

Submission
No 85

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

Organisation: Royal Australian Historical Society

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RAHS 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 Royal Australian Historical Society (RAHS) is Australia's oldest historical organisation founded in Sydney in 1901. It promotes the study of Australian history through its individual members and state-wide network of affiliated societies. The RAHS welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Select Committee on the Government's management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in New South Wales.

Overview

The RAHS does not support the proposed move of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, the Powerhouse Museum, from Ultimo to Parramatta for the following reasons:

- the historical significance and industrial importance of the Ultimo site
- risks to the Boulton and Watt steam engine and Locomotive No 1
- impact on the heritage buildings at Willow Grove and the Fleet Street precinct (St George's Terrace) at Parramatta, and
- unsuitability of the flood prone site proposed for the Powerhouse Museum at Parramatta.

The RAHS supports:

- a more cost effective strategy of creating an alternative Western Sydney Museum at the Cumberland Hospital heritage site, and
- a state-wide museum strategy.

Comments on the proposed move of the Powerhouse Museum, from Ultimo to Parramatta

The RAHS supports the retention of the Powerhouse on the present site, which is listed on the State Heritage Register. The Powerhouse Museum was considered a world-leading technology museum when it opened in 1988, providing a significant material connection between several major technologies that helped shape colonial Australia: coal, tramways and electricity. The former Ultimo Power House is historically significant 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.

The RAHS is concerned about the absence of documentation relating to the plans for the ongoing preservation of the two items of international heritage significance in the Powerhouse Museum collection, the Boulton and Watt steam engine and Locomotive No 1.

- The Boulton and Watt steam engine may be the most significant technological artefact to reach Australia. It was one of the earliest rotative steam engines to be built and is the oldest in existence.
- Locomotive No 1 is the first NSWGR locomotive and the oldest preserved locomotive in Australia. It is of national significance for inaugurating the first passenger service in NSW.

Furthermore, as the proposed site at Parramatta will not be large enough to accommodate the entire Powerhouse collection it will have to be split between Parramatta and Castle Hill. The RAHS is concerned that this division will diminish the strength of the collection as a whole.

There is considerable community concern in Parramatta and within the wider heritage community that two significant and State Heritage-listed buildings at buildings at Parramatta will be demolished to make way for the proposed new Powerhouse:

- Willow Grove was built in the 1870s and serves as a great example of a Victorian Italianate two-storey villa. Originally a private villa, Willow Grove subsequently served as the 'Estella' maternity hospital, and
- St George's Terrace is significant for the Parramatta LGA for 'historical and aesthetic reasons' and serves as a 'representative example of modest Victorian period terraces constructed during an early wave of development in the area'.

The site selected for the Powerhouse Museum at Parramatta will largely be built on the banks of the Parramatta River and there is concern that the site is flood prone. The site was under water during recent heavy rain. While the relocated Powerhouse Museum's designs, which were unveiled in December 2019, suggest that the bulk of the new precinct will be built on stilts, the museum site would still be inaccessible to visitors and others when the area is flooded.

Comments on the Government's management of museums and cultural projects in NSW

The RAHS supports the consideration of 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 an alternative Western Sydney Museum at the Cumberland Hospital heritage site. This site includes the area occupied by the historic Female Factory, the Roman Catholic Orphan School and the Protestant Orphan School.

Proposal for an Alternative Museum for Western Sydney

The RAHS agrees that Western Sydney deserves a world-class museum but considers that cannibalising what is a world-class museum is not the solution. Instead, the Cumberland Hospital heritage site offers the opportunity to create a world-class museum of national significance devoted to women's history, given the past history of the site. Parramatta as Australia's second European settlement is an appropriate venue and some parts of the Powerhouse collection — for example women's fashion — could be housed there.'

There are however, no existing buildings in the Cumberland Hospital site that would be suitable in terms of size and the need to retrofit modern fittings and climate control and storage into them. The RAHS supports further exploration of this option, particularly as the Parramatta light rail goes through the hospital site, providing transport access.

The RAHS notes that museums conducted by local historical societies, which are largely community funded (apart from grant funding for specific projects provided by Local or State Government), appear to sit outside the Terms of Reference of this inquiry. However, the RAHS advocates a state-wide museum strategy with sufficient resources to ensure cultural heritage led vibrancy, collection care and local storytelling initiatives that are supported, developed and maintained for communities throughout NSW.

Recommendation

The RAHS recommends that the NSW Government:

- retains the Powerhouse Museum on its present site given its historical significance and industrial importance of the Ultimo site
- provides advice about plans that are in place to ensure the ongoing preservation of the two items of international heritage significance in the Powerhouse Museum collection, the Boulton and Watt steam engine and Locomotive No 1
- addresses community concerns about the proposed demolition of two significant and State Heritage-listed buildings at Parramatta — Willow Grove and St George's Terrace — to make way for the proposed new Powerhouse by ensuring their preservation in any plans for relocating the Powerhouse Museum
- addresses public concerns about the unsuitability of the site selected for the Powerhouse Museum at Parramatta
- develops an alternative Museum for Western Sydney at the Cumberland Hospital site. and
- develops a state-wide museum strategy.