

Submission
No 86

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

Organisation: International Council of Museums Australia (ICOM Australia)

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PO Box 24, Deakin West, ACT 2600
www.icom.org.au
ABN 47 613 685 234
Ph: (02) 6230 0346

Hon Robert Borsak MLC
Chair
Legislative Council Select Committee

15 May 2020

Re: Submission to the Inquiry into the Government's management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in New South Wales

Dear Select Committee,

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) is committed to the research, conservation, continuation and communication to society of the world's natural and cultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible. Internationally we have 44,686 members. The ICOM Australia committee is one of 118 national committees and represents the interests of over 850 local members.

As a forum ICOM is the voice of museum professionals, and in Australia we contribute to recommendations on issues related to meeting internationally accepted benchmarks and standards of excellenceⁱ. Our purpose is to make recommendations on issues relating to museumsⁱⁱ and as such we can contribute to the discussion about the management of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, in particular the development of plans to relocate the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta.

ICOM regards the development, documentation, preservation and representation of heritage collections as being a common good at the heart of civil society. We proceed from the view that the people own museum collections and knowledge about those collections. Government has moral and legislative responsibilities to protect culture in the common interest of us all, and those responsibilities include providing a safe location for moveable heritage, the resources and intent to protect and preserve built heritage and the ethical framework to manage and share that cultural heritage.

The *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* represents the professional standard for museums and their management and we refer to this in providing our response to the Legislative Council about the NSW Government's management of museums and cultural projects in New South Wales.

ICOM has determined that any governing body responsible for heritage collections should:

1. Provide physical resources with a suitable environment for the museums to fulfill the basic functions defined in a museum's mission.
2. Develop and maintain policies to protect the public and personnel, the collections and other resources against natural and human-made disasters.

Museums in turn have a responsibility to:

1. Work in close collaboration with the communities from which their collections originate as well as those they serveⁱⁱⁱ.
2. Have a particular responsibility for making collections and all relevant information available as freely as possible.
3. Should ensure that the information they present in displays and exhibitions is well founded, accurate and gives appropriate consideration to represented groups or beliefs.

The site of a new museum, in this case the relocation of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences and important elements of its heritage collections, should take account of the fundamental obligation to protect and preserve public collections in perpetuity. Concern has been raised regarding the site presently favoured by Government and its propensity for flooding. ICOM Australia believes this concern, together with attendant challenges in the relocation of major collections, should be addressed in any preparation and planning for the relocation of MAAS, by reference to the guiding principles enshrined in ICOM's Code of Ethics.

ICOM Australia is committed to the preservation of heritage sites and the protection of Indigenous, natural and built heritage places. It is commendable the Government has recognised that the Parramatta area is rich with Aboriginal Peoples' contemporary culture and history, and holds unique convict and other colonial histories. ICOM Australia notes that two heritage sites appear to be impacted by the design for the Powerhouse Museum as things presently stand, namely Willow Grove^{iv} and St George's Terrace^v, both of which are planned for demolition.

ICOM Australia also recognises that the Parramatta heritage community has deemed these sites significant, from which there may yet be archaeological finds which reveal further significance. Ideally, an established museum wanting to engage with its local community should embrace that community's heritage and history in plans for any new building.

Moreover, the Powerhouse Museum site at Ultimo is a state listed industrial heritage site, and any redevelopment should therefore preserve the heritage attributes outlined in the State register:

The building should be retained and conserved...there shall be no vertical additions to the building and no alterations to the façade of the building other than to reinstate original features. Any additions and alterations should be confined to the rear in areas of less significance, should not be visibly prominent and shall be in accordance with the relevant planning controls.^{viii}

Furthermore, ICOM Australia is aware that the National Trust has before it new proposals to extend the heritage listing of the Powerhouse precinct in Ultimo, to recognise the significance of the 1988 adaptive re-use of the original Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences building and the Harwood building.

Investment in museum development is always welcome. The substantial commitment to the MAAS Powerhouse Precinct in Parramatta, and the 2019 budget^{vi} increase in recurrent operational funds for the Australian Museum and capital works program budgets for a number of organisations, indicates that the NSW Government is committed to supporting museums and galleries, which ICOM Australia readily acknowledges.

That notwithstanding, we also note that operating funding for regional and city-based museums in New South Wales has been subject to efficiency savings for several years. It is our hope that the expenditure planned for the relocation of MAAS does not result in further pressure upon funds for other museums and galleries in New South Wales.

There is much to be gained during any period of development of cultural heritage infrastructure in the careful consideration of industry-wide needs and interests. ICOM Australia stands ready to assist in any review and deliberation of a state-wide museums, gallery and heritage strategy that would integrate plans for a Parramatta-based institution with the broad needs and ambitions of the sector.

Yours sincerely

Dr Mathew Trinca AM
Chair, ICOM Australia

ADDENDUM - REFERENCES

ⁱ This includes cultural heritage and preservation, ethics, disaster recovery, standards for collection management and most recently, the debate about the definition of what a museum is, so that ICOM remains cutting edge in a rapidly changing world.

ⁱⁱ <https://icom-museum/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICOM-code-En-web.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://icom-museum/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/110825_Checklist_print.pdf

^{iv} Regional Environmental Plan 28, 441

<https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/heritageapp/ViewHeritageItemDetails.aspx?ID=2240440>

^v Regional Environment plan 28/441

<https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/heritageapp/ViewHeritageItemDetails.aspx?ID=2240441>

^{vi} <https://www.create.nsw.gov.au/news-and-publications/news/arts-screen-culture-across-nsw-flourish-with-871-million-investment/>