMaGA is an advocacy, research, service and professional development organisation. We seek to enhance the value of Australia's collections, public programs and stories by sharing knowledge, developing skills, inspiring innovation and providing leadership and the authoritative voice in protecting and promoting our arts, science and cultural heritage.

We advocate for museums and galleries, identify and undertake strategic research, inform policy, set ethical standards and run a broad range of training programs. More information on the organisation and our members can be found at <https://www.amaga.org.au/annual-reports-0>

We build on a history of museum professional association activity that extends back to the 1930s, have branches in every state and territory, and support professional national networks of expertise. The NSW Branch is one of the largest, with 318 members in total, comprising 141 organisations (ranging from national to remote, volunteer-run institutions) and 177 individuals, both professional and volunteer. The branch has three chapters throughout rural and regional NSW.

This submission draws both on the lived experience of our galleries and museums, and state, national and international research, expertise and standards.

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The cultural sector

The cultural sector is the parallel source of knowledge to the formal education system and museums and galleries, as core parts of this sector, are fundamental sources of information, learning and engagement for people of all ages and abilities. These institutions encourage curiosity, creativity and critical thinking, offer rich aesthetic and emotional experiences through art, science, history and story-telling, and enable people to access objects and collections in ways that enrich lives and society. Furthermore, they help foster the creative industries which are one of the engine houses of the economy. (Henley, 2016)

Comments on the Inquiry

Given AMaGA's role and expertise, our comments to this Inquiry are focused on international best practice in museology and cultural heritage, the importance of engaging diverse communities, the importance of history and stories, and increasing public access to and engagement with collections.

We also note that AMaGA made a detailed submission to the previous NSW Parliamentary Committee Inquiry in 2016 and has issued Public Statements over the ensuing years. Based on national and international principles and best practice, this advice is publicly available on our website at: www.amaga.org.au

Our follow up Statements in 2018 and 2019 are here <https://www.amaga.org.au/news/update-powerhouse-museum> and here <https://www.amaga.org.au/news/powerhouse-museum-confirmation-move>

Our response to this Select Committee addresses the following Terms of Reference:

- (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,
 - (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,
 - (iii) the risks in the move, including damage to collections, cost overruns and the future cost of operations at Parramatta,
 - (iv) the consequences of flood at the site at Parramatta in light of the flood event in February 2020,
 - (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,

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- (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',
- (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,
- (ii) whether there is equitable access to collections across New South Wales, including at the Powerhouse Museum and the Australian Museum,
- (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,
- (iv) the continuing impact of the efficiency dividend on the budgets of museums and galleries over the last 10 years,
- (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,
- (c) any other related matter.

Key Responses

AMaGA notes that many of the intentions behind the move of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta are important aspects of contemporary museology, namely cultural equity across Sydney, the desire to make collections more accessible, and a desire to connect with industry.

However, a number of concerns have been raised by our members across NSW in regard to the project to move the Museum to Parramatta:

- It is not common practice in any major world city to close a large state museum and move it entirely to what can be interpreted as a less suitable site. It is common practice to build significant satellite museums in suburban and regional areas, or build new institutions responding to community, industry or tourism needs. The V&A, Louvre, Guggenheim, Tate, and Hermitage are some of the many major museums using the satellite model. Sydney currently has fewer major museums than other high-profile world cities such as London, New York, Paris or Tokyo. Museums play a major part in the cultural and tourism industries in those cities and could certainly be expanded in Sydney without losing the Powerhouse in Ultimo.
- Some of the reasons behind the initial decision to move are no longer valid. Access in Ultimo has improved greatly. It is a vibrant educational, tourism, retail, convention and cultural hub served by excellent public transport. The condition of the buildings is good,

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and with modest investment can be brought back to best environmental standard. The Ultimo site provides best practice, easily accessible storage for more than half the Museum collection, including high security, high value collections and an extensive firearms collection. Current plans to move all of this to warehousing in Castle Hill is expensive, inaccessible and far away from other cultural and educational institutions and the MAAS sites. The major project to document and digitise the collection is important, however it can continue as part of the revitalisation of Ultimo. The large steam and technology objects are unlikely to find a place in the new museum, as it appears to be primarily designed for contemporary art installations, workshops, studios, apartments and cafes. It appears that there has not been adequate consultation with communities in Greater Sydney to determine the most appropriate museum and heritage solutions to maximise cultural, educational and economic benefits.

- The consultancies, business cases, budgeting, planning and design processes have been observed to be lacking in transparency, appropriate museological expertise and public consultation. The MAAS Trust no longer includes anyone with a museum background. There have been very high numbers of senior staff turnover in the last five years, with some of the newer senior staff being appointed with little experience in a large multi-disciplinary museum. Many of our regional and Greater Sydney members have observed that they find it much easier to visit Ultimo than Parramatta. It is evident via the media that many community groups in Parramatta are deeply concerned about their heritage, do not want to lose Willow Grove and the St George's Terrace, and do not feel consultation has been sufficient.
- The Ultimo site including the original MAAS building, the Harwood building and the 1988 award winning adaptive re-use have also been shown to be of high significance to the broader community for architectural, historical and social values. The Museum has been a much-loved presence in Ultimo for more than a century, and makes sense in its industrial, historical and educational context. Museums and heritage concerns should be considered together. The idea of destroying significant built cultural artefacts to build a new museum is unacceptable to many and breaches museum and cultural heritage codes of practice.
- There are serious concerns around the environmental conditions in the new building. The full impacts of expected climate change have not been taken into account, with the likelihood of higher temperatures and more extreme weather events including extensive flooding. The exhibition space which will meet best practice standards are smaller in the new proposal than in the current buildings at Ultimo. Museums close to river or ocean sites internationally have suffered flooding and damage to objects. Even if flooding events can be planned for, it cannot be seen as an appropriate site for the relocation of a major state museum. Major international museums will be reluctant to loan objects and travelling exhibitions to a museum which pose such a high risk. This will be a major economic and cultural loss for Sydney as these exhibitions are known to generate a great deal of interest and tourism.
- From the earliest days of site selection, where only the riverside site and the golf course site were being considered, neither were seen as ideal. Collection movement always

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contains significant risk. With the fragility of Roman glass and delicate porcelain, security risks of firearms and coins, and difficulty of large significant technology objects combined with inexperienced staff - damage is likely. Audience numbers are not likely to remain high after initial opening visits, with tourism numbers expected to be minimal unless Parramatta can maintain and value add to its significant heritage assets. It is likely to be difficult to attract loans and international travelling exhibitions to a museum with these environmental risks.

- Many of these highly significant matters have already been addressed by the previous parliamentary enquiry. The findings of that enquiry remain relevant.
- Our Association would like to see a thorough review of current NSW Government projects in consultation with communities and the museum profession. There remains concern regarding the move away from historical collecting at the Powerhouse Museum across all collecting areas. There is no designated NSW history museum. There is a clear need for a formal Strategy to address collecting, museums and galleries across NSW to ensure all areas of cultural and scientific heritage are covered with special attention to Indigenous cultural material and community relationships. In addition, the plan should consider how best to share engagement and museum access equitably amongst city, greater Sydney and regional communities. This should have taken place before the decision to move the Powerhouse occurred. This would require extensive consultation with our members in regional NSW and Indigenous communities and cultural leaders. There has been a lack of resourcing generally to ensure regional and community museums are sustainable and able to serve both their communities and promote tourism. Regional tourism is becoming increasingly important after the devastating recent events of drought, bushfires and Covid 19.
- Cultural and heritage institutions are vital for people's sense of belonging and can have a very positive impact on mental health through volunteering, events and programming. They are also a vital asset for supporting all levels of education and industry. Research has shown that international visitors are very interested in learning more about Indigenous cultures and Australia's history. NSW could do much more to ensure our museums attract more visitation through better programming and promotion. Clarity is required as to how Indigenous communities can have ownership of their own cultural material and stories and how best tourism can be served.
- Additional funding should be carefully allocated across NSW according to a clear equitable and transparent Strategy and Plan, rather than based on ad hoc decisions from years past that may no longer be supportable or serving the diverse communities and economies of the state.
- As a first step, the Efficiency Dividend should be removed from the state cultural institutions. The concept of an Efficiency Dividend is a false one – it is in essence a compounding cut to operational budgets. It is a “blunt instrument, which flies in the face of condemnation from all sides”. “Smaller organisations [such as museums and galleries] feel a disproportionate level of pain, while larger organisations have more flexibility on

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where to make the savings". (Christopher Stone, Research Director at the Centre for Policy Development, 2014)

- Salaries and wages comprise the majority of cultural institutions' operating costs – compounding cuts over many years have resulted in the loss of numerous experienced staff in NSW along with services and activities. Impacts include the loss of expertise, compromised long term strategic planning, reduced options for creativity and innovation, and risks to organisational sustainability.

Conclusion

Cultural institutions are central to a sense of place, time, identity and social cohesion. They connect Australians with the stories, art, heritage and histories of their community at a local, regional, state, and national level. AMaGA commends the NSW parliament for initiating a process of review, particularly in the case of the contentious Powerhouse relocation, and strongly advises that further work needs to be carried out.

Fundamental changes to these valuable institutions need to be clearly evidence-based and enable them to thrive as they deliver on the government's policy outcomes.

Reading/References

GLAM Peak and Digital Access frameworks: <http://www.digitalcollections.org.au/framework>

Darren Henley, *The Arts Dividend: Why investment in culture pays*, 2016

AMaGA Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health
<https://www.amaga.org.au/news/amaga-submission-pc-inquiry-mental-health>

Judith Coombes

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Our vision:
Inspiring Australia's cultural life through a thriving and valued museum and gallery sector

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