

## *My objection to the Parramatta project proposal to relocate the Powerhouse Museum*

1.1 I was the Director of the Powerhouse Museum between 2000-2007. Prior to then I was the inaugural Director of the Australian National Maritime Museum 1989-2000, and subsequently Director of Royal Museums Greenwich, 2007-19, one of Britain's national museums. I was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 2001 and awarded a CBE in UK in 2020 for services to museums and maritime heritage.

1.2 The Powerhouse Museum is one of the world's great museums, located in a magnificent, award-winning heritage building in Ultimo that is ideally suited to house and display the Museum's incredible array of collections, especially is magnificent (and massive) transport related items. Moreover, the building's original purpose supplying power to Sydney's new electric tram network is uniquely linked to its present usage, displaying some of the world's best transport collections. It would be a travesty to lose this link and down-size the museum by moving it into a smaller display space at Parramatta.

1.3 It is often stated that the Powerhouse Museum is directly comparable to the V&A Museum in London. This comparison is unfair – the extraordinary breadth of the Powerhouse Museum's collections is comparable with the original South Kensington Museum (opened 1857) whose collections were later split to become the V&A Museum AND the Science Museum. Thus, the Powerhouse is the antipodean equivalent of TWO of the world's finest museums. There are few museums anywhere in the world which possess such a breadth of collections and which display them in such appropriate conditions. To my mind, it would be crazy to spend vast sums of money building a new museum to relocate these treasures when their current home is perfectly suited for this function.

1.4 I well remember one wet Saturday afternoon during my time as the Powerhouse Museum's Director when I welcomed the leading British historian, Jenny Uglow, author of *The Lunar Men*, a brilliant history of the industrial revolution. As I led her past Loco No.1 and along the Wran Gallery towards the Boulton & Watt beam engine, mesmerisingly whirring backwards and forwards thanks to the specially installed steam plant in the Museum's basement, she broke into tears. When I inquired why, Jenny told me it was the first time she had ever seen one of Boulton & Watts' primary engines operating under steam power. Similar engines in UK are either static or (in the case of the Science Museum in London) electrically driven. Such is the quality of the exhibitions housed in the current Ultimo building.

1.5 Everything I have heard suggests that a new Parramatta building will fall far short of the display standards at the Ultimo building. I have even read that the new building will not meet standard international requirements to accept loans from other major museums. I am incredulous that this might be the case. The Powerhouse Museum has staged many the finest exhibitions ever to be shown in Sydney including, during my directorship, *1000 Years of the Olympic Games – treasures of ancient Greece* (in association with the Hellenic Ministry of Culture), *Leonardo da Vinci: the Codex Leicester – the notebook of a genius* (in association with Bill & Melinda Gates), *Star Wars: the magic of myth* (in association with Lucas Films and the Smithsonian Institution), *Greek Treasures from the Benaki Museum*, and *The Great Wall of China – dynasties, dragons and warriors* (in association with the National Museum of China). Most of these remarkable exhibitions were conceived, curated and designed by expert, highly talented Powerhouse Museum staff. It saddens me greatly to see this resource being stripped away.

1.6 New museums are notoriously difficult buildings to design, build and fitout as each project is unique in its form and content. Almost every major new museum project I know incurred significant overruns in cost and time. I recall in 1990, for example, when the Australian National Maritime Museum building was finally handed over after many months of delay caused by industrial action and wrangling between the Federal and NSW governments, the then NSW Premier, Nick Greiner, commented to me that he now looked forward to the new museum opening in 3 months or so. The Premier plainly had no sense of how much work is entailed fitting out a bespoke museum building and installing its myriad exhibitions, all of which are one-off creations. Our installation programme ran smoothly, and the museum officially opened just in time for Christmas 1991...considerably later than the Premier had first envisioned! Premier Berejiklian is deluding herself if she believes that the envisioned budget and construction/fitout/exhibition installation timetable for the proposed Parramatta building will not run well over current projections.

1.7 The risks of cost and time overruns are significantly magnified by the scale and fragility of many of the Museum's most prized objects. Lifting massive steam locomotives up several floors, dismantling and rebuilding the unique Central Station indicator board, and disassembling then re-rigging the largest plane suspended in a museum anywhere in the world are all 'red flag' projects which, I predict, will incur considerable overruns.

1.8 Aside from the powerful museological reasons to reject the proposal, it seems the height of folly to build a museum on a known flood plain which, along the way, necessitates the needless demolition of several historic buildings with powerful local resonance.

1.9 For all the reasons stated above, I strongly object to the proposed Parramatta move. If the government is determined to spend large sums of money on museum infrastructure, it would get much better value by allocating some of the proposed Parramatta project budget into rejuvenating the Powerhouse Museum on its Ultimo site (which has been left to deteriorate shockingly in recent years), and to commission the building of an appropriate new museum/cultural hub in Parramatta. Such a facility could draw on the collections of all the major NSW cultural institutions, thus adding to the State's cultural offering rather than needlessly moving one institution from one place to another (at huge expense).

Submission made by:

Dr Kevin Fewster CBE AM FRSA

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