

Supplementary  
Submission  
No 44a

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

**Name:** Ms Grace Cochrane AM

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**20 July, 2020**

For: 'Select Committee on the Government's management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in New South Wales.'

**Grace Cochrane: Followup to Submission No. 44**

This brief paper can be considered a followup to my submission, (No. 44 Ms Grace Cochrane AM) to the Select Committee. It takes into account the announcement on 4 July that the government has decided to keep the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo.

The thousands of advocates around NSW, across Australia and the world, are glad to hear the positive news of this decision.

**1. However, there remain a number of issues to be discussed, explained and resolved.**

The government's media release says:

- 'Sydney's Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo will continue to welcome visitors to its world renowned exhibits, with the NSW Government today announcing it will remain open and operate alongside the new state-of-the-art facility planned for Western Sydney.
- NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian and Treasurer Dominic Perrottet said the decision would ensure Sydney had two world-class facilities and would provide a significant boost for the arts, tourism and employment sectors and..."allow us to provide an outstanding visitor experience in the areas of technology, science, engineering and design at two major locations," Ms Berejiklian said.
- The decision means the Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences (MAAS) will soon boast four centres, including the jewel-in-the-crown Powerhouse at Parramatta, Ultimo Museum, Sydney Observatory and the Museums Discovery Centre at Castle Hill.'

**2. Questions to be addressed include:**

**2.1 For Ultimo:**

- Exactly how much of the Powerhouse Museum will remain in Ultimo? Will it be returned, with adequate funding, to the long-established museum we have all had such respect for, retrieving the exhibition spaces that were reallocated to different purposes (such as a UTS lecture theatre), and expanding to allow for broader representation of the collection (where representation of decorative arts and design and social history have been vastly reduced)?
- Or will we be left with token representation in the form of the Arts minister's preference for a 'fashion' museum, and token objects and pop-up exhibitions from other aspects for the collection. (Fashion is just one aspect of applied arts, or decorative arts and design, alongside ceramics, glass, textiles, furniture, jewellery and metalwork, and musical instruments, graphic design and archives)
- Can we be reassured that all the large engineering items will stay safely in the buildings in Ultimo that are appropriate for them, for both safety and historical context, knowing that they were to be in potential physical danger in the proposed Parramatta site.
- Is the government still planning to make the Parramatta site the main venue for the Powerhouse Museum?
- Will the main administration remain in Ultimo, or will that also be moved to Parramatta, leaving a token staff in Ultimo, and other key people at Castle Hill – distant from audiences and exhibition spaces?

- Does the government really understand the well-documented inadequacies of the proposed 'iconic' site in Parramatta, with relation to appropriate spaces for exhibition and preparation, and for the proposed approach to programming?

## **2.2 For Parramatta:**

- How will the Government and Council deal with the clear and well-documented disagreement in Parramatta about the choice of site for a museum, which includes demolishing heritage buildings and contravening the Council's earlier plans for the Riverside area, which were overturned by the government.
- Is it time to consider an alternative state museum of NSW migration history in the Cumberland/Fleet St heritage site, as has been advocated by so many people
- And would it be better to modify the current building to better suit the site (without demolition, and without invading the riverside precinct proposal), and be used as an art and culture centre, adjacent to the performing arts precinct, as the Council had earlier considered. This should NOT be part of the Powerhouse Museum.
- However, in both locations it would be entirely appropriate for a range of state and regional institutions, including the Powerhouse Museum, to contribute temporary exhibitions as part of their programs.

## **2.3 The big questions:**

- **Who will address these issues, and make decisions about purpose, place and process?**
- **Can we trust the decision-making process?**
- **Is 'leaving the Powerhouse in Ultimo' a 'real' decision?**
- After the demonstrably inadequate consultation processes carried out (or not carried out) earlier, can we trust any future process run by the same people?
- The current Trustees are not experienced in museum principles and management, and have also been sidelined by government processes. Many of the experienced professional staff at the Museum have left, and the current management appears to be subservient to government personal preferences.
- Will Parramatta Council be involved in deciding what they are to invest in themselves, and what they could receive state government help for? In the past their plans have been over-ridden.

## **3. Background:**

Circumstances have changed since the NSW government announced on 4 July, 2020, that the Powerhouse Museum will remain in Ultimo.

The Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the proposed new Powerhouse Museum in Parramatta, whether it includes all or even a 'branch' of the Powerhouse Museum, is now invalid and must be cancelled, and other more appropriate options considered.

### **3.1 Issues: Environmental concerns, associated with audiences, constituents and stakeholders.**

- These aspects have not been identified specifically in the EIS Requirements, but they are essential to any project that is to do with museums, galleries and cultural centres. Collections and exhibitions representing the work of people, past and present, their stories and achievements, provide a framework for understanding our broad society, and can be a stimulating background for contributions to the future. Audiences and a range of stakeholders support institutions that provide professionally-presented examples and experiences. (Refer my earlier Submission No. 44)
- These observations apply to the very wide range of such people associated with the Museum that was going to be destroyed in Ultimo, as well as those expressing the

particular needs and preferences for cultural history and contemporary practice in Parramatta.

- From the outset, it has been clearly demonstrated that there was never adequate or appropriate consultation regarding the purpose and process of making decisions for the rationale and future of either location.
- Those involved in decision-making for Ultimo and Parramatta did not have cultural benefit in mind, but rather property development and political gain. Parramatta Council records from 2014-2016 show that the NSW state government totally over-rode the Council's own long-standing plans for the Riverside location. See: <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/what-the-experts-say/parramatta-council-minutes-document-early-concerns-for-proposed-relocation-of-the-powerhouse-museum-tom-lockley/>
- Even now the Council appears under pressure from the Government to accept state funding for a project that may not be in their best interests.
- The business plans subsequent to the earlier decision were appallingly inadequate and mis-calculated.

And the realities of moving a long-established (albeit under-funded for many years) state museum from its appropriate site in Ultimo, including issues of heritage and collection safety, as well as access for audiences from Sydney, NSW, Australia and overseas, were not understood and, in fact, largely ignored.

- The Powerhouse Museum must continue to represent relationships between science and technology, decorative arts and design and social history, in Ultimo. The major engineering items must stay there, for a range of well-documented reasons, and the past exhibition record shows that decorative arts and design is a far wider field than just 'fashion', while social history crosses all fields in pertinent ways. See: [\(https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/about-the-powerhouse-museum/powerhouse-museum-an-exhibition-archive/\)](https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/about-the-powerhouse-museum/powerhouse-museum-an-exhibition-archive/)
- And Ultimo is close to an even more evolving science and design precinct, while also being part of the 'cultural ribbon'.

### **3.2 Total Parramatta project review: cancel current EIS**

With the recent decision made by the government to 'keep the Powerhouse in Ultimo', and the green bans placed on the heritage buildings in Parramatta, it is clear that the Environmental Impact Statement as it is now, must be cancelled, and the whole project reviewed.

Other options can include two separate centres:

#### **A: Museum of NSW History:**

- With its long and continuing Indigenous and migrant history, Parramatta is in a strong position to establish and support a Museum of NSW History at the significant Cumberland Hospital/ Fleet Street Heritage Precinct .
- This option is very strongly supported by Parramatta residents, and those from elsewhere who recognise the wider significance of the site and its potential for collection, exhibition, stories and events, which can be informative, engaging and stimulating for contemporary audiences. And access is improving.
- Instead of relocating even part of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta, this site could be a very appropriate alternative investment by the State Government, as it is a legitimate state project. It would be possible for other state and regional museums to contribute touring exhibitions as appropriate.
- It should be run by its own staff and Board of Trustees, with links to the Council.
- (See 'Waves of People', a 2017 report on a history of Parramatta, which could provide a strong argument for a better focus on the development of its own galleries and

museums. Click on: '*Waves of People*' or go to <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/find-out-more/2584-2/> )

**B: Art/design cultural centre in the Parramatta CBD:**

- It is difficult to comprehend why, if Parramatta is the 'centre of Sydney's population', that it appears to be the only outer city centre that does not have its own art (science) precinct/gallery – think Manly, Mosman, Blacktown, Casula, Penrith, Hazelhurst, Fairfield, Wollongong, Gosford...
- The Parramatta Council could now retrieve the current city site formerly acquired by the state government, and use it for its own purposes.
- On or near this site, a smaller, or modified, building that did not include demolishing the neighbouring heritage buildings, or destroying the earlier Council plans for the Riverside and Civic Walkway, could be developed by the Council as an art gallery/cultural precinct to complement the performing arts sites on the opposite side of the river. It could also include science-based exhibitions and experiences.
- The flexible intent of the current architectural design and exhibition/event program, could suit this kind of locally-oriented community cultural centre. It was NEVER going to be appropriate for the purpose of the Powerhouse Museum.
- Parramatta has audiences from many different backgrounds and experiences who would appreciate opportunities to see exhibitions of local artists and designers, and encourage local participation.
- And this venue would be appropriate for touring exhibitions from other state and regional centres, as occurs elsewhere: this could include special exhibitions from collections from eg: The Powerhouse Museum, the Art Gallery of NSW, and others.

**Final questions:**

**Who will address these issues, and make decisions about purpose, place and process?  
Can we trust the decision-making process?**

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