Submission No 76

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

In an up-beat media release dated 3 May 2024, the Minister for the Arts the Hon. John Graham announced that

> 'The Community is being encouraged to share their feedback on the proposed design to revitalise the much-loved and iconic Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo'[1]

and that the first 'key feature' of the Powerhouse Ultimo design was

> 'Four flexible, dynamic exhibition spaces that allow the museum (sic) to create and present high quality, internationally leading museum exhibitions across the applied arts and applied sciences and featuring the Powerhouse Collection'[2]

This submission asserts that, in relation to the 'Powerhouse Ultimo' site:

1. both the spirit and the letter of this press release were misleading and disingenuous and that
2. the above aspiration is demonstrably unachievable and that
3. inappropriate appointments to the professional staff of the Museum have led to a knowledge and skills deficit , which in turn has contributed to the Minister's and the Museum's CEO's failure to appreciate the highly significant cultural value of the former permanent exhibitions and their crucial relationship with the former Ultimo Power House

All the above points are, at least in part, a result of failings by the Minister and the Museum's CEO in relation to the terms of Reference (d), (e) and (f) above.

<u>Demolishing the Powerhouse Museum: Actions speak louder than words</u>

The second quote above from Minister Graham's press release of 3 May 2024 describes the vision for a 'revitalised' Powerhouse Ultimo in close alignment with the authentic, original and celebrated Powerhouse Museum of 1988-2024. More than this, the wording appears to be seeking a 'halo effect' from the reputational cachet of the name 'Powerhouse Museum'. One could easily conclude that the object of the Government's 'revitalisation' was a 'Powerhouse Museum version 2.0.'

[1] Refer https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/powerhouse-museum-ultimo-revitalisation-powers-along-community-feedback
[2] Ibid.

Yet when this press release was written, the Museum's CEO was already over 5 years into her tenure on a mission to change the very nature and function of the Museum. This was and remains to turn the Museum into a creative industries[3] and contemporary arts events centre.

A giveaway of the CEO's actual intent for 'Powerhouse Ultimo' is in the first five words of the quote above: 'Four flexible, dynamic exhibition spaces…' . This description of the proposed new cavernous interior spaces in the Museum masquerades as an improvement. However, anyone with knowledge of the Museum's collection and its interpretation in a suitable setting, namely the Powerhouse Museum as formerly configured, realises that what is required is a wide range of spaces and volumes defined by varying levels, ceiling heights and volumes that respond to the extraordinary diversity of the collection.

The 'four, flexible dynamic exhibition spaces' described above are in fact three large volumes and one smaller one, ideal for events, installations and theatrical performances. To suggest that these four volumes are an appropriate alternative to the nuanced variety of exhibition environments created in the authentic Powerhouse Museum is ludicrous and betrays the real purpose of these spaces (see image in boxed text below).

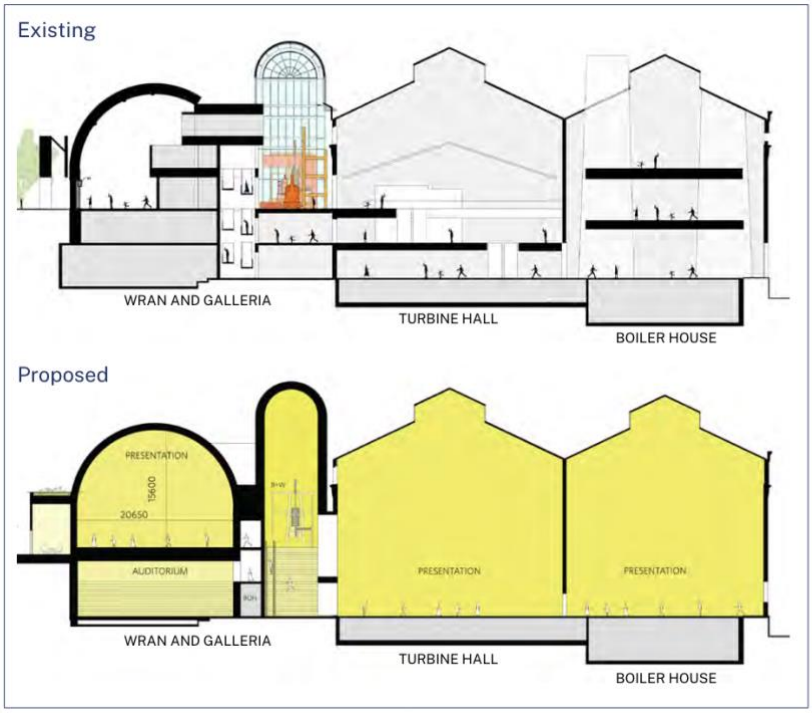

Figure 2: Cross sectional diagram showing existing and proposed exhibition spaces (source: Durbach Block Jaggers & Architectus)

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's interior into three large 'presentation' (as opposed to 'exhibition') spaces and one smaller volume.

[3] The Museum's CEO has defined 'creative industries' as 'a wide range of cultural and technology-intensive activities which include, but are not limited to, design, fashion, architecture, craft, music, performing and visual arts, publishing, media production and broadcasting, digital services, arts education and advertising'.

The so-called 'Powerhouse Ultimo revitalisation' initially held much promise as an undertaking by the present Government to retain the character of the (now former) Powerhouse Museum.

In particular, the Government and the Museum's CEO undertook to 'preserve the Wran legacy', which has since been shown to be a cruel hoax. It has since been revealed that, despite a cynical and disingenuous claim by Government that the Powerhouse Museum was 'saved', all of the 1980s architectural features that earned the Powerhouse Museum the Sulman Medal for Public Architecture in 1988 are to be demolished or, even worse in heritage practice, 'replicated'.

With the full support of the Minister, the Museum's CEO is leading a 'revitalisation' project that has ensured the pre-emptive and total demolition of several major exhibitions and the removal of the Museum's entire permanent collection to its Castle Hill display storage site. In the opinion of leading heritage architect Alan Croker, the 'revitalisation' project is 'being driven by an agenda to dismantle and destroy the museum'[4].

The relentless pursuit of this agenda has shown that the CEO is incapable of appreciating the cultural value of the former Powerhouse Museum and the central importance of the relationship between the building its former exhibition spaces and the Museum's collection.

It should be on record that the 'revitalisation' proposal approved by Government contravenes two articles of the Burra Charter, the basis for all heritage legislation in Australia, as follows:

'Article 8. Setting

> Conservation requires the retention of an appropriate setting. This includes retention of the visual and sensory setting, as well as the retention of spiritual and other cultural relationships that contribute to the *cultural significance* of the *place*.
> (Comment: These are not my italics, but these words in this case clearly allude to the cultural significance of the place as a museum)
>
> New construction, demolition, intrusions or other changes which would adversely affect the setting or relationships are not appropriate.'

Article 8 supports the Heritage Council's opinion that the entire site should have been listed without the insidious exemptions Gazetted on 12 July 2024[5] , which would acknowledge the high cultural significance of the Museum's role since 1988.

'Article 11 Related places and objects

> The contribution which related places and related objects make to the cultural significance of the place should be retained.'

There is a demonstrable and proven relationship between the Museum's collection types (science and technology, social history and decorative arts), their scale, materials, shapes and stories and the nuanced architectural responses devised by architect Lionel Glendenning to those collection types. These spatial relationships resulted from a collaborative process in the design development stage. They are most readily illustrated by the arched volume of the galleria, designed specifically to provide a grand setting for the Boulton & Watt engine and the first train in NSW. It was also very evident in the *Steam Revolution* gallery, which evoked the type of industrial setting in which the engines that operated in the exhibition might have

[4] Refer *Powerhouse Museum Revitalisation: Submission in Response to SSD Application*, Design 5 Architects, 30 May 2024, p1

[5] Refer https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/PHM-Complex-Gazetted-heritage-listing-12-July-2024.pdf

once functioned (see Image 3 below). Furthermore, the *Steam Revolution* exhibition was not just the only gallery of its kind in the state of NSW or Australia but was *one of only three permanent steam-powered museum exhibitions in the world*. The architectural treatment of the former Engine House in which the *Steam Revolution* exhibition was located is not artifice or confection: it is a permanent finish and interpretation of the historical role of that space in the former Ultimo Power House that resonated with its Museum context.

Article 11 (above) therefore supports the argument that heritage significance is increased because *the collection itself is integral with the buildings that provide a cultural setting for them*. The overwhelmingly positive and sustained response from millions of visitors to the PHM from 1988 to 2024 suggests that this relationship between building and collections was one of the key reasons for the broad and enduring appeal of the visitor experience.

The proposed demolition of all the internal mezzanine floors and the demolition and 'replication' of the Wran Building is directly contrary to the Government's claim that it is preserving the Wran legacy and makes a mockery of the Government's stated intention to preserve the built heritage of the site..

Yet the Minister apparently approved the wording of the press release only 18 months ago, to reiterate:

> '…to create and present high quality, internationally leading museum exhibitions across the applied arts and applied sciences and featuring the Powerhouse Collection'.[6]

However, actions speak louder than words. At no time since the CEO's appointment has she been able to articulate a vision for either Powerhouse Parramatta or Powerhouse Ultimo. She has assured us all that the care of the Museum's collection is a top priority but all the evidence indicates that she regards it as a largely irrelevant and costly inconvenience to her main objective for the Ultimo site. Meanwhile, as the entire collection languishes at Castle Hill site, the Harwood Building, the unique collection management facility co-located on the Ultimo site, is repurposed, partly as accommodation for 'creatives', while it too remains under threat of future demolition.

The CEO has often been critical of what she claims was the long duration of the former permanent[7] exhibitions at the Powerhouse Museum and, in particular, that they should have been replaced or were unchanged for far too long[8]. In a rare glimpse into her imagined future for the Museum, she has foreshadowed 'exhibitions' of very short term duration; a matter of several months before a changeover. This raises three important issues: Firstly, the risk of a lack of intellectual substance in a series of short-term exhibitions; secondly, the likely compromise to the build quality of short term exhibitions to achieve a reasonable return on investment and thirdly, the unsustainable strain on the Museum's future resources over the medium to long term to afford such a policy[9].

There are other significant reasons why the Powerhouse Museum maintained a policy of devising and building permanent exhibitions. The Museum's important education remit required working closely with schools and, at times, tertiary institutions to develop specialised programs based on various curricula.

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[6] [6] Refer https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/powerhouse-museum-ultimo-revitalisation-powers-along-community-feedback

[7] The term 'permanent' was used in Powerhouse Museum parlance to mean very long term, this is, not less than ten years. Such exhibitions typically had changeover components that kept them fresh and allowed the Museum to respond to current trends.

[8] This criticism reflects a naïve ignorance about how major museums set exhibition changeover priorities to align with public responses to how the collection is presented in interpretive displays. Many factors impact on a public museum's decisions about what to display and for how long, not least recurrent funding.

[9] Expensive lessons are being learned after the fact from the experience of Sydney Modern: not enough planning by inexperienced people to budget adequately for exhibition turnover in the new facility at the AGNSW.

These programs needed to be reliably available for booked group visits over the long term as part of the Museum's vital service to the education sector and developed in association with the content of the exhibitions.

However, the primary purpose served by permanent exhibitions is that they represent the core themes, collections and key objects for which a museum is known and on which it builds its reputation. Permanent exhibitions at the Powerhouse Museum were emblematic of the visitor experience that made it so popular with the public and ensured its success among its peers both in Australia and internationally.

This background sets the scene for the demolition of the long-term exhibitions that remained when the Museum closed – contrary to the Minister's promise - in February 2024.

Demolition of these exhibitions began as early as February 2021. The following month, angle grinders were being used to cut up showcase frames in the former *Transport* exhibition, showering unprotected aircraft still on display with metal swarf (see image 1 over).

Since then, every vestige of the former permanent exhibitions has been demolished and removed, including the celebrated *Steam Revolution* exhibition.

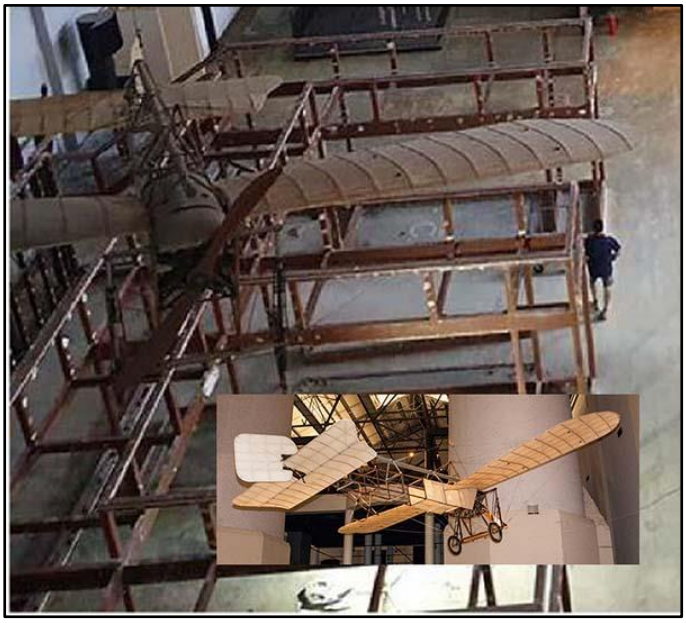

IMAGE 1: The Museum's rare 1914 Bleriot monoplane covered in metal swarf and other debris from the hasty demolition of the steel showcase frames in the former Transport exhibition, Powerhouse Museum, March 2021. Inset: The Bleriot prior to the demolition. *(Photo: Tom Lockley)*

Deskilling of professional staff

Another paper submitted to this Inquiry by the Powerhouse Museum Alliance details the deskilling of the professional staff of the Museum over the past 20 years and their inexorable replacement by the current CEO with new staff who have no experience relevant to the repurposed vacant positions. Instead, these replacements have contemporary arts backgrounds and generally have had no experience working in museums.

Transport and power technologies are two of the strengths of the Museum's collection. It is therefore reasonable to expect that the Museum would appoint specialist curators to be responsible for these fields, especially given the increasing importance of renewable energy into the future.

The exhibition teams responsible for the development of the *Transport* and *Steam Revolution* exhibitions (1985-88) (see images 2 and 3) were led by specialist curators (3 in Transport, 1 in *Steam Revolution*) who were supported by other specialist staff such as education officers, conservators and researchers over a 3½ year development time from concept to opening. Even allowing for the time saving benefits of digital technologies that have proliferated since that time, the development time today for a new generation of exhibitions would still be at least 2½ years.
With a lack of appropriately skilled and experienced professional staff – especially curators - no wonder there has been reportedly no progress on developing new exhibitions for the Ultimo site. As asserted above, the proposed major changes to the configuration of the interior spaces of the former Powerhouse Museum demonstrate that the site's purpose is being completely changed. Even if new exhibitions were being planned and developed, none of the specialist curators in the transport and power technologies fields has been replaced. This typifies the situation across the overwhelming majority of former curatorial specialisations, so **how can the Museum possibly meet the Minister's commitment of May 2024 to 'create and present**, (on the Ultimo site), **'high quality, internationally leading museum exhibitions across the applied arts and applied sciences and featuring the Powerhouse Collection'?**

IMAGE 2: *Transport* exhibition in 2020 – demolished 2021-2025 and no replacement planned
(Photo: Andrew Grant)

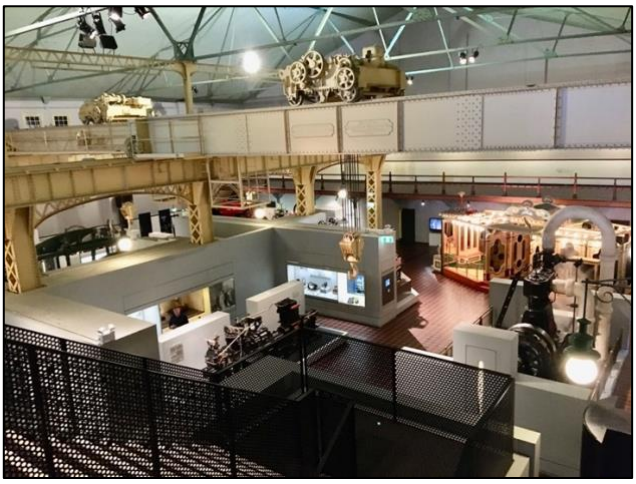

IMAGE 3: *Steam Revolution* exhibition in 2020 – demolished 2025 and no replacement planned.
(Photo: Andrew Grant)

This catastrophic deskilling of the Museum's professional staff helps to explain why there would have been little or no resistance to the CEO's *tabula rasa* approach that has resulted in the demolition of the permanent exhibitions and the interior structures of the Powerhouse Museum: The CEO had/has no appreciation for, knowledge about or respect for the themed exhibitions, the collections or their integral relationship with the architecture of the buildings that comprised the Powerhouse Museum. In simple terms and, as a whole, **the senior management and professional cohort of the Museum have such a knowledge and skills deficit in what is required to 'revitalise' the Museum that they have little idea what they were entrusted with to realistically attempt this task. This has provided the opportunity, at the CEO's instigation, for the Government, the Museum's Trustees and the CEO to preside over an act of cultural vandalism, namely, to erase all trace of the Powerhouse Museum and replace it with an indulgent and extravagantly expensive vanity project that converts a once highly respected museum into a venue for performers and contemporary arts practitioners.**

In this context, how can meaningful and appropriate knowledge transfer, mentoring and succession planning [refer term of reference (e)] take place? Those who are appointed to positions that were once related to the collection, including a list of at least 36 curatorial positions in decorative arts, science and technology and social history and many materials-based specialist conservators , would be compounding the issue if they were to mentor others with knowledge and skills outside the Museum's remit.

In his on-line column in January 2024, highly respected Arts critic John McDonald expressed a particularly scathing view of the politicians who have supported the destructive course of the Powerhouse Museum

over the past decide. His words apply to all those who have given their support to *or done nothing to stop or spoken out against* the current regime:

‘Culturally, they are a bunch of barbarians who show no understanding of what is being lost, and no desire to find out’.[10]

Andrew Grant

former curator, Powerhouse Museum

Positions held:
Assistant Curator Transport and Engineering (1980)
Curator, Transport and Engineering (1980-1984)
Curator of Transport (1984-1988)
Group Leader, Bringing People Together exhibitions (1984-88)
Senior Curator, Transport (1988-2012)
Acting Manager, Collection Research and Development (1995-96)
and
Transport Heritage Consultant (2013-present)

[10] Refer https://www.johnmcdonald.net.au/2024/newsletter-524/