Submission No 78

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

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SUBMISSION TO PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO.6 – TRANSPORT AND THE ARTS

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

RELEVANT TO TERMS OF REFERENCE:

(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
(i) the impact of budget and organisational decisions on services and programs across metropolitan and regional New South Wales.

STATEMENT

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

The Powerhouse Museum operates under the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences Act 1945 No.31. 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

The Museum was founded in 1880 following the success of the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition held on the site that is now the Royal Botanic Gardens. The Exhibition was the initiative of then Colonial Secretary Sir Henry Parkes who was inspired by Britain's The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations which opened in London's Crystal Palace in May 1851. Housed in the Garden Palace Exhibition Building, the Museum was destroyed when fire broke out in 1882.

In 1893, the Museum was established as the Technological Museum in Harris St Ultimo under the Minister for Public Instruction. The Museum had a state-wide role with branches in Albury, Bathurst, Newcastle, Broken Hill, Maitland and Goulburn.

In 1988, the Museum opened as the Powerhouse Museum - an award-winning architectural and museological transformation of the former Ultimo Power House site. The Museum's exhibitions and programs on site won numerous awards as did the Museum's programs delivered throughout NSW, Australia and the world. Over the 36 years since opening in Ultimo in 1988, the Museum has attracted more than 20 million visitors to the Ultimo site and to its offsite programs.

The foundational role of the Museum as an educational institution reaching a state-wide audience informed the Museum's collecting, exhibitions and educational programs up until the last few years when non-museum professionals were appointed to leadership and senior roles.

Now, despite continuing public protest and objections over the last decade or so to both Liberal and Labor governments' and the Museum's Trust's and senior management's plans, the Powerhouse Museum's mission and purpose continue to be ignored by these vested interests. These players have no respect for, nor understanding of, the Powerhouse Museum as an internationally and nationally respected museum of applied arts and sciences.

In responding to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, especially (e), (f) and (i), following is a brief account of a GIPA request I made on 13 March 2023. Under the Government Access and Information Public Access) Act 2009, I applied for information about damage to and/or visitor interference with Museum objects on display and in transit in the Powerhouse Museum. This was prompted by reports to me and to colleagues, of unacceptable levels of risk and damage to the Collection. In particular, we were concerned by the inadequacies of exhibition display methods, including the lack of showcases and barriers and, the lowering of the Catalina, Frigate Bird II to around a metre from the floor.

As evidenced in these reports, the Museum's collection objects were vulnerable to damage because the Museum's management failed to manage risk inherent in the custodianship and display of the Collection. The CEO did not replace, nor indeed increase the numbers and range of specialist, experienced curators and other professional staff knowledgeable about the Collection and its management and display according to museum professional standards.

For example, the former Curator of Aviation argued strongly that the Museum's Catalina, Frigate Bird II, should not be dismantled, lowered and removed. However, when he left the Museum, he was not replaced. The Catalina has subsequently been subject to unacceptable risk after being lowered and then removed from exhibition in the Museum and transported by road to a non-museum standard hangar at the Historic Aircraft Restoration Society's facility at Albion Park. This was despite objections by the family of the aircraft's donor, the Catalina's former owner and pilot, Capt. P G Taylor, both to the display conditions in the museum when lowered and to the removal of the aircraft from the Museum.

The Powerhouse Museum's CEO, Lisa Havilah, engaged the services of a leading legal firm, Herbert Smith Freehills to resist and delay the Museum's response to my GIPA request which resulted in my GIPA request being referred by the CEO to NCAT. I would be interested to know how much it has cost the taxpayer for the Powerhouse CEO to delay providing information requested under the GIPA Act.

I then had to engage SBA Law for legal advice and representation, at a discounted cost of $8,250 in order to receive the information I requested under the GIPA Act.

As former Deputy Director of the Museum with 30 years experience at the Museum, firstly as a curator and then department head, it was clear that the CEO's approach to exhibition presentation minimised the use of showcases and effective barriers and, the suspension/display of objects beyond people's reach. All these are standard exhibition methods used in professionally run museums to protect Museum objects. Hence the importance of my request as the safety and security of the collection whether on display, in storage or in transit is a primary responsibility of the CEO.

In the process of pursuing my GIPA request, I also sought the opinion of the Information Privacy Commissioner who commented on the CEO's response to my GIPA request and said that the Museum's/CEO's refusal of access was not justified. (see attached).

With advice from SBA Law, the involvement of NCAT - New South Wales Civil and Administrative Tribunal at the Museum CEO's instigation, resulted in me receiving a number of records of visitor interference with MAAS collection objects on display, and of damage to collection objects in transit, after I provided reasons to NCAT why it was in the public interest to provide the documents I had requested.

The most pertinent to this paper are two records: Object Touching Summary 2022 and Object Touching Summary 2023. These documents are attached.

As an illustration of the threats to objects on display due to the CEO's policy of open display and no barriers, these documents record that, after the Catalina, Frigate Bird II, was lowered to within 1 metre from the floor, in the period from 17 October 2022 to 15 March 2023 - (the actual records cover 157 days), the Catalina was 'touched' by visitors 4,011 times.

In fact, in one week, from 16 January to 22 January 2023, Visitor Service Officers recorded 520 instances of 'Visitors Touching' the Catalina.

In a professionally run museum, any touching of objects by visitors is mitigated by display in showcases and/or by the use of protective, effective barriers, and/or object installation out of reach, as any such interaction can damage museum objects. The Catalina was, from the Powerhouse Museum's opening in 1988, suspended out of reach as the centrepiece of an impressive display of significant aircraft. This breathtaking display was able to be viewed by the public from several different height viewpoints in the Boiler Hall.

The Imperial War Museum at Duxford in the UK has a magnificent collection of military aircraft on display, suspended and on the floor, as highlighted in a recent television program. In that program, the conservators made it very plain that no visitors are allowed to touch the fuselage of the airplanes - in fact, nor are the Museum's conservation staff who must wear gloves when doing their regular cleaning and checking of the aircraft.

Accordingly I have no confidence in the Museum's statement that the Catalina is not damaged as, since being lowered, it was subjected to an unacceptable level of visitor touching and interaction, despite what I am sure were the best efforts of the museum's professional staff, including the visitor service officers, to supervise its safety in a very difficult context of open display, in arm's reach with minimal barriers.

As the Object Touching Summaries, 2022 and 2023 demonstrate, the high incidence of visitor interference required that risk management plans and strategies for the Catalina and for the collection objects on display needed review and improvement. Experienced and knowledgeable staff would appreciate that the Catalina and other exhibits were vulnerable when displayed within arm's reach and without appropriate barriers or showcases. Minimisation of these significant risks is key to a professional and well managed MUSEUM. Under the current leadership and management, professional museum standards are being ignored.

Attached is a paper, *Threats to and Removal of Industrial Heritage at the Powerhouse Museum, Ultimo as at 5 September 2022. Extract, J.Sanders et al.* prepared by myself and former colleagues after the dangerous and destructive demolition from March to June 2021, of much of the magnificent and popular Transport exhibition, a much loved exhibition in the Boiler Hall alongside *Space, Beyond this World*, also now removed. This paper underscores the lack of

museum professional leadership at the Powerhouse Museum which, in my view, has been and still is putting the Museum and its priceless collection at unacceptable risk.

And now, the Museum has been emptied of all the objects which were on display, including the priceless 1793 Boulton & Watt Beam engine. The CEO took this action despite Industrial Heritage and museum experts advising that it would be an unacceptable risk to ever move the Boulton & Watt from its bespoke installation where it was operated by steam for the public to see. This world treasure which represents the beginning of the Industrial Revolution is now hidden away in a store at Castle Hill – not operating under steam as it did since it was built – as it did for crowds to witness in the Powerhouse Museum.

The Catalina is now at HARS Aviation Museum at Albion Park in a non air-conditioned environment near the coast - a hangar which is not bird proof so there have been informal reports of bird droppings found on the fuselage. The hangar is also a workshop and Avgas is stored there as reported by Dr Lindsay Sharp, Powerhouse Museum Founding Director after attending a recent function there. And the recent tragic fatal aircraft crash occurred in close proximity to this hangar which is adjacent to the airstrip. HARS is widely respected in aviation heritage but the Powerhouse Museum's Catalina, Frigate Bird II is NOT in professional museum standard storage – nor is it readily accessible on public display for the people of metropolitan and regional NSW - and beyond to experience, to be educated by and to enjoy.

Indeed, if the Labor Government's current destructive plans for the Powerhouse Museum are realised – at great cost and risk – there will be no Powerhouse Museum for the people of New South Wales – yet the Museum is held in trust for the people of NSW.

No civilised society destroys a museum.

Jennifer Sanders
M.ICOMOS
Former Deputy Director, Powerhouse Museum
24 November 2025