

Submission
No 125

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

Name: Mr Colin Macgregor

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**Submission to the NSW Government Select Committee
on
The Government's management of the Powerhouse Museum and cultural
projects in New South Wales**

Summary:

- *There is an enormous imbalance between the funding of regional cultural institutions and those in the Sydney Metropolitan area*
- *The practicalities and risks of moving the Powerhouse Museum were not assessed before the government announced the decision to move it.*
- *The difficulty of the chosen site for a functioning international museum, particularly on a flood plain.*
- *The energy efficiency of the winning design concept and issues of access for collections*
- *Is this actually a relocated Powerhouse Museum or something else?*

Colin Macgregor

Honorable Members,

Please accept my submission to the enquiry into Museum Projects in NSW. My submission is delivered in my capacity as a private citizen and NSW taxpayer. I am drawing on my 42 years experience as a museum conservator. I recently retired from my position as Manager of Conservation at the Australian Museum. I worked at the Australian Museum for 30 years and prior to that worked for museums in Scotland and England for 12 years. I have taken part in numerous international exhibition projects and overseas loans and surveyed regional museums and cultural centres throughout NSW. I would like to comment on 6 of the terms of reference.

Regional Museums

TOR 1 (b) i - The funding of museums and galleries in NSW is heavily weighted towards the Sydney Metropolitan area. When I first arrived in NSW 30 years ago, I was amazed by the fact that almost all specialist skills and resources for cultural organisations were concentrated in the Sydney area.

I have carried out conservation surveys of over 30 regional NSW museums over the last 10 years, and a number of Aboriginal cultural centres. The distributed museums and galleries house collections of local historical interest but they are also custodians of many items of state significance. The funding for most of these organisations is minimal and they are often run by volunteer committees with no paid or trained staff. They may receive some support from local authorities to assist with running costs (rates relief, energy bills etc) but mostly they have to raise their own funds. Museums and Galleries NSW provide advisory and training services and some grant aid but are spread quite thinly for such a large state.

The enormous cost of over billion dollars to move the Powerhouse Museum raises the question of whether funding for the arts should be spread more equitably across the state.

Diminishing Funding in Real Terms

TOR 1 (b) iv – The static funding of institutions for over 10 years has resulted in a steady decline in budget when inflation is taken into account. Large capital projects have continued to be funded by the government. These often result in increased operating costs for the institution as a whole.

For example, the construction of the new zoology collection and research building at the Australian Museum in 2007 resulted in a substantial increase in energy bills which were unbudgeted. The Australian Museum's Pacific Collections were relocated to Rydalmere in 2019 to create space for the current building project. This has resulted in substantial additional ongoing costs to rent and resource a large off-site premises.

Major capital projects should not be funded without also budgeting for increases in annual operating costs.

Definition of PHM Project:

TOR 1 (a) i – When first announced publicly, the vision and rationale for deciding to move the PHM to Parramatta was unclear from the information available. Uprooting an entire museum with collections of this nature appears to be the most complicated and risky option available. It would have been preferable to build of an institution specifically for Parramatta. This museum could draw on the enormous collections of all NSW state institutions (AGNSW, SLNSW, Records NSW, Aus Mus, MAAS) which are held in storage. This would reduce costs of the project and increase access to collections.

Communication

TOR 1 (a) ii – There was a notable lack of consultation with the major stakeholders about the concept of the project before it was announced. Staff with areas of specialist knowledge and expertise were not consulted regarding the practical process of relocating the museum and collections. The appropriate risk management strategies were not discussed during the early stages of the project design.

It is not uncommon for governments to publicly commit to a project based on a consultant's report. If the consultant has not consulted broadly and understood the functioning of the institution, the project budget blows out and compromises are made which deliver something other than the original promise.

Risk management

TOR 1 (a) iii – The risks to the collection associated with the move are considerable. This particularly applies to the large industrial and technology objects such as the Catalina flying-boat, the steam locomotive and the Bolton-Watt steam engine (an internationally significant item). These objects were installed in the Powerhouse building in 1988 with no plans to remove them. The logistics of relocation are complex and fraught with hazards. Also, assuming they would be displayed above the flood prone levels, the access for such large items will have to be considered carefully, as a 6 x 3 metre lift seems inadequate for such collections.

The issue of providing adequate access for large collection objects has a long history in Sydney. This was first raised by Curator Gerard Krefft at the Australian Museum in 1875 after the Barnett Wing was constructed without adequate doors for the delivery of large natural science specimens.

Flooding

TOR 1 (a) iv – The chosen site is in a flood zone as was evident in February 2020 when the site was inundated. Even if no collection items are exhibited or stored on the ground floor, the impact of a major flood event poses a risk of elevated relative humidity within the building over an extended period. In the event of extended power outages during a flood event, controlling relative humidity will not be possible unless a substantial back-up power generator is installed in the upper part of the building or on the roof. Periods of high relative humidity inside the museum will put the collections at risk from mould, corrosion and physical distortion of organic materials.

This is a risk that will have to be addressed when negotiating international loans. If a museum is unable to achieve the environmental conditions specified in the contract, the lender has the option of packing the loans and shipping them back to their own institution or into suitable local high quality art storage.

General comments on proposed design

Sustainability as a Museum Display Building:

My initial reaction to the designs unveiled in December 2019 was disappointment. Another glass box facing north does not seem appropriate for a museum in Sydney. The solar gain through floor to ceiling windows is considerable and results in the unnecessary expenditure on energy for climate control. Currently the push is for more energy efficient buildings by using the many architectural solutions available for passive climate control.

The reserve collections will almost all be located at Castle Hill. This is presumably where most research will be carried out. Wouldn't this be a more suitable place to locate accommodation for visiting researchers rather than at the display museum on the Parramatta River?

The impression of a large sunlit gallery published in the press could be suitable for many community activities and some art installations, but unsuitable for many museum exhibits for conservation and lighting design reasons.

In the published concepts, there was no sense of a building that was displaying the impressive technology exhibits seen at Ultimo. It appeared to be more of general purpose centre for art installations, touring exhibitions and community events. My feeling is that the Powerhouse display building should remain in Ultimo. In Parramatta a museum and arts centre should be created specifically to celebrate Parramatta's history, cultures and contemporary arts with support from all of the major NSW cultural institutions.

Thank you for reading my submission.

Regards,

Colin Macgregor

16th May 2020