

**Submission  
No 120**

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

**Name:** Ms Louise Douglas

**Date Received:** 17 May 2020

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NSW Parliament – Legislative Council  
Select Committee on the Government's management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in New South Wales

17 May 2020

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

**Re: Submission to Select Committee on the Government's management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in New South Wales**

I write as a retired but active museum professional who worked at the Powerhouse Museum in a senior management position for 10 years (1984-1994), and then at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra for 20 years. I am currently on the Boards of the Illawarra Museum and Wollongong Heritage Collections Inc. I have extensive knowledge of museums and collections and a strong interest both in the history and future of our collecting institutions. I support the aim of the Select Committee in investigating the circumstances surrounding the proposed move of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, the Powerhouse Museum, from Ultimo to Parramatta and the Government's management of all museums and cultural projects in New South Wales.

I offer the following brief comments against some of the terms of reference which indicate I am not convinced there is strong enough foundation for moving the Powerhouse to Parramatta. This is not to say Western Sydney does not deserve a significant museum of its own, telling its own stories, and so would support any move to enhance the cultural facilities of Western Sydney.

**(a) the proposed move of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, the Powerhouse Museum, from Ultimo to Parramatta, including:**

Terms of reference	Comments
(i) the <b>core visions</b> behind the move	There appear to be two notions informing the core visions both of which are flawed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- That MAAS/Powerhouse Museum was an old fashioned museum with historical collections that would not be missed: many similar collections around the world are becoming more valued by their governments and communities</li><li>- That a history-based museum which could explore and articulate the identity, diversity and stories of Australia's foundation state is not required: this seems perplexing</li></ul>

Terms of reference	Comments
	<p>when one of the key interests of communities is to understand their own place both in historical and contemporary terms.</p>
<p>(iii) the <b>risks</b> in the move, including damage to collections, cost overruns and the future cost of operations at Parramatta</p>	<p>Based on my experience relocating collections, the extraordinary proposal that the vast collections could be moved successfully without damage is not creditable. This applies particularly to the very large technology objects such as the Bolton and Watt engine and the Catalina flying boat.</p>
<p>(v) the impact on the <b>heritage status</b> of the site at Ultimo and heritage items at Willow Grove and the Fleet Street precinct at Parramatta</p>	<p>The prospect that the MAAS complex of buildings would disappear as a result of the relocation is very concerning from a heritage perspective. They represent a hugely significant aspect of Sydney's history.</p> <p>The Wran building, generally regarded at the time as an exceptional design solution and an imaginative fusing of the old with the new, provides a strong link to the past in that its vaulted form reflects the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition building, the source of the original Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences/Power House Museum collections.</p> <p>The Ultimo Tram Depot was built at the same time as an integral part of the power station complex and was home to 21 trams as well as 250 drivers, conductors, inspectors, and maintenance men which served the Sydney tram network, in particular the Circular Quay to Drummoyne route. It is also noteworthy that there is a close relationship between the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition and the introduction of trams to Sydney. As described in Sydney Living Museum's exhibition, <i>Shooting Through: Sydney by Tram</i>, the International exhibition 'marked the return of trams to Sydney. Four steam motors and six double-decker cars were imported from the United States of America for use on the new tramway. Fittingly, steam-powered trams were the very embodiment of the innovative technology and city improvements promoted by the Exhibition'.</p> <p>Additionally, the history of re-use of the old power station site from 1988 is one of the great success stories of heritage re-use in Australia. The adaptation of the original power station (disused from 1957) as a modern, award winning museum with a strong connection to the precinct, especially through the science and technology collections, surely requires greater consideration. The Power House Museum could not have been more successful and well received by the NSW community, Australians around the country and international visitors. It has had some of the highest levels of visitation for any Australian museum and a successful exhibition program featuring the decorative arts/design, science/technology and social history collections.</p>

Terms of reference	Comments
	In my view, the reinvention of the Ultimo power station as a museum is an exceptional example of adaptive re-use providing a way to preserve the heritage significance of the original building and precinct.
(vii) the Government's response to the <b>previous recommendations</b> of the Portfolio Committee No. 4 in Report 40 entitled 'Museums and Galleries in New South Wales'	In its insultingly brief response from the then Minister Harwin, the government demonstrated an unwillingness to engage with the myriad of issues raised in the report, and is untrammelled in its determination to go ahead with this flawed and defective project.

**(b) the Government's management of all museums and cultural projects in New South Wales, including**

(i) current Government <b>policy, funding and support for museums and galleries</b> across regional New South Wales	While the NSW government has produced a myriad of cultural plans and strategies since 2015, with many and different priorities, none of them specifically provide a policy framework in which we can make sense of the rationale for the move of the Powerhouse to Parramatta.
(iii) whether <b>comprehensive consultation</b> with communities and experts has informed <b>cultural policy and projects</b> across NSW such as that applying to heritage arms and armour collections	From discussions with professional colleagues it does not appear sufficient consultation has taken place to ensure that collections across the state are stored in appropriate conditions.