

Submission  
No 84

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

**Organisation:** Federation of Australian Historical Societies

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*Because history matters*

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

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Federation of Australian Historical Societies appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the Select Committee on Museums and Cultural Projects in NSW.

FAHS is the umbrella body for Australia's community history and heritage associations which number over 1000 and have approximately 100,000 members. Our volunteer members are deeply involved in working towards the best preservation and presentation of Australian cultural heritage in all its forms. They undertake very large volume of historical research and collection in hard (documentary, movable objects and built/sites) and digital forms, they operate many hundreds of small cultural heritage exhibitions and museums, and they transmit our history and heritage in publications, websites and various other formats.

FAHS was a founding member of GLAM Peak, which is deeply involved in the issues that are before the Select Committee, and of Blue Shield Australia.

### **TERMS OF REFERENCE**

Following the Terms of Reference, FAHS will respond to two broad areas:

1. The proposed move of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, the Powerhouse Museum, from Ultimo to Parramatta
2. The Government's wider management of all museums and cultural projects in New South Wales

### **PROPOSED MOVE OF THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM**

The Powerhouse Museum was considered a world-leading technology museum when it opened in 1988. The building provides a significant material connection between several major technologies

that helped shape colonial Australia. It is therefore arguably a very significant 'place' in the ICOMOS sense of the word, and of major historical and cultural heritage significance for NSW.

Like many in the museum and cultural heritage sector in NSW, FAHS expresses its concern about the proposal to remove the museum and break up its collection. The reservations are on the following grounds:

1. The enormous cost which would be better spent improving existing premises and services. There is no convincing business case for either moving the current museum nor for the likely visitation at the proposed and diminished Parramatta facility.
2. The site selected for the Parramatta Museum is known to be flood prone and it will be very costly to build there and to maintain safe premises for the collection.
3. That the very important heritage site currently housing the Powerhouse Museum will be sold to developers and lost. This structure is of heritage and historical significance because it was the original generating station for the supply of electricity to power the tramway network throughout Sydney. For a time it was one of the largest and most important generating stations in NSW. The site is also associated with the electrification of the suburban railway system and the general reticulation of electrical power. It was the first place where turbine driven alternators were used in Australia. Despite its importance to the State's history it is only listed as having local significance on the State Heritage Register. This should be rectified and the site protected.
4. The proposed site at Parramatta is too small and precludes the Powerhouse being relocated as a whole but it will need to be split between Parramatta and Castle Hill. This division of the collection will diminish its significance and strength.
5. It is feared in Parramatta and the wider heritage community that two heritage buildings will be bulldozed as part of the Parramatta development: Willow Grove, the important 1870 Victorian Italianate villa; and St George's Terrace which is representative of modest Victorian period terraces in the Parramatta area.

## **THE NSW GOVERNMENT'S MANAGEMENT OF ALL MUSEUMS AND CULTURAL PROJECTS**

### **Community History and Heritage Museums**

While the focus of the Select Committee is likely to be the Powerhouse Museum, the Australian Museum and other State Government funded museums, FAHS submits that the Committee also consider the wider range of local government and community museums such as those conducted by historical societies.

FAHS recommends:

That the NSW Government devise a museum strategy with sufficient resources to ensure that cultural heritage-led vibrancy, collection care and local storytelling initiatives are supported, developed and maintained for communities throughout the State.

### **Cumberland Hospital Site**

FAHS also understands that it has been proposed to establish a new Western Sydney Museum at the Cumberland Hospital site. We support this as we believe that this is more cost-effective than moving the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta.

FAHS also supports appropriate the establishment of protection of the Cumberland Hospital site which includes the vitally heritage-significant Female Factory, the Protestant Orphan School and the Roman Catholic Orphan School. We support the preservation of these structures and assert that, given its history, the Cumberland Hospital heritage site offers the opportunity to create a Western Sydney Museum as a world-class museum of national significance devoted to women's history.

Such a redevelopment would need to be handled very delicately so that the site is not degraded. There are no existing buildings that would be suitable in terms of size, so it would be necessary to retrofit with modern fittings, storage and climate control where possible, and with the sensitive addition of new building in an appropriate part of the hospital site.

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