

From: Grace Cochrane AM  
*curator, writer, consultant*  
B.Ed, MFA, PhD, D.Litt  
Summer Hill, NSW 2130,  
Australia

**POWERHOUSE ULTIMO REVITALISATION: SSD-67588459  
RESPONSE TO: EXHIBITION OF  
AMENDED STATE SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENT APPLICATION  
(SSDA) and RESPONSE TO SUBMISSIONS REPORT  
3 September, 2024**

**I OBJECT TO MAJOR ISSUES IN THE AMENDED SSDA, AND THE  
RESPONSE TO SUBMISSIONS REPORT**

I worked at the Powerhouse Museum from 1988 to 2005 (with a continuing project until 2007), as a curator, then senior curator, of decorative arts and design.

I have since maintained contact with hundreds of former professional colleagues, and local, national and international museum supporters, and have also worked with the Powerhouse Museum Alliance campaign group, managing its website from 2015: <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/>

This archive provides ten years of history of our campaign, and that of others, to keep the Powerhouse Museum as we remember it and want it to continue.

**1. Background of concerns:**

For almost 10 years, informed, experienced and supportive former staff and audiences of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences have suffered from government proposals (initiated/supported by PHM management and Trustees, and former arts minister) for replacing the existing museum with eg. 'Lyric Theatre and Fashion Hub', 'Fashion and Design Museum', or now a 'Creative Industries Hub'.

These proposals showed little demonstrated acknowledgement of appreciating the unique combination in this Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, of **science and technology, industry, decorative arts and design and social history**. Since reopening in the award-winning adaptive re-use of the Ultimo Powerhouse buildings in 1988, the Museum maintained an internationally recognised program of exhibitions, events, and experiences, focused on the evolving collection and its relationships between content areas, and past and present.

We were very glad to find that the new government would 'save' the site in Ultimo, but we still maintain great reservations about their 'broken promises' and the Museum's future role and program.

**2. Key reasons for objection: limited understanding**

Despite government inquiries, consultations, and other opportunities to

respond, and the current offer to submit comments regarding the Amended State Significant Development Application (SSDA), it is evident that – apart from actually keeping the buildings in Ultimo as part of the 'Museum' – that the plans for 'revitalisation' demonstrate that the revised plans for the Development Application still reflect extremely limited understanding by Planners of the long-acknowledged role of the Powerhouse Museum, as shown through their apparent totally inadequate knowledge of any proposed exhibition program and related events and the spaces required.

This confirms for me, and colleagues, that current managements of both the Museum and Infrastructure NSW have not shared their future purpose and program information with the planners – if there IS a clear purpose and program to share.

If they have shared it, it must be secretly filed (business case, cabinet in confidence?), but it remains evident that, despite their inconsistent media statements about future content and programs (ref. Ministers media release, Sept 2024), the management in fact, has very different views about the future role of the Museum in Ultimo, compared with its original purpose. They appear to be merely seeking spaces that will serve a completely different purpose, and that can be interpreted as potential pop-up arts experiences and entertainment, with very selected subject areas and little reference to the collection.

**Planners demonstrate no understanding at all about:**

- **Role:** What the role of the Museum has *always been and should remain*: to preserve and provide access to examples from the collection associated with science and technology, industry, decorative arts and design and social history, through continuing acquisition and exhibition over c.145 years.
- **Capital city presence:** That this is a highly significant state museum, with a unique combination of collection content and, as with other major museums, maintain its presence in the *state capital city* – not in a regional council area which deserves its own history museum.
- **Content and Display:** What *range of exhibition spaces are necessary* to provide audiences with the opportunity to experience the breadth of the collection together with professionally supplied background information about what, who, how, why and meaning then and now. These were very appropriately provided when the Museum reopened in 1988. With the exhibition space now reduced by 75% it is clearly not to be 'a museum'.
- **Shared sites:** The MAAS has included a number of associated sites (eg. Observatory, and others) but the Ultimo site **MUST** remain as the key centre for the Museum, and **MUST NOT** be reduced to an entertainment sideline to the 'Parramatta Powerhouse' which should not be the key site, and which also forecasts a very controversial identification of its entertainment role, rather than a museum identity.
- **Ultimo site:** It is reassuring that the significant *Harwood building* is now included in the 'curtilage' of the Museum, but it is totally unclear what its future role will be, and there are concerns that it will be taken over by such as the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) or others in the 'creative industries hub'.

- It is concerning that the 1988 award-winning *Wran building* will have its front façade cut back, and the original mezzanine removed. Exhibitions included the permanent changing exhibition, *Inspired: Design across Time, 2005* (see photos below), which provided a context for related exhibitions. Note that the changes made after *Inspired's* unexpected removal in the mid-2000s, cut the visual access from Harris Street, and the opportunity for major exhibitions, by inserting confusing dark spaces with limited viewing capacity and information.
- Also of great concern, is the destruction of so many carefully researched and appropriately planned and carried out adaptations to existing buildings, 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)

### 3. Exhibition requirements and content:

The PHM was immediately and internationally acclaimed in 1988 for moving on from 'display storage' to providing significant contextual information as part of engaging exhibitions, in award-winning buildings applauded for their adaptive reuse. From its opening in the new location in 1988, the Powerhouse Museum has always provided access to the collection through:

#### Access:

- **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...
- **However:** It is noted that the EIS Fact sheet state 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.*' But it is increasingly clear that the few remaining large exhibition areas are 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/>

#### Staff:

- 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?

#### Space:

- 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.

#### **Collection context:**

- The current CEO has demonstrated a strong tendency to ignore providing contextual backgrounds within exhibitions, 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 developed many 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 (eg. recently awarded Chau Chak Wing Museum), where inspiring information is accessible, and display lighting is appropriate, while including concerns for conservation. Will this confusing approach continue?
- And consultation? In a conference talk in Adelaide in 2021, the CEO made no secret of her disdain for consultation. 'I have never been a supporter of asking people what they want or community consultation.' (*Lisa Haviilah, Undoing the Institution, Adelaide, 16 June 2021*)

#### **4: Continuing concerns:**

- **1.** The award-winning 1988 buildings and the adapted reuse of original Powerhouse buildings, can be renovated, but should not be altered and mutilated in the way currently described.
- **2.** The three main exhibition areas, with 3-storey voids above the ground floor, plus a fourth that is mainly an auditorium (at a loss of existing theatres), raise some key issues: the overall exhibition space has reduced from: 1988: GFA (Gross Floor Area) of 42,594m<sup>2</sup> in 1988 with 25 *exhibition spaces for a total of 21,800m<sup>2</sup>*; to 2024: GFA of 15,843m<sup>2</sup> (- 63%) and *exhibition spaces to 4 for a total of 6,000m<sup>2</sup>* (c.-75%).
- It appears that apart from the few large objects mentioned (engines, aeroplanes, steam engine...) 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?
- Will there be one space for each major collection area?

- 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? And what content?
- **3.** As well, the main 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 (eg. the Asian Gallery above the *Inspired* exhibition, and Galleria). 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.** The Switch House had also opened with three floor levels for exhibitions; vastly reduced now.
  - **5.** Is it really necessary to commit to a row of shops on Harris Street instead of exhibition spaces?
  - **6.** The current plan also appears to herald the potential sale of the Harwood building, or takeover by UTS, despite its current inclusion in the curtilage.
  - **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'. Do they know enough about the Museum and its collection?

## **5: CONCLUSION: Key issue: Where is the necessary underpinning rationale and program?**

- While content programming is not the responsibility of the planners, architects and designers, they have presumably (and secretly) been given a 'concept brief' which identified proposed programming and content directions for them to follow. (Same concern applies to Parramatta site).
- However, if there is a business plan, 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 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 and planners react appropriately to this brief?

So at this stage, my Submission is directed to the origins of that development application and its rationale (never made public) that sits behind the very inappropriate design and future function itself. It must be stopped.

I VERY STRONGLY DISAPPROVE OF THE CURRENT (SECRET?) CONCEPT BRIEF AND PROPOSED PLAN 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 REJECTED 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/>

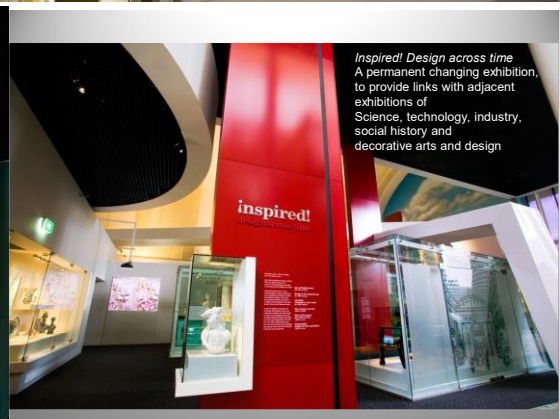
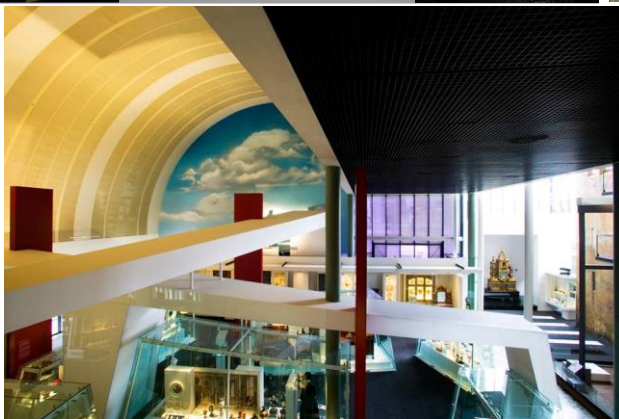
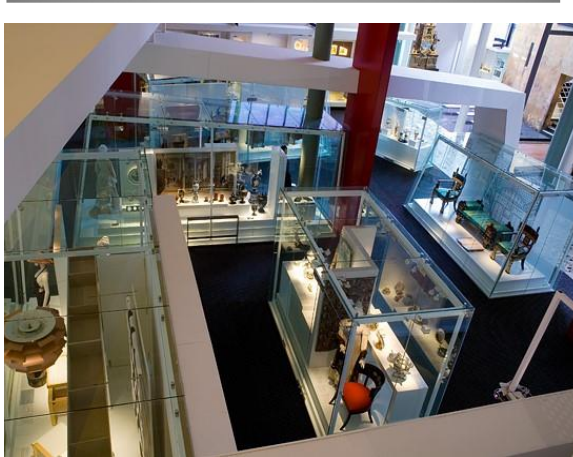
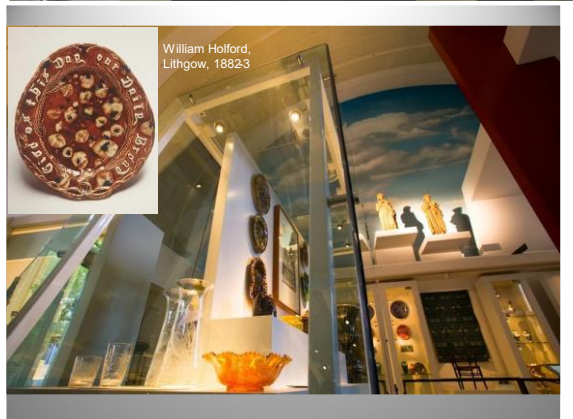
<https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/news-chronology-2023-on/>

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

**Below:** examples of 2005 'permanent changing' exhibition in the Wran building:







William Holford,  
Lithgow, 1882/3

*Inspired! Design across time*  
A permanent changing exhibition,  
to provide links with adjacent  
exhibitions of  
Science, technology, industry,  
social history and  
decorative arts and design