

**Submission
No 151**

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

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A Submission Regarding the NSW Government's Determination to Destroy the Existing Powerhouse Museum and Transfer Some of its Contents to a New Building in Parramatta

Major project 26576

Introduction

This submission is at a point where clearly the Government has already made its decision.

I find that a funny way to conduct a democracy.

However, really hoping that it may change some thinking by the committee and, hopefully, reverse the current decision, the following is my submission.

Submission

This NSW Government is a dynamic one, driving some good things (for example managing the Covid 19 situation, working to get the economy going again, but carefully), and some bad things.

One of the bad things that seriously concerns me, and many of my friends and professional colleagues is the Powerhouse Museum.

I have said many times – we have no right, especially in a democracy, to do things that could possibly have a negative impact on our children, grandchildren and future generations. If we do, they will be left to clear up our mess, or they will be left the worse off, or both, and they will curse us for it. And we will deserve their curses.

If you destroy the Powerhouse Museum – and it will be destroyed if you insist on taking the action you plan, then it will certainly be an example of imposing another, and serious, negative impact on both the present and future generations – one that can never be recovered.

And a vast, historical collection of treasures from our short history, and the award winning building that houses them will be no more – decimated – blown to the winds, both figuratively and absolutely.

Our present and future generations will lose a never-to-be replaced historical and educational treasure. And the Government prides itself, quite rightly, on the importance of education.

Is that what the Government really wants ?

I have studied the Parramatta plans and all that will be housed are a few bits and pieces from the Powerhouse Museum. What will happen to the rest? I don't know, and to the best of my memory, we haven't been told.

Will the planned 'Museum' be a Museum, as stated?

Well, no, it will not, and cannot ever be a fit-for-purpose 'new Powerhouse' museum - as the present one is. The CEO of Parramatta, when asked by the community what might be there in terms of Parramatta history - answer - Eels jerseys and a car sale yard sign. Yes, part of Parra's history but there is so much more.

That's not a museum as was intended – surely not.

An appropriate Building for Parramatta

I ask, has there been serious research conducted to find out what the people of Parramatta would like? Could I please have a copy.

If I were asked, I would support a building that would include a standing exhibition of the art and history of Parramatta – critically important – with displays from the beginning, including, of course, the indigenous Darug people – something like that wonderful gallery in Darwin.

I would support a well designed, multi-use building at Parramatta, absolutely not in a flood prone area (I've seen pictures taken in the recent floods and it looked a disaster, especially in the light of Climate Change). I cannot believe that someone would actually make a decision like that – to locate a significant building in an area subject to severe flooding.

I am aware of, and support, a campaign for a Museum of NSW, led by an organisation like the North Parramatta Residents Action group, situated on the Fleet St Heritage Precinct (above the flood height), close to the CBD

It would be appropriately designed (not like the current one, which is weak and messy, not strong and purposeful, a bit like a bowl of spaghetti – a bit like shopping centre car parks are doing.)

It would be nestled within the 30ha of open space and the marvellous historic buildings, owned by the Government, and with access to it by the planned light rail. Importantly, Willow Grove and St George's Terrace saved, and the proposed 'not a museum' building gone off the drawing board.

A study of the plans reveals that the proposed 'Museum' is more for entertainment, performances, cafes, bars, retail, events, residences, school dormitory, commercial kitchen, without the ability to have major standing displays from the existing Powerhouse Museum.

It would be without the ability to have art and history displays, as above.

But if the research reveals that this is what they would like, then this is what they should have. I suspect that they would not nominate the Powerhouse contents in their list of wants. In fact, I'm willing to bet on it.

I further suspect that the Government is constructing a building, inserting some Powerhouse contents into it, calling it the Powerhouse Museum, then giving itself the excuse to knock down the Powerhouse Museum and sell off the site to developers to build lots of units – profits to the developer/s, some money to the government, and the people duded.

My question is, has any thorough research with the community and relevant stakeholders been carried out? Please could I have a copy.

The Stage 2 Design Brief specifies only 5,200 sqm of Museum standard air-conditioned space which is only 25% of the PHM's 21,800 sqm of Museum standard air-conditioned space.

Completely inadequate for a central Museum to serve NSW and visitors around the world.

This 'museum' could not cope with the massive and powerful collections, presently installed and displayed in the Powerhouse Museum – the Boulton and Watt steam engine built in England during the Industrial Revolution, which may be the most significant technological artefact ever to reach Australia - one of the earliest rotative steam engines to be built and the oldest in existence - also one of the oldest in the world to still work regularly under steam.

Also Locomotive No. 1 which brings to life the age of steam travel, beginning in 1855 when this very locomotive hauled New South Wales' first train. The exhibition at the Powerhouse Museum, as you know, recreates a journey from Sydney to Parramatta in 1863.

The Catalina flying boat 'Frigate Bird II', designed in 1935 - by 1951 the final ocean to be traversed for air travel was the South Pacific between Australia and South America. In this aircraft, and, as you probably all know, famous Australian pilot P.G. Taylor, a resident of Sydney, pioneered an air route by island hopping across the Pacific from Sydney to Valparaiso.

Extremely difficult to install, and I am informed, even more difficult to remove – damage to this aircraft would be terrible.

In examining the Parramatta plans, there is no way you could put these, and other examples of our industrial history, on permanent display. It's clear that the display areas are for short term exhibitions.

I read that Arup is trying to work out a way to stuff the Boulton and Watt engine into the space, and again my question is, do the people of Parramatta really want it? and the other industrial memorabilia?

I'm willing to bet they don't – so why persist – and think of the potential danger of damage to this extraordinarily rare piece of equipment

If I'm wrong, please show me the research that proves me wrong.

The Business Case for Knocking Down the Powerhouse Museum

It is my understanding there isn't one. I have asked, but no luck. The only thing I am clear on is that on 26 November 2014 – 'not waiting for a feasibility study, Premier Baird announces that the Powerhouse Museum will move to Parramatta' – just like that!

It has clearly been kept as 'cabinet in confidence'. And I have heard that there is nothing for Ultimo at all.

Very unsatisfactory – we are meant to be a democracy, not an autocracy.

No Business Case for the community to study – no sensible discussion with the community, huge subsequent criticisms, locally and worldwide. And huge costs. Where is an IPC hearing for such an important issue?

The building to be sold to some developer to put up more units, an inadequate building to appease the Parramatta people, some money into Government coffers, and a seriously important historical building swept away.

Committee members, forgive me for saying, but this is no way to run a democracy.

Costs

I understand the projected cost of destroying the Powerhouse Museum, and building a new building at Parramatta, is \$1.1billion, upped already to \$1.5 + billion . The cost by Arup of installing just the Boulton and Watt engine at over \$400,000 (no doubt to be + 50% or double – a significant indicator of costs to rise) into a building down on a flood plain beggars belief. There's a significant bit of your budget gone for the whole project, just for the transport of a single item, with many more to follow, you would have us believe. And with the danger involved – it's not as though the engine is just a 28 tonne cement block.

Would you be kind enough to send me a copy of your budget. I'm sure it would be a public document – thank you.

The Planned Destruction of Woolloomooloo Finger Wharf and the Rocks area

When I think of what would have happened if the people of NSW had not objected strongly to the planned destruction of the Woolloomooloo Finger Wharf back in around 1988, I think, and the same to the Rocks area, to be developed with Harry Seidler type concrete buildings (and is it not now the No.1 tourist attraction, producing lots of delight, revenue and profits to Sydney).

It is too awful to contemplate – the destruction of the character of Sydney for profit.

What would people here, and around the world, think and say, if your Government decided, without serious public consultation, to knock down the Mint building, or the Hyde Park Barracks, or both? Although, no doubt, the Government would get an excellent price from a developer, and jobs for quite a few people for a while.

But I don't think you would do that – well I hope you wouldn't.

So, why knock down an equally significant building with its irreplaceable contents?

No museum in the Western world, where culture and history is seen as important, to my knowledge, has ever been destroyed and their contents sent off somewhere – into storage – into goodness knows where.

Of course we know of many museums that have set up 'branch' museums, like the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, with eleven museums and galleries, the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, with a branch in Dundee, focusing on Scottish design and history (an equivalent of what the Parramatta building could be) – to display important items that would otherwise be in storage. If indeed the Parramatta people saw that as important to them.

But they haven't destroyed their 'mother' museums.

To continue with an autocratic decision, knowing that a large portion of the NSW population is saddened, or appalled at the idea, is unconscionable.

We have not even had the opportunity to make submissions to an IPC in a proper democratic way – simply an opportunity, as I learnt from the article by Elizabeth Farrelly, to make a submission - after the decision has been made – an extraordinary way to conduct serious community discussion, if that ever was the intention.

It would be awful for you to be known as the Government which left behind a legacy of the destruction of irreplaceable history and culture, in exchange for the go ahead to developers to build units and prosper, at the cost to present and future generations.

You, unfortunately, have the power to carry out this destruction, but for the reasons above, in all conscience, you cannot do it.

I am reminded by our local, well liked and respected MP Rob Stokes , who says, and has always said – of the 3 - **Environment, Economic, and Social**, the **Environment** is the most important. It sits above the other two - in this case, the Urban Environment.

Clearly, **Economic** is driving this – and Political, dare I say.

Jobs

Yes, of course it would produce some jobs and money for the Government coffers, but what cost would it be to NSW and its people, present and into the future?

I appeal to the committee, will you please hold back on your Covid19 dynamic economic recovery and consider my points.

I'd hate to think that this government was remembered as the Government which actively destroyed a significant part of our history and culture.

This submission is well intentioned, acting in the Government's best interests, as well as those of the people of NSW and the many visitors from all over the world.

I'm sorry to have to say this, but I cannot believe the arrogance in what is meant to be a democracy.

Greg Roberts OAM