

**Submission
No 96**

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

Name: Ms Irma Havlicek

Date Received: 15 May 2020

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

If the move of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta goes ahead, it is the beginning of the end for the Museum. I worked at the Powerhouse Museum for 22 years from 1992, and I learned a lot about it in that time.

The Powerhouse Museum's collection of applied arts, sciences and technology objects is its beating heart. The interdependence of the applied arts and sciences is the key to illuminating the story of human ingenuity and progress. That is the purpose of the Museum. In any lesser, smaller site such as that proposed at Parramatta, there is a great risk of dividing arts from sciences and splitting off bits of the collection, mortally damaging its integrity and narrative potential.

Unfortunately, too many people tasked with decision-making for the Powerhouse come to it from a specific viewpoint (eg, fashion or industry or technology), blinkered to the integral importance of the rest. Splitting the collection up creates a perilous precedent.

People who propose leaving fashion and design at the Ultimo Powerhouse Museum but moving the rest to Parramatta fundamentally misunderstand the nature, purpose and potential of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences. Design is not limited to fashion.

Fashion, is that only clothes? Does that include hats and shoes? What about jewellery? What about textiles? Furnishing textiles? Furniture? And what about the machinery and tools used in the creation of fashion? And the dyes to dye the textiles? And so it goes. And what is the logic of fashion at Ultimo when the Ultimo museum, purpose-designed and built, implores to retain all its objects, but especially the vast transport, space exploration and steam engine objects, the greatest of which will not fit into the Parramatta building?

Everything in the Museum's collection is related to design. Design is not only the smarty-boots stuff found in swanky magazines filled with objets [sic] with which to decorate your dream home or clothes to adorn yourself. Every steam engine, computer, set of cutlery, telephone, oboe, cochlear implant, chair, camera, solar panel, measuring device, tin whistle, rocket, child's toy, vase, aeroplane, coin and cash register has been designed. And only with a synergy of arts and sciences can all manner of stories about society be revealed.

It will be the Powerhouse Museum, through its significant health and medicine collection, that will tell the story of Covid-19.

Conveying a sensitivity to and understanding of design, form, function and meaning to new generations of designers, architects and citizens is a profound way to influence society for the better. These vital narratives will reach far fewer people if they are told at the smaller and risky, flood-prone site at Parramatta instead of Ultimo.

The different proposals we have seen about the future of the Powerhouse from short-sighted committees with different niche interests have overlooked what has been built up with great care over 141 years. Too many cases of a variety of tails trying to wag the dog.

There have been attempts over the years to rid the Powerhouse of entire collection fields such as musical instruments and numismatics (money). These objects are perfect examples of the fusion

of applied arts and sciences, and can convey an array of narrative themes such as commerce, design, manufacture, communication, industry, creativity, history, geography, materials, etc.

There is also risk if an independent retail precinct is incorporated into the building to house the museum at Parramatta. The purpose and operations of a museum are incompatible with those of a retail business. If the retail business is powerful, it can use its influence to change the activities of the museum to serve the aims of the business. Another potential case of a tail wagging the dog.

Museums, with their primary source material, are needed now more than ever because of the reliance most of us have on information from digital devices which can be of dubious veracity. Expertly curated collections and exhibitions are much more reliable conveyors of truth.

As we physically enter these temples of knowledge and discovery, they fill us with awe and the promise of great things to come - as was the case with the magnificent, breathtaking, lofty entrance experience of marble and glass, designed by government architect, Lionel Glendenning, for the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo.

The Powerhouse presents authenticity: the locomotive that pulled the first passenger train in NSW; samples of merino wool or wood from the early history of NSW and the products made from such materials.... Actual, tangible objects you can physically be in the presence of, aware of their size, dimensions, colour, texture, finish, quality. You can't get that from a digital device.

Many historical objects of the type collected, preserved and stored by the Powerhouse no longer exist elsewhere. Without them, our connection with a tangible past is severed. Not only for general visitors but for students, and researchers and art designers for film and television which helps them to portray an accurate representation of the past. Not to overlook the fact that the Powerhouse also represents the present and augurs the future.

After the tragedies of drought, bushfire and Covid-19 as they affect NSW, now is the time to stem the expenditure of the proposed move of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta.

Due to the resignation from the Ministry of Don Harwin, the NSW Premier, Gladys Berejiklian, has taken over the responsibilities as Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the Arts, the Public Service and Employee Relations, in addition to her daunting responsibilities as Premier, particularly in this time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

How much care and thought is she able to give to the Powerhouse Museum among all those responsibilities?

The Museum has been loved, nurtured, cared and worked for by dedicated but unlauded professionals and volunteers for 141 years (not unlike the medical professionals, teachers, farmers and firefighters we seem only to have begun appreciating in recent months).

Build a great museum for Parramatta without destroying unique heritage buildings to do so. Lend them wonderful objects from the Powerhouse Museum.

But the Powerhouse Museum belongs in Ultimo, centrally located, accessible to many, historically connected to its site, thematically connected to its precinct of education, technology, creativity and communication. And it needs the leadership of a person who understands and values its purpose: to tell the story of human ingenuity, which applies equally and synergistically

to the applied arts and sciences. To divide them would be a travesty, the beginning of the disintegration of the Powerhouse Museum and the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, and the irredeemable loss of knowledge and stories we can convey to future generations.

It's not too late to stop this move now - but soon it will be. Please act now to save the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo for its original and fine intended purpose.