Submission No 46

INQUIRY INTO STRUCTURE AND FUNDING OF THE ARTS, MUSIC, NIGHT-TIME ECONOMY, AND TRANSPORT PORTFOLIOS

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SUBMISSION TO

INQUIRY INTO THE STRUCTURE AND FUNDING OF THE ARTS, MUSIC, NIGHT-TIME ECONOMY AND TRANSPORT PORTFOLIOS

ADDRESSING TERMS OF REFERENCE

(d) The operational, staffing and program impacts of budget and restructuring decisions on…(vi) the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (Powerhouse Museum)...
(e) The retention of professional expertise and institutional knowledge, including the adequacy of processes for knowledge transfer, mentoring and succession planning
(f) The extent to which restructures and workforce reductions have affected technical capacity, project delivery and service quality

At its conference in Prague in 2022, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) defined a museum as

'a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.'[1]

Professional expertise is key to any museum's ability to meet the requirements of this definition, at the core of which is the 'tangible and intangible heritage' which, in turn, is embodied in a museum's permanent collections.

For about 20 years, this professional expertise of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, known as the Powerhouse Museum, has been gradually eroded, initially by attrition (positions not re-filled) or 'redundancy' (falsely claiming that positions are not required purely to reduce operating costs). However, in practice, no savings are made as these 'savings' have been committed to employing new staff whose knowledge and skills are unrelated to the vacant positions.

More specifically, in recent years and in particular since the appointment of the current CEO in 2019, vacant positions of former professional staff have been repurposed and reassigned to extraneous roles that bear no relationship to replacing the lost expertise about the collections.

In 'realignment' meetings with senior management, curators were told that their skills and particularly collection knowledge would be retained after this realignment. However, as long-term staff have left, their knowledge is not being retained via succession planning.

The Museum's Curator of Astronomy was replaced this year by an applicant with no curatorial experience in museums and a background as an artist specialising in glass-working. Curators of Health and Medicine and Australian Cultural History are being replaced by applicants with backgrounds in sound design and contemporary art.

[1] Refer https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-approves-a-new-museum-definition/

This practice has resulted in **comprehensive de-skilling of the specialist curatorial staff** at the Powerhouse Museum that must be urgently addressed as **a major risk to the operation of the Museum and its legal obligations to research, interpret, promote, develop and conserve the collections.**[2]

It would be concerning enough if this situation could be characterised as an abandonment of one of the Museum's central tenets: to preserve, practice and prioritise traditional skills that were used and continue to be understood and valued in relation to the half a million objects in its collection. But it is worse than that: it is a betrayal of the main purpose of the Museum as described in its Act to

'…effectively minister to the needs and demands of the community in any or all branches of applied science and art and the development of industry…'[3]

Since 2019, there has been a major shift in the purpose, function and future of the Museum. This was single-handedly introduced by the current CEO: a decision apparently unexamined yet supported by Government to turn the Powerhouse Museum into a creative industries and contemporary arts organisation. This decision has had drastic consequences for the Museum's curatorial, conservation, collection acquisitions and trade expertise and its skills in and knowledge of science and technology, decorative arts, design and social history. The scholarly research and documentation of the collection is being downgraded at great risk to the Museum's standards of professionalism and its education mission – a trend that will be deleterious to all the Museum's collection-based programs, indeed, to the very purpose of the Powerhouse Museum. Examples can be supplied on request.

This major shift in the Museum's purpose has not gone uncontested. Indeed, it has been widely condemned by museum and heritage professionals, members of the public, including donors, former PHM trustees, Museum directorate, senior Museum staff and supporters of the Museum from across Sydney, NSW, Australia and internationally. From the time it became clear soon after the CEO's appointment in 2019 that her goal was a 'creative industries precinct' and contemporary arts venue, there has been opposition through both informal and formal channels, the latter through two Upper House Inquiries, submissions to Dept of Planning, the Heritage Council, Heritage NSW, the Minister for the Arts, the Premier, the Treasurer and numerous local MPs.

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[2] At its core, *loss of skills is about loss of knowledge* that is in turn critical to collection care. This is *fundamentally an issue about risk management,* which was recognised in a report commissioned by the Museum as far back as 2002 prepared by the NSW Treasury Managed Fund Risk Management Unit. To address it successfully in the current and proposed circumstances in which the risk is heightened (all the collection now centralised at Castle Hill) will require nothing less than a fresh and independent analysis of the risks associated with the future handling and care of the collection, including the critical loss of skills specific to collection knowledge.

[3]Refer Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences Act 1945 No.31
https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/act-1945-031#sec.14
It is important to also refer to the clauses that elaborate on this principal remit. These include
(i) the display of selected objects arranged to illustrate the industrial advance of civilisation and the development of inventions and manufactures,
(ii) the promotion of craftsmanship and artistic taste by illustrating the history and development of the applied arts,
(iii) lectures, broadcasts, films, publications and other educational means,
(iv) scientific research, or
(v) any other means necessary or desirable for the development of the natural resources and manufacturing industries of New South Wales.

Some of Australia's most respected heritage professionals expressed their opinions with authority and conviction. In a submission in response to the State Significant Development Application for the 'Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation' in May 2024, prominent heritage architect Alan Croker described the proposal to redevelop the Ultimo site as 'driven by an agenda to dismantle and destroy the Museum' and that there was an 'unwillingness of a (then) new government to call out and rectify these errors'[4]

The resulting cuts to the Museum's core professional personnel have critically affected the Museum's capacity to meet its obligations under its Act, to manage the collections, to make strategic acquisitions, to curate engaging exhibitions and among other key functions, to maintain the specialised engineering and steam facilities at the Powerhouse Museum.

Looking to an uncertain future for the Museum, we are reliably informed that there are **no exhibitions being planned for the 'revitalised' Ultimo site.**[5] On the closure of the Ultimo site in February 2024, the Government promised that the site would reopen in about 3 years – meaning 2027. The experience of the authors of this paper is that it takes at least 3 years to develop a major exhibition from concept to opening. Half that time has already elapsed.

Most seriously, cuts to professional staff led to the Museum's posting of the lowest visitor numbers since 1960 in 2021-22. Over 5 years to 2022-2023, education engagement statistics at the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences[6] decreased by 56%, whereas at the Australian Museum, education participation rates increased by 36%... The steep decline in visitor numbers coincides with the de-skilling of the PHM's expert curatorial staff and the loss of trained education staff and curriculum-linked education materials as the CEO progressively closed exhibition galleries at the Museum. Declines across all the key performance indicators are a reminder that **skilled, highly trained people are essential to any successful museum. They animate collections, engage audiences and, at the Powerhouse Museum, they ultimately ensure that the community benefits from taxpayers' intergenerational investment in the museum and its collections.**

In 2020 the MAAS CEO promised to restore specialist curatorial positions at MAAS. Instead, employment priority has been given by the CEO to artistic associates on SES level salaries, friends of the CEO and people who have worked at the Museum of Contemporary Arts and Carriageworks. **Despite a sustained and forensically researched 11-year campaign** by the Powerhouse Museum Alliance, Save the Powerhouse and others **to save the world class and publicly acclaimed Powerhouse Museum, the government is still erasing a 145-year-old institution with a remarkable heritage collection, along with all trace of the 1988 multi award winning Museum, designed with state-of-the-art facilities including co-located conservation, research and storage facilities in the unique Harwood Building.**

In place of the state's - indeed Australia's - major science, technology and industrial heritage museum – the Powerhouse Museum**,** the site is being turned into a creative industries precinct. For the first time since the

[4] *Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation, Submission in Response to SSD Application* Design 5 Architects, 30 May 2024, p.1

[5] This is a critical indicator of the current CEO's real intentions for both Powerhouse Parramatta and Powerhouse Ultimo. It takes several years of planning and development to produce a thoroughly researched, themed exhibition with clear educational objectives. Examples of topical themes that might be prominent in the 2020s and beyond are sustainability, energy production and AI. The success of such projects depends on experienced and professional in-house knowledge and skills in a range of museological disciplines.

[6] Figures are drawn from MAAS Annual Reports and include visitors to the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney Observatory and the Museums Discovery Centre at Castle Hill.

1960s the Museum has no curator of transport and no curator of power technologies to curate and communicate these collection**s** of international significance.

Moreover, the most valuable and revered object in the collection, the 1784 Boulton & Watt beam engine, has no curator but just one engineering conservator who is the only person on staff with knowledge about how this 'stupendous'[7] engine works and how it should be maintained. The same member of staff is also responsible for the entire world-ranking collection of steam and hot air engines that once attracted millions of awe-inspired visitors to the Powerhouse Museum to see them in operation.

In a blatant step by the current CEO to effectively deskill the Museum of its longstanding and formerly nationally respected expertise, all curators were assigned as either 'Collection Curators' or 'Exhibitions Curators' - no other curatorial roles exist. Appointments under this untested new curatorial regime to Exhibitions Curator positions are artists or so-called 'creatives' with no apparent requirement for previous curatorial experience and/or collection knowledge[8].

To make such an arbitrary division reflects a failure to understand the continuity in the role curators across the operations and public engagement of a museum, ranging from acquiring an object or collection of objects, to research work, to then developing exhibitions and other programs that will engage with stakeholders and stimulate a target audience. Drawing on a specialist collection to curate exhibitions is one of a museum curator's most important responsibilities, relying on the knowledge of the relevant field of the collection and an understanding of the Museum's purpose.

The following specialist positions have been deleted over the last two decades through attrition, budget cuts and restructures.

Lost Science and Technology curatorial and trade positions – not a complete list

- Senior Curator of Engineering and Design
- Curator of Engineering and Design
- Curator of Energy and Power Technology
- Curator of Biotechnologies
- Senior Curator of Sciences
- Curator of Computing and Mathematics
- Senior Curator of Transport
- Curator of Transport - Aviation
- Curator of Space Science and Technology (temporarily filled but vacant again)
- Curator of Health and Medicine
- Curator of Philately and Postal Technology
- Curator, Design and Built Environment
- Engineering Conservator (3 positions)
- Manager, Interactive Exhibits and the entire staff of the department (about 5 positions)
- Plant Operators (3 positions)

[7] This adjective was used by King George III when he saw the engine demonstrated in London

[8] To the combined knowledge of the authors of this submission, no other museum in Australia or overseas has sought to up end the purpose and skills base of the Museum in a way that downgrades the institution's curatorial expertise and scholarship, and role of the collection in driving exhibitions and public programs.

Lost Decorative Arts and Design and Social History curatorial positions

- Senior Curator Social History - domestic history
- Curator Social History – arts and design
- Curator Social History – architecture, lifestyle
- Curator Social History – culture, music
- Curator Australian Indigenous Culture
- Senior Curator Australian Contemporary Decorative Arts & Design: architecture, furniture, lifestyle
- Curator Australian Contemporary Decorative Arts & Design - crafts, crafts practice
- Curator Australian Contemporary Decorative Arts & Design – graphic design, photography
- Senior Curator Australian Historical Decorative Arts & Design
- Curator Australian Historical Decorative Arts & Design – textiles, dress
- Curator Archaeology and Numismatics
- Senior Curator International Decorative Arts & Design Curator International Decorative Arts & Design – furniture, architecture & design
- Curator International Decorative Arts & Design – juvenilia, textiles and dress
- Curator International Decorative Arts & Design - Asian arts
- Curator West, Central, South and Southeast Asia, Africa and the Pacific - textiles, dress
- Curator West, Central, South and Southeast Asia, ceramics & metalwork
- Assistant Curator Decorative Arts & Design – textiles, dress, lace
- Assistant Curator Decorative Arts & Design – general
- Curator Egyptology
- Curator Lace
- Curator Music

By the end of 2023, of the remaining 21 curators left at the PHM only 14 were permanent ongoing positions. The other seven positions were on contracts.

The former Powerhouse Museum once had an excellent record of supporting regional museums and their staff and volunteers. The following positions have been vacant for over 10 years and not since filled:

Lost regional and migration heritage positions
Manager of Regional Services 2001-2014
Manager NSW Migration Heritage Centre 2004 – 2012
MHC education and community positions x 2

These positions were established to extend and deepen the Museum's engagement with regional communities and with migrant heritage communities in Sydney and across NSW. The team worked with PHM staff across the museum - especially curators, conservators and registrars, to co-develop and deliver exhibitions and programs documenting and interpreting regional heritage places and collections and community collections.

In total, these cuts have so weakened the Museum professional capacity to fulfil its central role that it has been vulnerable to the current CEO's plan, actively supported by successive Arts Ministers, **to completely change to role of the Museum to a contemporary arts, creative industries and events centre.** If there were any doubt about the validity of this claim, one only has to see the approved plans for redevelopment of the Powerhouse Ultimo site (see boxed section over) which clearly shows the internal demolition of all 1980s structures at 'Powerhouse Ultimo' and the introduction of 'presentation spaces' –

note the telling change from 'exhibition spaces' to accommodate multi-purpose use such as for temporary installations, one-off events, music and theatre performances.

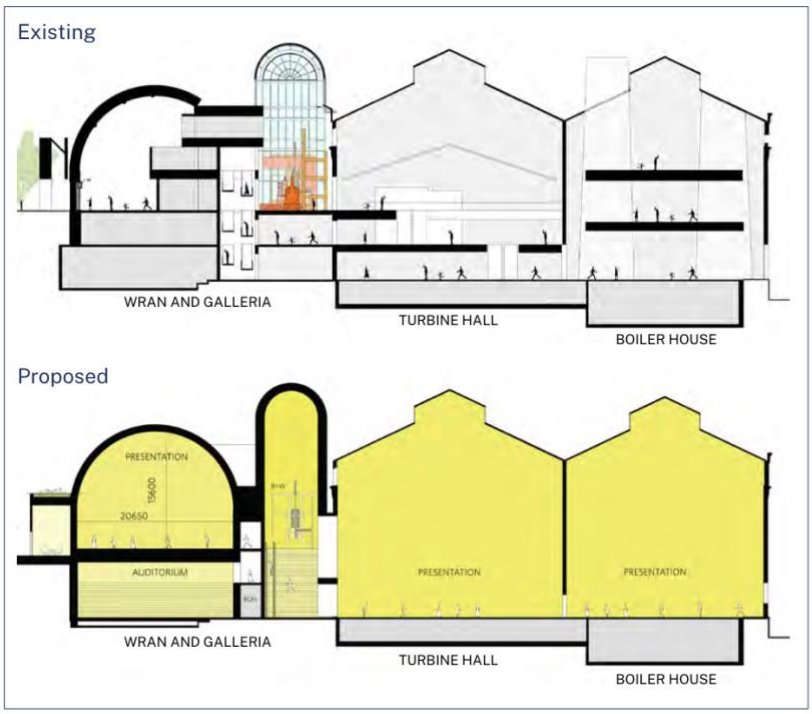

Figure 2: Cross sectional diagram showing existing and proposed exhibition spaces (source: Durbach Block Jaggers & Architectus)

EVIDENCE THAT THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM IS BEING CONVERTED INTO A $350m EVENTS CENTRE FEATURING THREE CAVERNOUS, THEATRICAL 'PRESENTATION' SPACES

The cross-sectional diagram above is an extract from the *Design Fact Sheet* for the so-called 'revitalisation' of the Powerhouse Museum as 'Powerhouse Ultimo', published by Infrastructure NSW, May 2024. It shows the removal by demolition of all the current mezzanine floors built in the late 1980s to house the Museum's internationally-acclaimed exhibitions by the adaptive re-use of the former Ultimo Power House. This demolition is nothing short of cultural vandalism which will convert the former Museum into three large 'presentation' (as opposed to 'exhibition') spaces.

But it is not only in historic technologies and trade skills that the Museum is failing its responsibilities. The Museum must also keep pace with and devise programs and exhibitions about cutting-edge technologies and emerging trends such as AI and machine learning, quantum computing, robotic surgery or nanotechnology, environmental engineering and active transport.

At this time in the information revolution when Artificial Intelligence (AI) is being hotly debated and the source, motive and reliability of information has never been more contested, the role of mediators and neutral commentators has never been more important. In museums, these are the curators who interpret the cultural meanings of objects and the collections they belong to and the contemporary themes that are explored in exhibitions, publications and other forms of stimulating educational products.

Under the current CEO's tenure, there is no apparent concern about the failure of the Museum to keep pace with emerging technologies which would require establishing curatorial positions in fields such as AI, robotics, sustainable energy and data science. Acquisitions for the permanent collection are one measure of curatorial activity and in recent years, these have dropped away alarmingly, notably in cutting edge

technologies. This is especially concerning as scientific and technological research leads to new discoveries and product development that is both enhancing and disrupting the pattern of our daily lives.

However, while acquisitions have declined in recent years, an equal concern is that the *focus* of collecting has changed to include extensive archives of low significance and limited interest and utility for Museum exhibitions, as well as artist commissions, recent or contemporary works, and works of art that are demonstrably outside the museum's legislated remit for applied arts and sciences. These acquisitions are not consistent with the MAAS collection policy and lack any credible assessment or rationale for inclusion in the Museum's permanent collection. The collections are being treated as a form of subsidy for favoured artists and designers. This carries huge sustainability costs for NSW taxpayers.

Museums are uniquely placed to provide the 'sweep of history' perspective that is revealed from reviewing past discoveries and trends and using the lessons that arise from human experience (such as the damaging effects of fossil fuels) to direct future planning and inform public discourse. As Winston Churchill once sagely observed, 'the longer you can look back, the farther you can look forward.' Notably, many of the Museum's most significant and strategic acquisitions were made in the 50-100 year retrospective window.

Other cultural organisations both in Australia and around the world have already taken action to avoid this existential crisis of progressive loss of knowledge and skills. The Endangered Material Knowledge Program (EMKP) at the British Museum (see here) documents and preserves threatened crafts, skills and knowledge around the world, while Sovereign Hill in Ballarat has established the Australian Centre for Rare Arts and Forgotten Trades (see here).

A promotional story about Powerhouse Parramatta broadcast on free-to-air television news on 29 October 2025 included a statement by the Minister for the Arts Hon John Graham that

> 'This (Powerhouse Parramatta) will be a home for Western Sydney arts and culture lovers, for Western Sydney technology and science lovers. If you want to be an engineer, this is one of the places you'll come to dream big about the future'

The Minister may have been praising the well-earned and enviable reputation of the authentic Powerhouse Museum (1988-2024). He most certainly is not describing the kinds of virtual experiences, entertainment events, science fiction and immersive shows we have been led to expect at Powerhouse Parramatta, nor the material cultural wasteland almost devoid of the Museum's collections that we can expect at Powerhouse Ultimo. It is instructive that neither venue is described as a 'museum'. Further, the Minister's expressed aspiration is plainly not supported by the current professional staffing profile of the Museum, which lacks the experience and expertise required to deliver the 'revitalised' – and *recognisable* - Powerhouse Museum that the public expects and deserves.

Summary statement

The impact of the loss of the Powerhouse Museum's specialist expertise has been felt across the Museum: in its development, care and conservation of the collection, in the collection's documentation and accessibility and, in the Museum's lack of meaningful engagement with its core and diverse audiences.

Instead, the current CEO and senior management have prioritised the employment of artists and **'**creatives**'** who are invited to use the collection and the Museum's resources and facilities for often arcane purposes that are not related to the Museum's education mission and core audiences but are for the 'creative enjoyment' of an extremely limited audience.

This current CEO-driven fundamental change to the Museum's purpose, structure and programs has resulted in 'exhibitions' which are indulgent forays into the thoughts and reveries of contemporary artists, with little or no relevance to the Powerhouse Museum's longstanding audiences and, at odds with the Museum's Act and, importantly, its education remit. The current CEO has apparently retreated into her comfort zone of contemporary art and artists.

The Powerhouse Museum Alliance calls on The Minister, The Hon John Graham, to replace the Powerhouse Museum's Board of Trustees and senior management with people who have experience and knowledge of museums and their important role in society, as described in the International Council of Museum's statement of purpose quoted at the beginning of this submission.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this submission.

Jennifer Sanders, Kylie Winkworth, Dr Lindsay Sharp and Andrew Grant on behalf of the Powerhouse Museum Alliance

14 November 2025