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## Re AGNSW Sydney Modern DA SSD 6471 3/11/17 Development Application and Environmental Impact Statement

I wish to object to this development application.

### The Promise and Value of Heritage Parklands

The proposed Sydney Modern development violates the basic promise of public parkland which is that it is held in trust for the quiet enjoyment of the whole community. The Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain parklands (RBG&D) are not vacant space or a development opportunity. They are visited by thousands of people every day; many, many more people than go to the gallery. The gardens of are outstanding value for the community in a city with increasing population density and where little new green space has been set aside to provide green lungs or recreational opportunities. All of the Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain are treasured by the community and have social value for the people of Sydney.

The fact that some of the parkland that the AGNSW is seeking to develop for Sydney Modern may be degraded is not relevant. The land still has value for its views, tree canopy, open space and as a green corridor. Even the former fuel bunker is valued and used as a rare parcel of flat land for recreation. In the future, a more enlightened set of trustees, and a more far sighted state government, may see the opportunity to improve the design and amenity of this land. Development on this land would prevent future enhancements that are more appropriate and sympathetic to this significant landscape, and which may offer greater public benefits.

A staggering 11,000 square metres and 140 trees will be destroyed in this development, including mature indigenous trees which are rare in the city. The value of the trees and the green landscape that the gallery will cover in concrete has not been recognised. No recognition is given to the environmental value of this landscape for wildlife, passive and active recreation, public health and community well-being, and green-air conditioning as a place that combats the heat sink of the city's concrete. The parkland the gallery intends to develop is heavily used, especially when the main part of the Domain is fenced off for an increasing number of special events.

It is appalling that the RBG Trust has said it has been co-operating with the AGNSW in the hope the Gardens will be compensated for the loss of the precious legacy the Trust is charged to manage and preserve for current and future generations. There can be **no meaningful compensation or offset** for covering such a significant landscape and a large area of parkland in concrete, further eroding the green legacy from our forebears. No roof top garden in the proposed gallery can compensate for the loss of mature trees and genuine open space.

Public parkland is by definition inalienable open space, held in trust from generation to generation, for the benefit of the whole community. No public park in Sydney should be considered a development opportunity or tradeable asset, let alone such a significant cultural landscape. And yet

we have seen increasing commercial development and land grabs of precious parks for housing, stadiums, schools, private golf clubs, toll roads and commercial enterprises. This has accelerated under the current government. If this development is approved in the most significant park and intact cultural landscape in Australia - it will set an appalling precedent. No park will be safe from unsolicited offers and development.

Sydney is a wealthy city. We can and must preserve intact all of the lands of the RBG and Domain for future generations. **This not a choice between developing a new gallery or preserving the parklands of the RBG&D.** As discussed below, the AGNSW has many site options for Sydney Modern. But a civilised society with a burgeoning population must preserve its parkland, especially its most significant historic gardens and cultural landscapes which have been public open space since European settlement.

### **Landscape and Visual Impacts**

*The Domain and Royal Botanic Gardens are a series of designed landscapes which substantially represent their spatial form established from 1792–1826. The Governors' Domain and Civic Precinct comprise an integrated cultural landscape of aesthetic significance with outstanding scenic qualities. ... The Royal Botanic Garden and the Domain form a landscape which demonstrates almost 200 years of landscape design, with two key British landscape practices—the Picturesque and the Gardenesque—adapted to the Australian landscape and soils, using many Australian species.*  
<http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/organisations/australian-heritage-council/national-heritage-assessments/governors-domain-and-civic-precinct-proposed-national-heritage-listing>

This remarkable cultural landscape is home to one of the oldest botanic gardens in the world, a cultural and education institution whose purpose is inextricably linked to the European exploration and settlement of Australia. Two peninsulas frame Farm Cove, providing stunning views of Sydney and the harbour. On the city side, the edge of the parklands along Macquarie St is defined by historic buildings of cultural, heritage and political significance. These buildings are mostly in their nineteenth century form, or in a sympathetic palette.

Sydney Modern violates this otherwise respectful design by plonking the development on the ridgeline in the heart of the parklands. The building is large, intrusive and out of character. It uses unsympathetic materials in an historic precinct and cultural landscape which is dotted with nineteenth century sandstone buildings (RBG gatehouses, AGNSW, Registrar Generals, the State Library, the Con and Government House). The landscape, topography and views in the RBG&D are central to its heritage values and significance, and these will be profoundly compromised should the development go ahead.

If approved, Sydney Modern will ruin the very significant beautiful views and approach to one of the main gateways to the Royal Botanic Gardens. The Visual Impact Assessment, EIS Part 6.1, grossly understates the impact of the development on views to Woolloomooloo, on the approach to the RBG, and appreciation of the AGNSW as it sits in the landscape. These are not moderate impacts. They are high and severe impacts that cannot be mitigated. The development will destroy appreciation of the topography and landscape of the RBG&D ridgeline – a defining experience of Sydney; it blocks views to Woolloomooloo, and will even block much loved views within the AGNSW to Woolloomooloo. It also destroys the sense of the Domain and RBG as the green edge of Sydney.

The walk along Art Gallery Road to the RBG is one of the joys of Sydney. It is the green counterpoint to Utzon's conception of the journey across the Sydney Opera House forecourt and up the monumental steps, of being tethered to the city but separate, looking back but released from the pressures of the city. It is the green space, the views, the openness of the ridgeline, the trees and the sea breeze which together create this delightful, quintessentially Sydney experience.

Instead walking along a cool green corridor, and enjoying the breeze and way the views unfold as you walk past the AGNSW, in this development the first views of the RBG will be of an intrusive unsympathetic building, set forward from the AGNSW, blocking views, with a sharp ugly roof, and more traffic at a choke point to the peninsula. All sense of the terrain is obliterated by the design, as is the sense of this landscape as a peninsula. And leaving the gardens after a restful walk, visitors will not have the gentle green transition back to the city, the views, the shade and breeze; instead they will be immediately faced with an intrusive building, with a roofline looming above the tree canopy, more buses, cars and traffic, no views, and no shade. It will be decades, if at all, before replacement trees offer any shade or protection.

The Sydney Modern design is not a cascade of transparent pavilions. It has a giant footprint of 11,000sqm. It steals public parkland, views and amenity. It privatises open space and makes it less accessible. It brings more traffic and congestion to a point where people should be feeling released from the intensity and pressures of the city. The development plonks hard surfaces, sharp lines and inappropriate materials into the heart of Australia's most significant park and cultural landscape. It should be rejected.

As a footnote, I remember the storm of controversy around development plans for the Conservatorium in 1997, when the Carr Government approved plans for expansion on its current site rather than move to Rozelle. The contrast with the current Sydney Modern land grab could not be greater. Most of the Con development went underground, there was minimal intrusion on the RBG, the integrity and form of the former Government House stables was preserved, new materials were sympathetic and a students and staff have modern fit for purpose new halls and rehearsal rooms. This should be the exemplar for any development on the edge of the RBG&D. It demonstrates that great cultural facilities need not come at the expense of Australia's most significant cultural landscape.

### **Global cities, the Met and Central Park**

Spruikers for Sydney Modern cast this project as a development that cements Sydney's claim to be a global city. But great global cities defend their public parkland from encroachment and development. I note that New York City has long put a stop to the Metropolitan Museum of Art building on any more of Central Park. No more land from Central Park has been ceded to the Met since the 1970 masterplan. The same arguments advanced by the AGNSW for Sydney Modern have, in the past, been advanced by trustees of the Met: unseen collections, the tourism value of the Met, and the alleged difficulties of operating satellite galleries - despite the great success of the Cloisters annex. Like the AGNSW, the Met's need for more gallery space arose in part from permanently dedicating galleries to certain influential donors, thus compromising future planning. Promises made by trustees of the Met in exchange for building in Central Park have not been kept. The long promised gallery entrance to Central Park was never built and there have been efforts to wind back

the requirement for free admission in the face of recurring budget deficits. Unlike the RBG and Domain, Central Park has not suffered the recurring erosion of its parklands for freeways, buildings and utilities. Central Park is defended and celebrated by the City of New York and its citizens as one of the city's crowning attractions.

To my knowledge, there is no international example of a substantial new gallery development being built in the heart of a global city's most significant historic parkland. Global cities know of the value of their historic parks and gardens and do not make them available for opportunistic and destructive land grabs in the guise of cultural development.

## **Tourism**

The Royal Botanic Gardens are one of Sydney's most important tourism attractions. In the 2016-17 financial year, the RBG drew more than 5m visitors, against the gallery's 1.591m visitors.

<https://www.ausleisure.com.au/news/more-visitors-to-nsws-botanic-gardens-than-ever-before/>

Even if the Sydney Modern development achieves its target of 2m visitors, it is still less than half the visitors that already visit the gardens. It is unconscionable that the AGNSW should seek to cannibalise such precious and significant parkland in the name of furthering their property ambitions and creating a tourism attraction. The RBG&D are already a far more important tourism attraction than the gallery will ever be.

Visiting history, heritage buildings and sites is the most popular activity for international tourists to Sydney, 71.8%, as against 55.7% of international visitors going to museums and art galleries.

International cultural and heritage visitors stay twice as long as other visitors and spend almost twice as much as other visitors. Reviewing recent tourism statistics that underline visitor interest in heritage sites and buildings, it is difficult to understand why Sydney is not adapting its fine legacy of nineteenth century heritage buildings, instead of selling them off for a pittance as the government has done with Lands and Education buildings, knocked down for a paltry \$35m. Sydney should be expanding heritage and cultural attractions. But it should not, and need not do so by degrading Sydney's most visited and significant cultural landscape.

<https://www.destinationnsw.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Cultural-and-Heritage-Tourism-to-NSW-Snapshot-YE-Dec-2016.pdf>

## **Cultural Infrastructure Policy and Priorities**

The Sydney Modern project is being developed in a cultural policy vacuum. As noted in my submission to the current Legislative Council inquiry into museums and galleries, NSW has no museum policy.

<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/DBAssets/InquirySubmission/Body/56235/0149c%20Ms%20Kylie%20Winkworth.pdf>

The government spends around 75% of the arts and cultural budget for all of NSW on the NSW cultural institutions but it allocates this money without a policy, without transparent performance benchmarks or any mechanism for shaping programs and outcomes. What passes for policy is a list of capital works projects, repackaged from the 2014 State Infrastructure Strategy Update into an 'arts and cultural policy framework' *Create in NSW*, released in February 2015.

<http://www.arts.nsw.gov.au/index.php/arts-in-nsw/create-in-nsw/the-nsw-arts-and-cultural-policy-framework-create-in-nsw/>

In its policy free list of cultural infrastructure projects, the government has missed the chance to address strategic omissions in the profile of museums and cultural facilities in Sydney. Why not a museum of NSW? Why not an Aboriginal cultural centre? Why not a design museum to cement Sydney's credentials as a global design city? Museum structures, policies and programs need rethinking to maximise the impact and returns from the community's investment in museums and collections **for all the residents of NSW**. NSW needs landmark museums and galleries in Sydney and high quality cultural infrastructure in western Sydney and regional NSW.

In the absence of a museum policy for NSW it is difficult to understand why the Sydney Modern project is the highest cultural infrastructure priority. The most recent strategic analysis of Sydney's cultural infrastructure needs and priorities is the 2011 report *Planning Sydney's Cultural Facilities*. The report identified notable gaps and omissions, including the high priority for an Indigenous Cultural Centre, the lack of a NSW social history museum and the opportunity for a major design exhibition space.

Curiously almost none of the key cultural priorities identified in this study were addressed in the State Infrastructure Strategy which is cited in support of the Sydney Modern project. The 2014 *State Infrastructure Strategy Update* drew a blue line around the harbour and picked an ad hoc group of cultural projects to be funded from a pool of \$600m. It is not clear how and why these projects were selected by Infrastructure NSW (INSW), in the absence of a policy for museums and cultural infrastructure in Sydney and NSW, and without an updated needs analysis or transparent consultation with the cultural sector. At the time the favoured projects were selected by who-knows-who-insiders, INSW had no expertise in cultural policy or infrastructure. There is still no policy for museums in NSW and no policy that provides a strategic, transparent and equitable framework for prioritising cultural infrastructure projects.

Indeed, after the NSW Government has picked the cultural infrastructure winners for the \$600m pool of funding, the new Cultural Infrastructure Program Management Office is only now engaging in sector consultations to underpin a comprehensive Cultural Infrastructure Plan!

<http://mailchi.mp/75caad75380c/cultural-infrastructure-in-nsw-have-your-say>

Spending scarce cultural infrastructure funds before basic cultural policy and planning is like pouring concrete for a motorway without knowing where it's going, why it is needed and who will use it. Sydney is overdue for significant cultural infrastructure investment, but policy and plans must be developed with community input, taking account of strategic omissions and cultural equity issues, before individual projects like Sydney Modern are funded.

### **Project Justification, Rationale and Options**

The arguments for the necessity of the Sydney Modern development adjacent to the AGNSW on sensitive public parkland are weak. The gallery's letter explaining the rationale for the project cites the 2011 report *Planning Sydney's Cultural Facilities*, claiming that the report says that art gallery exhibition space is below that of benchmarked cities. In fact this report did not recommend a major gallery expansion. Its key priority for the gallery was an education centre – an initiative which could be accommodated in a smaller extension on the southern side of the building.

While the footprint of the AGNSW is at capacity and difficult to further expand given the constraints of the site, *it is able to fulfil its purpose including the accommodation of blockbuster exhibitions and should continue to meet demand over the next 15 years* (my italics)– particularly if consideration is given to extending opening hours as demand warrants. The main inadequacies of the AGNSW relate to accessibility and provision of education and learning programs as a result of inadequate educational facilities. P.6 and 72 <https://www.create.nsw.gov.au/wp.../09/Planning-Sydneys-Cultural-Facilities-Final.pdf>

The *Cultural Facilities* report was prepared before the completion of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) extension which has boosted gallery exhibition space in Sydney city. The need identified in the report for multidisciplinary contemporary arts spaces is now well served by the MCA and Carriageworks, which has a calendar of interdisciplinary contemporary art events and performances.

It is notable that the AGNSW does not mention MCA or count its floor space when tallying the deficiencies of gallery space in Sydney. If the MCA is taken into account, then the claim that the AGNSW is half the size of the NGV is incorrect. Not that size matters in cultural facilities.

Other weaknesses with the justification for Sydney Modern include:

- The gallery is not short of space. In fact it has a far higher proportion of its relatively small collection on display than either MAAS, with more than 98% of its collection in storage, or the Australian Museum.
- To my knowledge the AGNSW has held only one blockbuster that required temporarily relocating permanent collections. This was the Picasso exhibition in 2012.
- The gallery's argument that it needs more floor space for temporary exhibitions could be more economically accommodated in a new multi institutional gallery, instead of each of the cultural institutions engaging in a floor space arms race for ever larger temporary exhibition spaces which in fact are rarely fully utilised.
- The Powerhouse Museum made this same argument in a bid for funding for \$25m to change its entrance and turn the Wran building fronting Harris St into a big temporary exhibition space. After all the money and work, the space has rarely been fully used for temporary exhibitions and there is now a proposal to subdivide the space for a lecture theatre for UTS.

The proposal to double the size of the gallery on its current site runs counter to the trend for international museums such as the Tate, the V&A and the Smithsonian to develop satellite museums on distinctive themes at new locations and in other cities. This is the model used by the NVG with its two sites, and the Queensland Art Gallery with two sites. The reasons for this are obvious:

- Satellite museums spread the government's cultural spending more equitably, they enhance access and generate greater tourism impacts
- Each museum has a distinctive focus, identity and audiences
- Visitor numbers are higher at multi-site museums, as demonstrated at the NGV International / NGV Australia, and Tate Britain / Tate Modern
- Doubling the size of the gallery is not good value for money as visitors do not spend twice as long in a super museum or visit twice as often
- The evidence shows that multi gallery developments can be very successfully branded and marketed to expand the organisation's reach, audiences and supporters.

The justification for building Sydney Modern adjacent to the AGNSW is flawed, poor value for money and not the best option for realising a high cultural return from taxpayers' investment. No 'mitigation' can counter the project's destructive heritage and environmental impacts. Historic developments within the land belonging to the RBG&D cannot justify continued development on public parkland, especially in such a sensitive location. (EIS 6.30) Too much weight is given in the site option assessment to the need for an 'iconic' building. If this is the prime need, then an iconic gallery building can be constructed on other less sensitive sites that have fewer heritage constraints. However there is an increasing body of evidence that iconic buildings do not create sustainable museums. See for example Jonathan Meades on The Bilbao Effect in *The Spectator*, 21 October 2017. Ultimately people go to museums to see collections, and it is arguable that the AGNSW would be better investing some of the \$350m project cost in collection development, and building a smaller gallery extension on a less sensitive site.

The assessment of the site options (appendix AN) is skewed to the preferred outcome, uses a narrow highly debatable set of criteria, and does not consider wider social, cultural and tourism benefits. Everything is framed around what suits the gallery, not what might provide the best most equitable outcome for taxpayers. The interests of the AGNSW in settling its development sights on lands belonging to the RBG&D, are not the same as the interests of the community of NSW. Badging an alternative site option at Walsh Bay or Barangaroo as 'remote' is a stretch appendix AN, p.58. In fact a gallery development in the dramatic cavern under Headland Park at Barangaroo would help realise the goal of turning Walsh Bay into a cultural precinct, generously funded with \$210m of taxpayer's money. It was always anticipated there would be an Indigenous Cultural Centre at Barangaroo when plans were conceived to develop Walsh Bay as a cultural precinct. Without an anchoring museum or gallery in this precinct it is difficult to see Walsh Bay ever becoming a cultural precinct for tourists, outside of visitors attending a performance. As detailed in *Planning Sydney's Cultural Facilities*, a formal museum or gallery space is one of the defining requirements for a cultural precinct, p.99. The alleged public transport difficulties listed as a deficit in the site option assessment for Walsh Bay/ Barangaroo are in fact no more challenging than getting to the AGNSW.

Other potential sites for a new gallery have also been missed, including the Registrar General's Building/ Land Titles Office on the strategic corner of Macquarie, Prince Albert St and Art Gallery Road. This building is on the government's list for disposal. This option would have benefit of keeping this significant building in public ownership, it would strengthen the collections ribbon/ museum mile concept of Macquarie St as Sydney's major cultural precinct, and could include the option of demolishing the intrusive 60s court building at the rear – a heritage bonus - with the possibility of adding the gallery's desired 'iconic' modern building to the rear.

It is sad that the AGNSW and the government did not apparently consider this or other options for adapting heritage buildings in the city, especially when visiting heritage buildings is the most popular activity for our money-spinning international visitors. The Lands Department building on Bridge St would have made a fine gallery for the 19<sup>th</sup> century collections, with the option of integrating some of the PHM's unseen historic decorative arts collections.

### **Why not Sydney Modern in Parramatta?**

It does not appear that the AGNSW ever assessed location options for Sydney Modern outside the city. But if education, social and cultural equity issues are given any weight in assessing site options

for Sydney Modern, then the new gallery should be built in Parramatta, close to the demographic centre of Sydney. Parramatta has properly claimed its right to be the location for a major state museum. But it is a mystery why Premier Mike Baird decided to 'move' the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta, instead of building Sydney Modern there. A new gallery would be much cheaper than moving the PHM and arguably it would have more resonance and impact for contemporary audiences than the PHM's planes, trains and automobiles. Notably Parramatta was never asked what kind of museum or gallery it wanted, or if it would prefer the PHM or Sydney Modern. It was Mike Baird's 'captain's pick' to send the PHM to Parramatta, before any feasibility testing or a business plan. This is indicative of the policy free zone for cultural infrastructure in NSW.

If the Sydney Modern development in the Domain is approved, it will **concentrate all three public galleries in the city**, while Parramatta will remain the only city in Sydney or regional NSW without a gallery. Parramatta is badging itself as a creative, global city. Its new cultural plan says a gallery is a high priority, a missing link in the city's cultural infrastructure. Interpretation of Parramatta's nationally significant Aboriginal culture and history is a high priority in the cultural plan.

[https://www.cityofparramatta.nsw.gov.au/sites/council/files/2017-06/Parramatta%20Cultural%20Plan\\_3.pdf](https://www.cityofparramatta.nsw.gov.au/sites/council/files/2017-06/Parramatta%20Cultural%20Plan_3.pdf)

In pitching Sydney Modern the AGNSW has made much of its desire to improve and enlarge the display of Aboriginal art. The 2010 Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Strategy is cited as one of the policy underpinnings for Sydney Modern. This policy underlines the importance of bringing Aboriginal people in contact with their culture. Western Sydney has the biggest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in Australia, so why not build Sydney Modern closer to where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live? The Parramatta site for the new museum is far less sensitive than the RBG&D and can easily accommodate the gallery's ambitions for an 'iconic' building. A Sydney Modern gallery in Parramatta, with a strong focus on Indigenous arts and culture, would reach a huge audience and draw international visitors to Parramatta.

## Conclusion

Sydney and NSW are overdue for substantial new investment in museums and galleries. Investment in cultural infrastructure offers a far higher return and wider benefits than the \$2.5b the government is proposing to spend on little-used stadiums. Sydney needs new museums and galleries to address notable omissions in the profile of Sydney's cultural attractions. But cultural infrastructure spending must be based on a transparent cultural policy and needs analysis, which is developed with sector and community input, and considers equity, access, education and tourism opportunities. Museums are an intergeneration commitment for the next century, so taking the time to get the policy right before building is essential.

Even in the absence of a cultural infrastructure policy, there is no essential need for the AGNSW to build Sydney Modern in the heart of the most significant and historic cultural landscape in Australia. The gallery's project objectives can be achieved at any one of a number of possible sites including Barangaroo and Parramatta. No benefits to the gallery's programs and audiences outweigh the damage and negative impacts of this development when there are perfectly suitable site alternatives. It is repugnant that a cultural institution should be proposing a development which is so damaging to the cultural landscape and amenity of Australia's most significant parklands. The Sydney Modern development on this site should be rejected.