

**Submission  
No 81**

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

**Organisation:** The Hunters Hill Trust

**Date Received:** 17 May 2020

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The Hon. Robert Borsak, MLC

Chair

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

NSW Parliament House

SYDNEY NSW 2001

Dear Mr Borsak and other members of the Committee

**Re: Government responsibility for State Heritage, history and culture as represented by the Powerhouse Museum and its 'proposed move' to Parramatta**

I write as President of the Hunters Hill Trust on behalf of our organisation's membership. We are dismayed at the Government's plans to dismantle the Museum and send its exhibits into storage or for display elsewhere. This would mean Sydney would no longer have a Technical Museum and the Powerhouse's iconic exhibits, Loco 1, the Boulton and Watt Steam engine, the famous Strasburg clock and the many large 19th and 20th century exhibits would no longer be on display. The proposal is cultural vandalism and a crime against past, current and future generations.

We believe that the custodianship of our State's heritage, history and culture should be approached with integrity, equity and bipartisan support, which clearly the current Powerhouse relocation proposal does not have. Our membership is pleased that this new parliamentary inquiry has been launched into the government's \$1.5 billion plan to 'relocate' the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta, along with the disparities in funding support for city and regional galleries and museums that these plans represent.

The Trust has written to the NSW Government and the Premier on this matter at least twice now to relay our concerns about the enormous cost and negative impacts of the proposal. The Government led by the Premier should be fiercely protecting the Powerhouse Museum's significant legacy for current and future generations to be able to enjoy, engage and learn about the collections and the stories they represent. The Trust has not received a satisfactory response to any of our correspondence regarding this matter.

Significantly, our concerns were heightened by seeing details of the plans for the proposed 'Applied Arts' museum at Parramatta. Clearly the plans are not for a Powerhouse Museum as we know it, but something more like a performing arts centre, with far less display space and museum quality conditions to care for the collections than there is currently in Ultimo. Apparently, most of the collections would go elsewhere or into storage - so the Parramatta museum will not be bigger and better, but smaller and no longer illustrating our technological history. Moreover, the Powerhouse Museum building itself is an exhibit in its own right, and this connection of technological exhibits with a technology building would also be lost if the project proceeds.

The Powerhouse Museum, despite an erosion in funding and NSW Government support, has established its reputation as a world class institution with highly significant collections that have been built up by and invested in by the people of NSW. \ Generations of taxpayers have contributed to and donated important collections of material to the Museum as part of the legacy, story and history of Sydney and our State. The site and its collections are

indisputably owned by the people of NSW and held in Trust as a gift from previous generations to future generations and, as a whole, they inform our sense of identity and our future and should not be at risk of political decisions.

Overwhelmingly the voices of the community have advocated to:

- preserve the Powerhouse Museum and its substantial investment in its Ultimo precinct for continuing enjoyment by all at its current transport accessible location and;
- build a new, locally influenced cultural institution at Parramatta that speaks to the history, sense of place and local community of Parramatta and;
- use the funding saved from moving the Powerhouse museum to create regional museums and galleries.

The community has also spoken clearly on its desire to protect the State Significant Heritage of Willow Grove House and St George's Terrace in Parramatta as well as the Powerhouse Museum's built heritage in Ultimo. The Trust is concerned that the Powerhouse Museum project in Parramatta has been declared a 'State Significant Project' to enable the Government to override and ignore all reasonable opposition or community input and permit the destruction of local heritage. There has been a chorus of voices raising serious concern about the inappropriateness of the old David Jones car-park site in Parramatta - reinforced by the extensive flooding of the site earlier this year. No museum in the world would plan to build on a flood prone site and experts and Museum professionals have made this case through numerous channels that have been ignored. The published proposals for the site will not only destroy cherished local heritage but will require significant engineering controls and expense to protect the site from the well documented flooding of the Parramatta River.

The Powerhouse Museum was a visionary project delivered for the Australian Bicentenary - building on a long association with Ultimo and with the industrial history of the precinct that was appropriate for a collection of 'applied arts and sciences'. This history and sense of place and identity should not be dismantled. The Powerhouse Museum and its wonderful collections relating to science, applied arts, design and technology should be reinvigorated and connected to the arts, design and teaching institutions on its doorstep. Ultimo certainly does not need a downgraded 'arts and cultural space', as proposed at some point by the former Minister Don Harwin, when millions have been committed to 'Sydney Modern' at the Art Gallery of NSW (which could have been built at Parramatta) and there is also the MCA at Circular Quay.

It is well known that more than a decade of considered, consultative and specialist planning went into building the Powerhouse Museum following years of detailed work by a team of professional museum experts. The shortened timeframes currently proposed for the Parramatta project risk the security and protection of the collections themselves, particularly as the specialist knowledge within the institution has been significantly depleted. This fast tracking will ensure poor outcomes, compromised design and cost blowouts.

There are also negative costs beyond building a new museum offering in Parramatta due to:

- the value lost in demolishing existing purpose built, specialist climate controlled, fire protected and specialist collections storage infrastructure;
- the value lost in demolishing the purpose built specialist conservation laboratories and workshops;
- the cost to move the vast collections that are on display and in storage in Ultimo -

- many of which are priceless and unique in the world and some specifically that were transported into the museum along the old rail lines and before walls were built;
- the value lost in the investment in engineering solutions to hang, house and display priceless objects such as the Boulton and Watt rotative steam engine - 'one of the first rotative steam engine ever built, and ... the oldest surviving [1]' is still in working order;
  - the inevitable cost escalations in rushed and ill-conceived museum planning;
  - the loss to the broader community, in its historic links to the Ultimo precinct and easy access to Sydneysiders, international tourists and regional NSW visitors in its current location.

Parramatta deserves its own cultural facilities that reflect the history and character of its region. There is great cost in demolishing one cultural offering to create another. A cultural facility at Parramatta can be developed without the encumbrance of the costs and energy of dismantling and moving the collections to an inappropriate location and design for a museum collection. Rather local stories and heritage can be showcased more relevant to the region from not only the Powerhouse collections, but also the vast collections from the Australian Museum, the State Library and the Art Gallery of NSW.

The only sensible outcome for the people of NSW is for the Powerhouse Museum to remain intact in Ultimo and enhance its connections to nearby learning institutions; and also create a cultural institution for Parramatta that draws on their stories, communities and sense of place - potentially as a branch of the Powerhouse Museum if that is determined to be appropriate. Parramatta's rich colonial, aboriginal and migration history and the vibrant community arts deriving from this could also, alternately, be located in the North Parramatta Heritage precinct. This alternate location would create a far greater visionary legacy than dislocation of the Powerhouse Museum to an ill-suited, compromised, flood prone and smaller site that would not pass a serious risk analysis. The savings that will be achieved by not moving the Powerhouse Museum collections can then also be invested in the regions that deserve more cultural infrastructure.

We hope that the Parliamentary Select Committee on the Government's management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in New South Wales will be able to persuade the NSW Government to abandon its ill informed decision to move the Powerhouse Museum. The history in Parramatta is unique and distinct and the proposed loss of one location in favour of the other is a diminishing of both and unjust on the regional communities of NSW.

Yours sincerely

*Alister Sharp PhD*  
President Hunters Hill Trust

9 March 2020

[1] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whitbread\\_Engine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whitbread_Engine)