

Grace Cochrane AM:

22 May, 2024

Feedback on Powerhouse Museum 'Revitalisation'

SSD-67588459 Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation – CSE Ref No. [P-960876]

I OBJECT TO THE CURRENT DESIGN PROPOSAL AND PUBLISHED PLANS

I have read on-line the full Environmental Impact Statement, and the Architectural and Urban Design Report. And on 18 May, I attended a consultation meeting organised by Aurecon, with architects. At this information event, the printouts of summarised Factsheets (also on line), photographs and building model, were available for inspection and discussion.

Documentation for these appears to have been drawn together by the Powerhouse management, Infrastructure NSW, the architects, and event organiser, engineering and infrastructure advisory company, Aurecon.

However, this opportunity was poorly attended. Reasons?

- It is not known who provided the ill-conceived brief to the designers and planners, or what it demanded, and this is frustrating in offering responses.
- Awareness that the proposed functions and subsequent design changes do not reflect the achieved purpose and 30+ year scope of the Powerhouse Museum on this site.
- Former experiences where submissions and concerns were not documented or responded to – or followed up! The plan appears already in place and non-changeable?
- Disappointment and disagreement with all reports to date about the changes to the site that destroy former award-winning adaptive reuse changes, vastly reduce available exhibition space and introduce other uses for these spaces, despite many existing audience engagements?

Background of concerns:

I am a former senior curator of Decorative Arts and Design at the museum, with a particular knowledge of contemporary practice. For over 9 years, informed, experienced and supportive former staff and audiences for the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences have suffered from government proposals (initiated/supported by PHM management and Trustees, and former arts minister) for eg. 'Lyric Theatre and Fashion Hub'; 'Fashion and Design Museum', or a 'Creative Industries Hub', showing little demonstrated acknowledgement of appreciating the unique combination in this Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, of science and technology, decorative arts and design and social history.

In the *Fact Sheet: Design*, it is noted now that: 'The museum would continue to deliver an applied arts and sciences program, presenting exhibitions that showcase the Powerhouse Collection, international exclusive exhibitions and programs that support the creative industries.'

But there is no published evidence of exactly what those programs will be, or how they will be presented. This should be absolutely necessary for the designers. (Compare detailed published outline of content and planning process in 1984 that clearly identified content groupings and themes).

The award-winning 1988 buildings – and Harwood building – are being considered to be included as part of the museum curtilage by the Heritage Council. They, and the adaptive reuse of original Powerhouse buildings, should not be altered and mutilated in the way described. A state museum of national significance, such as the PHM in Ultimo, is internationally known for its evolving and inter-related collection acquired over time, the stories that lie behind individual objects and the wider

themes that encompass them, and the ways that the understandings of those aspects can inform and inspire our lives and practices now and in the future.

As an example, I viewed in the 1990s at the V&A Museum in London that it noted on its wall panels, in main themes and subthemes including: 'What is this? Who wanted it? Who made it? How did they do it? What did it mean then? And what does it mean now?' With these provisions, audiences of all ages and interests can then work their way through understandings of the collection, and this was originally a strong factor in the Powerhouse Museum.

The PHM was immediately acclaimed in 1988 for presenting exhibitions in this thematic way, moving on from 'display storage' in an award-winning buildings applauded for their adaptive reuse.

However, the current CEO has demonstrated a strong tendency to ignore such backgrounds, minimising or dismissing the use of theme panels, and often even presenting exhibitions without labels (or so small and low down you can't read them), while providing little clear sequence through the display. Sometimes even exhibition titles are hard to find. With a background in contemporary art centres, the CEO tends to see exhibitions as 'art experiences' instead of engaging, mainly collection-based, visual displays with informative narratives.

Over time, she and former directors have also developed some exhibition spaces as very dark rabbit burrows, where it is easy to get lost and not see or read anything significant about the displays, or find your way from one to the other. Compare this with other well-regarded museums, where inspiring information is accessible, and display lighting is appropriate while also including concerns for conservation. Will this confusing approach continue?

And consultation? In a conference talk in Adelaide in 2021, the CEO said: 'I have never been a supporter of asking people what they want or community consultation.' (*Lisa Havilah, Undoing the Institution, Adelaide, 16 June 2021*)

Comments regarding content:

From its opening in the new location in 1988, the Powerhouse Museum had always provided access to the collection through:

- **permanent changing exhibitions** (across time) for each broad collection area ('changing', meaning subthemes can be exchanged for related others from time to time)
- These provide contexts for **temporary related** exhibitions from the collection, or commissioned and touring exhibitions. They can be historical or contemporary.
- And there have always been **related events** such as conferences, group visits, education, engagement with related associations and institutions across all fields...
- In recent years there has been a significant **loss of professional curatorial and other staff**, who well understand the different aspects of the collection, and are experienced in exhibition development. Who is available now to work appropriately on all exhibitions?
- It is noted that the EIS Fact sheet says that: '**Exhibition spaces are designed to present a diverse and broad range of exhibitions, performance and events** with infrastructure to respond to contemporary museum practices and utilisation,' it is increasingly clear that the few remaining large exhibition areas may well be intended as **entertainment areas with limited pop-up exhibitions**.
- For a list of exhibitions from 1988-2018 see: <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/about-the-powerhouse-museum/powerhouse-museum-an-exhibition-archive/>
- It has been assessed by PMA colleagues that 'there is around **a 75% decrease** on the Powerhouse Museum's dedicated exhibition spaces designed to accommodate exhibitions of collections of all sizes in a range of flexible spaces over five levels.'... 'And after the demolition of all but three of the museum's exhibition spaces, there will be no space to show applied and decorative arts, design,

social history or science and technology in association with the Museum's highly reputed interactive exhibits.'

- Also of great concern, is the destruction of so many carefully researched and appropriately planned and carried out adaptations to existing buildings, designed in order to 'function as a museum displaying vast collections across relevant subjects', ... and where 'heritage decisions judiciously balanced industrial heritage considerations with the primary needs of a museum collection and of permanent thematic displays.' (LSharp 2024)

Questions and concerns:

1. The award-winning 1988 buildings – and historic Harwood building – are being considered to be included as part of the museum curtilage by the Heritage Council. They, and the adapted reuse of original Powerhouse buildings, should not be altered and mutilated in some of the ways described (including chopping back the front of the Wran building).

2. The three main exhibition areas, with 3-storey voids above the ground floor, plus a fourth that is mainly an auditorium, raise some key issues:

- The overall exhibition space appears to have been reduced from:

1988: GFA (Gross Floor Area) of 42,594m² in 1988 with **25 exhibition spaces for a total of 21,800m²**, to

2024: GFA of 15,843m² (-63%) and **exhibition spaces to 4 for a total of 6,000m² (c.-75%)**

This includes the Switch House which had also opened with three floor levels for exhibitions; none to be there now.

- It appears that apart from the few large objects mentioned (engines, aeroplanes, etc...) there is a possibility, given the recent exhibition tendencies, that these large spaces will be mainly entertainment and pop-up display areas, and not for permanent-changing and related temporary, exhibitions.

- Do they remain as single large spaces, or is there provision to subdivide them? For what?

- Will there be one space for each major collection area? (S&T, DAD, Soc H)

- But not all the broad collection needs to have three-floor-high voids for all exhibitions.

- So is this EIS claim really possible? 'Provide exhibition spaces that are flexible and adaptable to ensure that the museum is capable of showcasing the Powerhouse's significant Collection and attracting internationally significant exhibitions; Ensure exhibition spaces have significant internal programmable volumes to meet requirements of present and future exhibitions.'

What kinds of exhibition displays will there be, in these vastly reduced overall spaces? Where is the proposed content?

3. As well, the mezzanines should stay, to provide more opportunities for important smaller permanent and temporary collection-based exhibitions. In our experience, these locations also provide enjoyable aerial views and places for audience engagement. Most museums have such effective multi-layered floors, and they have had a significant role in the Powerhouse Museum. And they require floor-plans that are easily followed, unlike now.

4. Bringing what appears to be most of the 'behind-the-scenes' staff working space into the new and existing buildings, also takes up more exhibition space (including the loading dock, which already exists in the Harwood building next door, with other exhibition preparation sites).

5. This move also appears to herald the future sale of the Harwood building, which is arguably a necessary inclusion in the Heritage Council's current proposal as part of the museum curtilage (but not part of this EIS project). It includes necessary workshop and office spaces (and formerly collection storage). 'There are no collection working spaces, no conservation, no exhibition fabrication capacity and the need for more admin and operation space is because the Harwood building will be divested.' And the connection distance with Castle Hill makes transfer of this aspect

unworkable. (NOTE: at a consultation meeting on 27 May it was reported that the Govt has guaranteed maintaining Harwood building as part of PHM. Not public or certain yet?)

6. The PHM has always maintained close contact with students of all ages, as well as professional makers, designers, historians, collectors, volunteers and related organisations, and has provided places and occasions for involving them. But, regarding use of space, does this really warrant now providing student accommodation, when other places are available nearby?

7. With so much funding being provided for these very inappropriate changes, what commitments are made to fund the future staffing (with experienced professionals) and program development? The CEO has been cited as saying to PSA that there would be 'new staff'. From where? To do what? With what experience?

Key issue: So where is the necessary underpinning rationale and program?

While content programming is not the responsibility of the architects and design team, they have presumably (and secretly) been given a 'concept brief' which identified proposed programming and content directions for them to follow. (The same concern applies to the Parramatta site).

However, the proposed functions and subsequent design changes do not reflect the purpose and 30+ year scope of the Powerhouse Museum on this site.

It has been clear to everyone who has worked in, and known the PHM over decades, that whoever provided the team with information to underpin their plans does not appreciate the real purpose of this museum that is based on a distinctive, and evolving historical collection, such as this one.

We have lost essential space, structural elements, purpose, staff, audiences – and appropriate programs and procedures do not appear to exist! Demolition of award-winning elements cannot be accepted.

How can the designers react appropriately to this brief?

So at this stage, my Feedback is directed to reviewing the origins of that concept brief and its rationale (never made public) that sits behind the very inappropriate design and future function itself.

I VERY STRONGLY DISAPPROVE OF THE CURRENT (SECRET?) CONCEPT BRIEF AND PROPOSED MASTERPLAN FOR LOCATIONS, CONTENT, PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT OF THE EXHIBITION PROGRAM AND ITS RELATED INFORMATION AND EVENTS.

WHAT IS THE BRIEF? WHO WROTE IT? WHAT DO THEY REALLY KNOW?

IT MUST BE TOTALLY REVIEWED AND REVISED BEFORE ANY APPROPRIATE CHANGES CAN BE MADE.

I WOULD LIKE THESE ISSUES TO BE THE SUBJECT OF ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK.

Read more in:

<https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/>

<https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/news-chronology-2023-on/>

For news, papers, enquiries, reports and submissions on these concerns.

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