



## DESIGN 5

A R C H I T E C T S

### POWERHOUSE ULTIMO REVITALISATION SUBMISSION IN RESPONSE TO SSD APPLICATION AS AMENDED IN RESPONSE TO SUBMISSIONS

6 October 2024

I write on behalf of Design 5 – Architects to **OBJECT to the ‘Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation’ proposal**, as amended in response to submissions, presently on public exhibition and under consideration for SSD approval.

I note that this amended submission is substantially the same as the original SSD application, with only minor changes. My original comments in our firm’s letter of objection dated 30 May 2024 to the original application remain completely valid for this amended proposal.

The main points of my objection are set out below.

#### **Flawed Amended Heritage Impact Statement and destruction of cultural significance**

- There is a fundamental flaw in the assessment of significance prepared by Curio Projects as articulated in the Amended Heritage Impact Statement (AHIS). Like the Heritage Impact Statement that accompanied the original SSD application, there is a very misguided and incomplete understanding of the original design intent or significance of the 1980s Wran additions and installations. This 1980s work gained considerable national and international recognition for its design, function and cultural connections with the use of the surviving power house buildings on the site and the history and evolution of the museum itself – aspects of the existing buildings and recently removed exhibitions that are considerably understated in the AHIS leading to a very distorted assessment of the impacts of the amended application. The AHIS notes on the Wran Building:
  - *the current ‘lightweight’ structure is not of itself considered to be significant fabric;*
  - *the fabric of the Wran Building has been heavily modified over time to accommodate the ongoing and evolving needs to the museum including, for example, the addition of dark tinting of the external glazing for light control;*
- In regard to the first dot point, the Curio assessment fails to acknowledge that both the materials and forms chosen by Lionel Glendenning for the Wran Building addition were deliberate references to the origins of the MAAS in the Garden Palace in the Domain in the Galleria and to the lightweight arched canopy structures over railway stations in the larger arch roofed space

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(originally used for touring exhibitions). They were also very appropriate as modern additions to the pre-existing masonry structures – a philosophical approach to adaptive reuse that was ahead of its time in 1988 and is still considered best practice in Australia and internationally. Both the materials AND the forms are significant and interdependent. This should still allow changes but these must retain and respect these currently misrepresented heritage values. Changes proposed to the Wran Building in this current proposal include its unnecessary truncation to the south, its glazed cladding replaced with masonry, its internal steel structure either removed, or where retained, encased in masonry to effectively entomb and thus ‘erase’ it from the identity of the Sulman Award winning museum. This approach is contrary to Burra Charter principles and best conservation practice.

- The second dot point quoted above fails to acknowledge that the modifications externally and internally, while mostly unsympathetic, have been comparatively minor and reversible. The removal of dark tinting to windows can be done quickly and inexpensively. The deterioration in the external fabric has not been the glass or the steel structure, it has been the direct result of what I have personally observed as a deliberate lack of investment in basic maintenance – now used as a justification for major changes and complete replacement of otherwise sound external and internal linings. This goes against every principle of sustainability, both culturally and materially.
- We note that as in the first SSD application, there is no Conservation Management Plan included in the exhibited documents for this amended SSD. For any site listed on the SHR, it is normal practice to require a full CMP be prepared and submitted, even in draft form with the application as part of the public review process, particularly when the application includes changes that are as extensive as those proposed here. This has not happened here.
- I noted in our earlier submission that we (Design 5) were commissioned to complete the earlier Curio draft CMP specifically to more fully understand the Powerhouse Museum’s cultural heritage values and were then abruptly removed from the project once we articulated these values to the museum’s executive team. In our opinion, this earlier flawed understanding of the heritage values has been deliberately retained to support the proposed destruction of the cultural heritage values of the Powerhouse Museum as it was known until its recent closure and the proposed changes in this amended SSD are nothing short of government supported and publicly funded cultural vandalism of an important and widely acclaimed cultural institution.

### **Deception and lack of transparency in process**

- The same flawed assessment referred to above has been deliberately retained and used to justify the proposed ‘heritage revitalisation’ project as well as the now gazetted site-specific exemptions under the recently expanded and revised State Heritage Register (SHR) listing. These site-specific exemptions will allow many of the major and inappropriate changes proposed without further scrutiny but were not disclosed when the proposal to expand the SHR listing was put on public exhibition. All media releases at the time suggested the expanded and revised listing would provide some protection for the museum, its buildings and its use and we, the public, believed that may be the outcome. However, with these 13 site-specific exemptions being withheld from the public exhibition process and only revealed once they were gazetted, the opposite has been achieved.
- This deliberate lack of transparency is both a failure and a deceit of proper process that affects a publicly owned institution. It is my understanding that this lack of transparency may be a breach of the Museum Act.
- One of the public consultation sessions I attended lacked sufficient information to enable a considered comment or response by those attending. This allowed the consultation ‘box’ to be ticked, without having any meaningful consultation. Key information was withheld or deliberately misleading to try to convince the public that the museum’s use and heritage values would be retained and enhanced.

- The proposed amended SSD application will result in the erasure of the institution presently designed as the 'Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences' through:
  - removal of the existing range of differently scaled spaces to appropriately present the extraordinary diversity of the collection, each exhibition space deliberately overlooking or leading into other spaces and aspects of the collection, inviting exploration and surprise.
  - Erasure of all evidence of the original Powerhouse Museum, its qualities, attributes and functionality, as well as its innate, intrinsic and significant relationship to its collection and exhibits. In the 1980s-2020 museum, the significance of the original power station structures as the home of the MAAS collection, supported and strengthened the significance and meaning of the collection and exhibits and vice versa. This connection was particularly strong in the sections on the evolution of steam power and transport
  - De-coupling of the Harwood Building from the function and support of the museum, with relocation off-site of the extensive back-of-house facilities for conserving and storing the collection, preparing and constructing exhibits.
- Expert advice has been deliberately ignored or silenced throughout the development of the current proposal. Lionel Glendenning – the original architect, Lindsay Sharp – the original museum director, as well as independent heritage assessments by Architectural Projects (2002) and Design 5 (2022) have either been very selectively quoted or completely ignored. Public sentiment has also been ignored.

### **Reduction in exhibition space**

Comparing the exhibition space available at the Ultimo site prior to its recent closure, with what is now proposed under this 'heritage revitalisation', there is clearly a considerable reduction in exhibition area overall particularly with the removal of the various mezzanine levels in the Boiler House, Turbine Hall and Wran building, and the transformation of the Galleria space into a grand staircase.

**In conclusion, it is our opinion that this SSD proposal (as amended in response to submissions) is totally inappropriate for the reasons stated above and should not be approved.**



Alan Croker

Director and Principal

Design 5 – Architects Pty Ltd

7 October 2024