

Submission
No 122

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

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Date Received: 17 May 2020

Select Committee on the Government's management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in NSW

17 May 2020

Dear Committee Members

I write to you as a retired senior curator of science and technology who was employed by the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences for 29 years. I wish to address a number of risks associated with the removal of the Museum from its current site in Ultimo.

Risk 1

If the Museum is closed and packed up the current NSW Government might never build another museum of applied arts and sciences to help people make sense of their technological environment. Articles (published in the Sydney Morning Herald) about the planned institution at Parramatta describe a performing arts and art installation venue with scattered objects. The Museum's remit is too valuable to lose. At no other venue in NSW can people gain insight into vital links between science, art, industry, innovation and history. The recognition of such links is often the catalyst for innovation, a commodity our society and economy will need in spades if we are to overcome existential crises posed by climate change and the virus that causes Covid-19.

Risk 2

Removal of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences from its current building will destroy a source of awe and inspiration for children destined to become tomorrow's scientists, technologists and engineers. I have lost track of the number of young Australian scientists who have told me the Museum shaped their early ambitions. The grandeur of the building, as much as the content of the exhibitions, inspired their awe. The Transport Hall, with a soaring height capable of displaying a steam engine, rocket engine, satellites and an enormous Catalina Flying Boat, is nearly always mentioned. I understand there are no plans to display those items at Parramatta, let alone in such spectacular fashion. Not all children go on to become scientists but it is important to nurture those who will. Almost 60% of Australia's GDP is currently generated by science, technology and engineering.

The Ultimo location also places the Museum in its historical context, beside the railway line that allowed industry to flourish in the city in the 19th and 20th Centuries. The Museum was integral to the workings of Sydney TAFE and the wool industry in Ultimo. The building in which it is currently housed provided electricity for the trams of Sydney. It is not possible to recreate that context in Parramatta and nor would it be appropriate to do so. Parramatta has its own history that should be respected and celebrated.

Risk 3

Once the current government builds another arts venue in Parramatta it might then rationalise disposal of the Museum's Collection. The Collection represents the work of thousands of people who have selected, documented and preserved evidence of life in NSW for 150 years. It would be an appalling waste to squander their intellectual efforts. The whole Collection is particularly important because it allows people to draw links across all human endeavours. It helps us make sense of who we are, how we've changed technologies over time, and how they've changed us. If the Collection is split up its value and usefulness will be greatly diminished.

Risk 4

Moving the Museum to Parramatta will make it less accessible to people from the north, south, east and inner west of Sydney, and unattractive to tourists. The Museum's current location near Central Station provides equitable access for people from the north, south, east and west of Sydney, as well as easy access for tourists.

Risk 5

Flood risk. It seems ridiculous to have to point out that building a new museum on a flood-prone site exposes people and objects to unnecessary risk.

Risk 6

If the NSW Government spends 2 billion dollars moving the Museum 25 kilometres to a smaller site it will short change everybody. Most Sydneysiders will lose their cherished Powerhouse Museum, people of western Sydney will get something that doesn't resemble the Powerhouse Museum, and the people of regional NSW will get nothing. And this at a time when many regional museums can't even afford stationery! Such wanton waste of taxpayers' money is a crime.

The NSW Government has starved the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences of funds for many years. Its imposed efficiency dividends have severely curtailed exhibitions and programs, and thinned the ranks of experienced staff. If the Government had spent the same amount of money on refurbishing the Museum as it has on consultants to move the Museum, then there would now be a thriving institution in Ultimo. The proposal has been nothing but a colossal waste of money and it will be interesting to learn who stands to benefit if the project goes ahead. I feel certain it won't be the people of NSW.