

**Submission  
No 100**

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

**Name:** Mr Ian Debenham OAM

**Date Received:** 16 May 2020

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Heritage Council of NSW  
Locked Bag 5020  
Parramatta, NSW, 2124

Response to the listing of the “Ultimo Tramway Power House “ for inclusion on the State’s Heritage Register.

My name is Ian Debenham OAM, a former Curator of Transport (aviation) of thirty years’ duration (1980-2010) at the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (Powerhouse). I received my OAM for furthering the study of Australia’s aviation history while at the Museum and, as a ‘by the way’ I am a second-generation employee of the Museum. My father’s brother worked as an assistant botanist at the Museum from the 1950s to 60s carrying out research into essential oils. Since retirement I have been a volunteer providing my knowledge of the aviation collection and liaising with kindred volunteer organisations. Thus I have some considerable ‘skin in the process’ as the saying goes. My purpose in writing is to object to the current listing of the Powerhouse Museum under the misleading title of the “Ultimo Tramway Power House” amongst other aspects of the current listing.

I also take issue with the quality of the report delivered by the consultant Cracknell & Loneragan that appears to me as the proverbial borrowing of the State Government’s wrist-watch by the consultant to be able to tell the Government the time. The latter knew that the watch was faulty and the former gave the Government the time it wanted. Thus the report is dogged by errors and superficial analyses.

Taking the lesser of my objections first the listing should be for the “Powerhouse Museum” rather than the misleading “Ultimo Tramway Power House” that limits the heritage aspect of the building and hence the reduction of the ‘protected’ outline to, broadly, the Turbine Hall, Boiler House, Switch House. Moving on from this, the listing should also include protection of the three cranes that remain in the Turbine Hall and other original fittings also still in situ as these are features existing from the building when it operated as a power house, not only for the tramway system but for the electrical requirements for an expanding Sydney. The listing should also include the Harwood Building – formerly the Ultimo Tram Depot – that stabled the trams operating on the George Street system. This building is part and parcel of the power house and contemporary with it. The two buildings are inextricably linked.

The listing should also acknowledge the power house as an evolved building that now incorporates in its heritage the museum aspect and, thus, the plan for heritage listing should also add the galleria and the Wran Building. The architectural renewal of the building is an integral part of its heritage – another chapter in the history of the building. As well, the listing should respect the evolved building for its architectural acknowledgement to the interior features that were recreated as the originals did not survive the attempted demolition of the building decades ago. The Sulman award won for the repurposing of the building is also an inextricable aspect of the history of the building as well as of the architectural history of Sydney and its evolution.

The power house and the museum are exceptionally fit for purpose in that the transport and technology collections contained within the museum have a ‘symbiotic’ relationship with the building. One supports the interpretation of the other. Because of the volumes of the Turbine Hall, Boiler House and galleria it has been possible to display the museum’s collection of significant aircraft consisting of aircraft as large, and heavy, as the Boeing Canada built Catalina flying boat “Frigate Bird II” that, in the hands of Sir P.G. Taylor and crew accomplished the first aerial crossing of the South Pacific and return in 1951 and as small and light as the ‘microlight’ aircraft, the Wheeler

Scout, one of two prototypes to allow series production and it is a pioneer in Australia of the microlight aircraft movement. The Wheeler Scout was the first aircraft of its class in the world to have its airworthiness officially recognized. These aircraft are displayed alongside others in the Boiler House allowing visitors to understand their history, design and significance in Australian cultural and technological history and this display is in juxtaposition with the Space exhibition allowing the viewer to venture in their mind beyond the realm of the air into the airless void of space to appreciate the differences in the history, design and technology of space craft. The Turbine Hall has, over time, displayed a number of other aircraft of the museum's collection and the galleria has been the venue for the display of Dick Smith's solo-around-the-world helicopter and the display of the recreation of aeronautical pioneer, Lawrence Hargrave's, kite lift experiment of 1894. By virtue of the volumes and scale and quantity of aircraft displayed, the effect on the museum visitor of suspended aircraft and space vehicles is a sense of awe. The variety of historically and technically significant aircraft on display is unique in Australian museums. One would have to travel to the United States, Great Britain or Europe to see a similar museum aircraft display. Without these volumes and the pre-planning of the internal structure of the museum building that was necessary to accommodate the weight of the combined aircraft, the effect could not be achieved. I would, thus, evoke Article 11 of the Burra charter that states "[t]he contribution which related places and related objects make to the cultural significance of the place should be retained." In short, all the objects that make up the totality of the museum's collections should be included within the heritage listing as they are objects related to the museum function of the evolved building.

I would hope that the attempted, and transparent, detachment of the power house from its full history and, hence, its full heritage value as it is in the consultant's report, should not proceed in its current form. Instead, the listing should be rewritten to give a complete, true and honest assessment without political interference.

Yours sincerely,

Ian Debenham OAM, BA (Hons.), Dip. Mus. Stud.

Current Hon. Secretary of the Historical Aircraft Restoration Society Inc. (HARS)  
Director, Historical Aircraft Projects Pty. Ltd. (HAP)  
Life Member, Aviation Historical Society of Australia (NSW) Inc.

I append here my submission to the Heritage Council of NSW to show the obvious underlying thesis that the NSW State Government is being less than open and honest with the proposed move of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta and the reason for it. With this project the Government has a track record of avoiding transparency and fabricating spurious information to show, however ineptly, that proper process was being followed. It has always been thus from the outset of the misbegotten process with the Museum Trust being kept in the dark and apparently being bullied into lock-stepping with the Government despite the requirements of the legislation that legitimizes and guides the Museum's role and the Trust's responsibility to protect it. Throughout this whole sordid process the Government has hidden behind "Cabinet in confidence" to keep the reasons and process from those who have an interest in the Museum and from the general public of NSW who are also process the nominal caretakers of the institution and whose money is invested in it. This is the antithesis of the original process of the PHM development where every aspect was open and above board.

Throughout the Government has set aside its own rules for assessing the viability of such a process by putting forward fatuous reasons for its move. One published reason was that the Museum was outside the Sydney heritage precinct that enclosed the Opera house, Museum of Contemporary Art,

NSW Art Gallery and Australian Museum (they forgot the Hyde Park War Memorial). The Powerhouse Museum was too far west! Whoever wrote the ridiculous rationale neglected to mention the National Maritime Museum that sits on a line slightly further west of the Museum. Despite its national status the ANMM is, nevertheless, a heritage operation. When it came to having a required cost benefit ratio of one or over it was impossible to achieve this by other than adding commercial real estate into the project. Another problem for the bureaucrats in complying with the rules: the relocation was going to cost far more than retaining and refurbishing the existing Ultimo building: a failure to comply with Rule number one. That problem was handled by producing a report that showed the Ultimo building to be ostensibly ramshackle and thus required considerable expenditure to bring it back to useful condition. This document, however, was not supported by an almost contemporary report that showed that the building and its infrastructure were all in relatively good condition (as one would expect of a building only 30 years on since major refurbishment) although some repairs were necessary. The cost of these repairs would not come close to the expected cost of \$1.2 billion for the Parramatta exercise.

A recent ill-conceived exercise to hit the email was the questionnaire from Infrastructure NSW which included the question that, since Willow Grove and St. George's Terrace were to be demolished what would people like to see preserved to honour the existence of those two Heritage properties. This question after the Premier had stated in a TV interview that both properties would not be demolished. The obvious answer to the question posed by Infrastructure NSW was that the two properties should be preserved in their entirety, as, with the loss of the very historic pub, they are basically the only heritage remnants in the Parramatta CBD. This mode of question is, in its way, similar to a reported public consultancy that occurred in the early phase of 'consultation' about the move of the Museum, when the encounter group was asked "what they would like to see in the Parramatta PHM"; not whether or not they wanted to have the PHM in Parramatta. A later, but brief, output from Infrastructure NSW touted that the Parramatta PHM would draw over a million visitors and employ 400 staff. Time will tell but it is difficult to believe. The PHM hasn't seen 400 staff for quite a few years.

For a number of years now the budget of the PHM has been annually reduced on the basis of an "efficiency dividend". This has caused a huge reduction in staff and other services. The successful regional museums project was curtailed despite a strong need for support for that heritage sector. An initiative for recognising the input of immigration into the areas of interest to the PHM was ended and Social History was excised from the Curatorial responsibilities of the Museum.

To me this notion of an efficiency dividend actually achieving future efficiency in the Museum will be overturned by the situation that PHM professional staff will be ensconced at Castle Hill. Currently, at Ultimo, with the Harwood Building having the well equipped workshop, conservation laboratory, photography studio, high quality small object and organic material storage, Curatorial, Design and Registration areas in close proximity and a short walk from the Powerhouse exhibition building, all exhibition development is very efficiently handled. With all these functions miles from the proposed location of the museum at Parramatta, exhibition development and installation will be badly hampered by the inefficiency of distance. This also will add to the minor inefficiency experienced with the PHM responsibility for the Sydney Observatory caused by its location. During my tenure at the PHM as a curator it was necessary to spend some time in the exhibition area during the week to check objects on display for condition and clean them as required. This was also a responsibility of collection care for Registration and Conservation staff. Again, the tyranny of distance makes this process less efficient than current.

Another point against the move of the PHM from Ultimo to Parramatta is that the current rumours about the content of the building will make the institution something akin to Carriageworks rather

than as a response to the legitimate mandate of the Museum. In information seen, performance and temporary exhibitions have been touted with some iconic objects appearing such as the Catalina, No.1 locomotive and the Boulton and Watt engine being mentioned. These three iconic objects, however, may not receive the interpretation they would otherwise receive and thus be displayed merely as 'ornaments'.

My last few points are that the proposed new building's display space is smaller than the current Ultimo building and, even so, may not have the required 'climate' necessary for the conservation of the objects on display as is currently available at Ultimo. When the PHM was being developed at Ultimo it took eight years to prepare the exhibitions and objects for display. With the Parramatta museum promoted as being opened in 2023, I am aware that little work has been done to obtain floor plans, to develop themes and have them approved, to select objects illustrating the themes, have them condition-checked and fully documented, display labels prepared and display furniture purchased or designed and built. This seems to support the notion that what the Government is claiming to achieve is based either on a tissue of lies with a poorly hidden agenda or total ignorance of museum practice and requirements. It also seems obvious that a PHM in Parramatta will not be achieved on time or with the substance it would otherwise be capable of and the Museum and its patrons will suffer as a result.