

**Submission
No 134**

**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

Submission to the NSW inquiry into the Powerhouse Museum

Introduction – general comments on cultural infrastructure

The strategic planning of cultural infrastructure must involve high quality sector research and the best available expert advice. Governments are responsible for ensuring this on behalf of their constituents. Museums are an important part of cultural infrastructure that facilitate and enable significant social and economic benefits. Museums are one form of institution (galleries, libraries, archives and museums) which must feature as part of good cultural infrastructure planning.

Western Sydney is one of the fastest growing population centres in Australia. It needs the development of new and significant cultural infrastructure, probably more so than anywhere else in state of NSW, if not the nation. Parramatta as a natural centre for the location of a diverse range of growing cultural and economic activities, desperately and obviously needs new cultural infrastructure.

Due to the growth in western Sydney's population, this must be new infrastructure, not the transplantation of existing infrastructure. Anything less than the development of new cultural infrastructure, that adds to the existing geographic spread of cultural infrastructure across the state, significantly short changes the tax payers of New South Wales.

Museums as Cultural Infrastructure - NSW context

Before considering the state's investment in museums it should be noted that the Australia Bureau of Statistics showed that, in 2017-18 recurrent and capital per capita expenditure on cultural infrastructure, of all the states and territories in Australia, NSW was the lowest.

Over the last two decades NSW has developed an aversion for the provision of cultural infrastructure in the form of museums. This trend has its roots in decisions taken by governments last century, but has become a form of government behaviour that is institutionalised this century.

In 1991 'Museums in NSW: a Plan for the Future [and] a Strategy for the Sustainable development of a NSW State Museum Network' was published by the NSW branch of the Museums Association of Australia Inc. (NSW) and Museum Studies Unit, University of Sydney, with support from the NSW Ministry for the Arts. It includes sections on development, roles, support and recommended structures and levels of support for local and regional museums in NSW. It was one of the few consultative processes regarding museum development undertaken with the participation and support of the state government. This was an example of the state government attempting to formulate museum strategy for cultural infrastructure provision through consultation and expert advice.

Unfortunately, the results of this and all subsequent inquiries and reviews of museums in NSW have been comprehensively ignored by successive NSW state governments. Here are a few that have essentially had little or no impact on government policy and decision making.

1. The Future of Collecting in NSW: A discussion paper by Museums Australia (NSW) 1996,
2. Community Culture & Place: A Local Government Handbook for Museums in 2000,

3. Museums Program Policy, March 2000, after the establishment of Museums and Galleries Foundation of New South Wales,
4. Study into the Key Needs of Collecting Institutions in the Heritage Sector by the Heritage Collections Council in 2002, - various reports and projects by the Collections Council of Australia (2004 to 2010).
5. Arts NSW Strategic Plan for the Visual Arts and Museum Sector in NSW in 2011.

The above listing is not comprehensive, it shows there has been no shortage of effort to construct strategy and policy in this area. The fate of the last one listed above (number 5) is indicative of NSW state government catharsis and disinterest in this area. This report was part of the decadal review of the government's own agency, Museums and Galleries NSW.

The report was underpinned by a view that government-led cultural policy should provide an overarching vision and holistic approach across arts and heritage that would benefit the museums and galleries sector. The report provided strong argument for MGNSW to work with Arts NSW to develop a visual arts and museum strategy. The report has not been released publically and there has been no follow up development of a strategic plan. Essentially, NSW has had no strategy for museums as part of cultural infrastructure planning for many decades.

The absence of any strategic framework regarding museums has given a free hand to successive state governments. In the 1990s the Geological and Mining Museum in the Rocks in Sydney was closed. The use of valuable real estate to showcase a part of the scientific heritage of the state of NSW was no longer tolerated. This decision was taken without recourse to public consultation or expert advice. The collections that comprised this museum, a significant part of NSW heritage, have remained in storage off limits (even in terms of digital access) to the public ever since.

The defunding of the NSW branch of Museums Australia and the Public Galleries Association of NSW in 2000 by the state government in favour of funding a state-created agency (MGFNSW) was a move intended to institutionalise expert advice into a government controlled entity.¹ NSW has been the only Australian state to adopt this model.

The establishment of MGFNSW was intended to:

- (1) provide support for the development of a network of exemplary regional museums that in turn will provide advice and support to surrounding local and community museums;
- (2) support best practice models of community and theme based museums;
- (3) assist in raising standards of collection care and presentation in museums throughout the state;
- (4) stimulate involvement with and access to museums and their collections.

Twenty years later, with no state level museum plan in place, there is little evidence to support attainment of these strategic objectives. What is needed to achieve these goals is research underpinned by principles of best practice in museum and gallery management. These should emphasise the significance of living collections and heritage, creative programming, community engagement, technology and the importance of multiple interpretations and perspectives coexisting and breathing life into collections.

The main function of MGFNSW (now M&GNSW), as a government agency reliant on government funding for its existence, is to act as a funnel for a trickle of state government grant

expenditure for specific projects. While this is welcome, an agency funding transfer model has no strategic remit and fund disbursement takes place independent of any strategic framework.

Government funding, in this context is characterised by unrealistic short term grants, and regular changes to administrative procedures that add to the operating burden of small organisations. Initiatives are fragmented, duplicative and sometimes have ridiculously overblown requirements for reporting. Program design is often inflexible when it comes to the needs and logistics of particular regional communities. There is no ‘whole-of-government’ approach to museums that combines formal and informal arrangements, that enables developing partnerships and mobilises cross-agency and cross-sector resources.

The Powerhouse to Parramatta

The location of the Powerhouse Museum has changed a number of times during its history. The first move being as a result of the tragic Garden Palace fire in the centre of colonial Sydney. But the move from Ultimo to Parramatta will effectively break the Powerhouse lineage to the heritage of industrialisation and the post-war boom that enabled the growth and suburbanisation of Sydney.

Museums essentially put their collections to work for the benefit of the public through a deep understanding of the significance of all the individual items that comprise the collection and the significance of the collection as a whole. Significance assessment is a standard museological practice framework that examines and plots the dimensions of aesthetic, historic, scientific and social and spiritual dimensions (as first order criteria). This is what brings museum collections to life, without significance assessment a museum is just a warehouse full of objects.

At a recent online public consultation meeting about the new Powerhouse Museum in Parramatta the question, ‘how much of this enormous collection is significant in terms of western Sydney and Parramatta’ was asked and remains unanswered. Normally one would expect this to be the first piece of factual research to support a proposal to relocate such a massive institution.

All museums have a history of collecting that reflects the museum’s rationale and purpose and their socio-cultural function as a collecting institution. This may change over time and a museum may serve different purposes throughout its history. These changes usually come about as a result of deep socio-cultural insights into the changing nature of society. They should not change as the result of a geographic whim of an opportunistic government.

The fact that the collections of a significant state asset will be moved to a flood prone site without any significant research or community consultation, without any consideration of alternative possibilities for cultural infrastructure, with the destruction of heritage buildings at Parramatta and Ultimo, and with a marginal business case, simply defies logic and comprehension.

There is little that can now be said about the move that hasn’t already been said. The idea is clearly an asset stripping exercise to allow the government to divest itself of a significant state institution that has the misfortune to be currently located on valuable land. The move serves the singular purpose of enabling and facilitating private sector real estate speculation in Ultimo.

This was essentially the main finding of the previous inquiry into NSW museums. The complete and instant dismissal of this finding was another manifestation of the NSW state government’s disdain for museums. Shedding or translocating state assets to benefit the private sector is

something many tax payers in NSW would see as being opposed to the role of government in facilitating the development of cultural infrastructure. While it may be argued that it is admirable to have a government that is supportive of private profiteering as a way of generating business activity, it is debatable that this should be at the expense of public assets and entail the destruction of heritage.

When the bulldozers move in at Ultimo, the true nature of Sydney's cultural aspirations will be obvious to the world. As a wealthy first world city, we will have an unenviable reputation for destroying cultural infrastructure to enhance private profiteering. Sydney will be seen as a place where heritage and culture are subjugated in favour of greed. After 250 years of European occupation, sadly there has been little change in the colonial mindset of our city.

Museums are a specific form of cultural infrastructure defined by what and how they collect. While museums might change in some ways during their lifetime, the nature of their collections usually doesn't change substantially. Parramatta deserves cultural infrastructure that includes a world-class museum, it needs to be built from the ground up.

Notes

1. Bentley, P. & Simpson, A. 2019. A brief history of the NSW branch of the Australian Museums and Galleries Association. Available online at:-
<https://www.amaga.org.au/resources/brief-history-nsw-branch-australian-museums-and-galleries-association-19692019>

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17 May 2020.