

**Supplementary
Submission
No 24b**

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

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Parramatta's heritage and the museum proposal

When I worked as a curator at the Powerhouse, I had to refuse offers of several large engineering objects that fitted the collection policy but whose distinguishing features (those that made them different to objects already in the collection) were not sufficiently important to outweigh the costs the museum would have confronted because of their size (extraction, transport, conservation and storage). Often, I could help the owners find another home for them, but this was not always possible. Like other curators, I sometimes resorted to photographing the site and accepting smaller artefacts that together told the same story as the doomed object, a story that would be easier to tell in some future exhibition because they were easier to handle and display.

The destruction of Willow Grove and St Georges Terrace is a very different issue. How can a museum (calling itself a protector and portrayer of cultural heritage) justify destroying heritage buildings *in order to* retain bits and bobs for display within a shiny new building? **Imagine the exhibition if you will: here is part of the quaintly outmoded iron lacework that once graced Willow Grove; here is a photo of people protesting the building's destruction (more fool them!); imagine negotiating this staircase that once led between the ground and upper floors of one of the homes in St Georges Terrace (please congratulate us for being bold enough to salvage and reconstruct it!); contemplate these rusty toys, copper coins and crockery shards found in the back yard by our archaeologist, and imagine the daily lives of the people who used the intact objects; and compose your own story about life in these buildings, which unfortunately had to be destroyed to make way for this museum, which is wondrously fit-for-purpose (even if it does need alarms and alerts to warn visitors of possible flash flooding whenever rain is forecast).**

Sure, the *utilitarian value* of city precincts can be increased by knocking over old buildings and erecting new ones. However, their *social value* can be increased by retaining old buildings and assigning them new, sympathetic uses. The experience across Greater Sydney has been of swathes of heritage lost by stealth, each case considered in isolation and the assessment weighted towards utilitarian rather than social value. This museum project aims to give Parramatta a major cultural venue, but in the current proposal too much culture is lost (heritage buildings at both Ultimo and Parramatta) and too much is compromised (by providing less display space for the museum's collection, in a location that is less accessible for most NSW citizens and tourists). This huge loss has been imposed to meet the needs of shadowy, rapacious players at odds with the overwhelming majority of NSW citizens, who oppose this unnecessarily destructive and expensive project.

The better path to a great cultural venue would start from discussion with local citizens about what aspects of their heritage should be preserved and enhanced, and how they would like to tell their past and current stories to their neighbours, to visitors from afar and to future citizens. Because their stories, and their visions for the future, are not constrained to the local, they should be able to draw on the collections of other NSW cultural institutions as well as on local historical material, commissioned works and objects borrowed or purchased from further afield.