

## OBJECTIONS TO PROPOSED 'POWERHOUSE ULTIMO REVITALISATION'

BASED IN AN ON-LINE PRESENTATION ON TUESDAY 14 MAY 2024, 11.30am-1.00pm

### 1. I STRONGLY OBJECT to the entire proposal

The project is poorly and dishonestly conceived, based on non-existent or secretive documentation, destructive of the tangible and intangible aspects of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS), appallingly wasteful of taxpayers' funds and against the wishes of the overwhelming majority of public opinion that has been expressed over almost 10 years.

The Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation lacks a cohesive vision either in itself or as a component of the MAAS. It fails to adhere to the articles of the Burra Charter, the basis of all heritage legislation in Australia, or to reflect the recent decision of the Heritage Council to include the entire Powerhouse Museum Complex in the State Heritage Register.

A wide range of expert opinion based on deep knowledge and experience has been repeatedly offered at no cost to inform and benefit this project. This advice has either been ignored or treated with disrespect or even contempt.

This extravagant and wasteful project should be immediately abandoned and replaced with a less costly program that aims to re-open the Powerhouse Museum (PHM) to the public as a priority, to rebuild public confidence and restore the unique brand and identity of the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo as a *museum* of applied arts and sciences. This project should employ those with the necessary expertise to develop a coherent vision and draw on the Museum's rich collections to build on the existing permanent galleries and develop fresh new exhibitions, public programs and events that interpret the collections and address the emerging challenges and opportunities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### 2 I OBJECT to the name of this project

What's in a name? In this case, the name 'Powerhouse Ultimo' reveals what has always been intended by this project: to 'rebrand' the MUSEUM as a VENUE that is intended to become 'events central' in the precinct with a particular emphasis on the night-time economy and with only token use of the Museum's collections. The 'Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences' is, and should remain, precisely that.

### 3. I OBJECT to the lack of vision and clarity of purpose for the Ultimo site

As I said at the presentation, there is *no cohesion between the elements of this project* nor is anyone working on it apparently capable of articulating its content because **there is NO VISION for either Parramatta or Ultimo; in its place is a VACUUM.**

Neither the Government nor the CEO has ever, to my knowledge, made a clear statement about what the public can expect at either Parramatta or Ultimo. Before the change of Government in February 2023, the Museum released its 'Powerhouse Ultimo Renewal' document, which described the main objective of the Ultimo site redevelopment as

‘Deliver an international standard museum<sup>1</sup> that is complementary to Powerhouse Parramatta, Powerhouse Castle Hill, and Sydney Observatory’  
(*Powerhouse Ultimo Renewal Design*, NSW Government, February 2023, p7)

‘Complementary’ to what at Parramatta? Only a vague general notion appears to have been expressed about Parramatta - that it will focus on the future of science and technology – when the plans for the Ultimo site were to turn it to rubble and sell it. In July 2020, when, in response to public protest, the then LNP Government’s policy changed to retaining the Ultimo site, the related press release made it clear that the intention was to create two sites with similar aspirations:

‘...this will allow us to provide an outstanding visitor experience in the areas of technology, science, engineering and design at two major locations’  
(*More Powerhouse for the People* press release, 4 July 2020)

But since then there has been no progress in distinguishing the respective collections-related roles of the two sites. Why? Because it was *never intended* that the site at Ultimo would follow the spirit or intent of the Government’s wishes in 2020.

The only indication of a general purpose of the claimed (but implausible) intention to display the collections at Ultimo is that the Ultimo site will focus on the *historical* science and technology collections, as if this satisfies the objective of being ‘complementary’ to Parramatta’s future focus.

A robust argument against any facile division of ‘historical’ and ‘future focussed’ content at Ultimo and Parramatta respectively is that any subject that contemplates our future (such as AI) is informed by the historical collections, which provide insight, perspective and useful learnings. As Churchill observed: ‘The longer you can look back, the further forward you can look’. The same wisdom dates back millennia in First Nations lore: ‘when you can look behind you, you can see the future in your footprints’ (*Songlines: the Power and Promise*, Neale and Kelly, 2020, p.102)

#### **4. I OBJECT to the contravention of the Burra Charter and ignoring the Heritage Council’s recommended SHR listing.**

The ‘revitalisation’ proposal as presented contravenes two articles of the Burra Charter, the basis for all heritage legislation in Australia, as follows:

"Article 8. Setting

Conservation requires the retention of an appropriate setting. This includes retention of the visual and sensory setting, as well as the retention of spiritual and other cultural relationships that contribute to the *cultural significance* of the *place*.  
(Comment: These are not my italics, but these words in this case clearly allude to the cultural significance of the place as a museum)

New construction, demolition, intrusions or other changes which would adversely affect the setting or relationships are not appropriate. "

Article 8 supports the Heritage Council’s opinion that the entire site should be listed, which would acknowledge the high cultural significance of the Museum’s role since 1988.

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<sup>1</sup> Let’s call out the implied falsehood that the current Powerhouse Museum was not fit for international exhibitions – it has always been and still is.

## “Article 11 Related places and objects

The contribution which related places and related objects make to the cultural significance of the place should be retained.”

There is a demonstrable and provable relationship between the Museum’s collection types (science and technology, social history and decorative arts), their scale, materials, shapes and stories and the nuanced architectural responses to those collection types. These spacial relationships result from a collaborative process in the design development stage. They are most readily illustrated by the arched volume of the galleria, designed specifically to provide a grand setting for the Boulton & Watt engine and the first train in NSW. It is also very evident in the *Steam Revolution* gallery, which evokes the type of industrial setting in which the engines that operate in the exhibition might have once functioned. Furthermore, the *Steam Revolution* exhibition is not just the only gallery of its kind in the state of NSW or Australia but is one of only three *permanent steam-powered museum exhibitions in the world*. The architectural treatment of the former Engine House in which the *Steam Revolution* exhibition is located is not artifice or confection: it is a permanent finish and interpretation of the historical role of that space in the former Ultimo Power House that resonates with its present Museum context.

Article 11 therefore supports the argument that heritage significance is increased because *the collection itself is integral with the buildings that provide a cultural setting for them*. The overwhelmingly positive and sustained response from millions of visitors to the PHM since 1988 suggests that this relationship between building and collections is one of the key reasons for the broad and enduring appeal of the visitor experience. Therefore, as the Heritage Council has recently determined and recommended to the Minister for Heritage, **the entire PHM site should be included in the State Heritage Register (SHR) listing proposal.**

The plan to demolish the internal mezzanine floors (see point 7 below) and to partially demolish the Wran Building is directly contrary to the spirit and intent of the Heritage Council’s view that the entire PHM complex should be listed on the State Heritage Register.

## 5. I OBJECT to the absence of process in content development for ‘Powerhouse Ultimo’

Conspicuous by its absence at this presentation was any explanation of what content was intended to fill the ‘large volume spaces’ that are proposed. I raised this in my email submission to INSW on 25 February 2024 and am now even more alarmed that *design development of the proposed new spaces continues without involvement of the curatorial/exhibition development teams*. Content development should be fully engaged with design development from the start of the process. Whose experience was used to inform this project? Where is the core document that expresses the ideas and aspirations for the ‘revitalised’ museum?

There have been repeated questions at consultation sessions about what the new version of the PHM will be like, yet no-one is able to describe it. The only reference to content at this latest session was in response to a question about the three large objects that are apparently to feature in ‘Powerhouse Ultimo’: the Boulton & Watt beam engine, Locomotive No.1 and its carriages and the Catalina flying boat. (There is so much wrong about this, including utter incompetence, but I have to start somewhere.)

The audience at the presentation were advised that the beam engine would remain in place but would be surrounded by a protective structure, while the Locomotive No.1 (ah, but what about the carriages?) would return to the Museum after temporary display at Castle Hill and the Catalina flying

boat would be located either back in the Boiler House or in the Turbine House, the only two 'Exhibition Spaces' that could accommodate it. I guess we can assume that they will be isolated like pieces of driftwood on a beach with no contextual exhibitions (and what about promised steam power for the Boulton & Watt?). We all know why these three objects were pre-emptively committed in August 2020 to be in the final mix by former Arts Minister Harwin – the then Government felt under political pressure from the community and the media. But it makes no sense, not helped by a ludicrous attempt to relate them in terms of technological history. Impressive museum objects like these are almost always featured in exhibitions to annotate a narrative which is developed from a theme which in turn is inspired by a vision. *Nominating objects before any of the ideas have been evolved makes no more sense than designing a house without looking at the site.*

This is not to say that these three highly significant objects should not be included but at least place them in context first. The other question that nominating three objects raises is – Only three? What about everything else? It simply draws attention to the complete lack of planning.

The other yawning gap is not only where is the content/exhibition plan but **where is the exhibition budget?**

## **6. I OBJECT to the implied disposal of the Harwood Building**

I have made many submissions to Government and to NSW and the Museum about this wonderful but under-utilised asset of the Museum's, which is unique in Australia. A fully functioning Harwood Building is essential and integral to the operation of the PHM.

In response to a question from me and others after the presentation, there were several assurances that the Harwood Building would be retained, for example:

'The Government has publicly committed to retaining the Harwood Building for Museum use' and

'We would maintain the conservation labs there.'

But I don't buy it, and here's why:

1. Promises are easily broken. The Government, represented by the Minister for the Arts, made a commitment not to close the Museum, but it closed on 4 February 2024.

2. Exclusion from the revitalisation project. If the real intention was to retain the Harwood Building permanently to support Museum operations into the future, the Harwood Building would unquestionably been a part of the 'revitalisation', so that its facilities could benefit from an upgrade. This would ensure that the Harwood Building was best able to support the revised functions of a revitalised 'Powerhouse Ultimo', assuming that a 'Museum' was still its main function of course.

3. Duplication. The plans for 'Powerhouse Ultimo' include a new 'loading dock with entry off Macarthur Street' which would provide for '...safe and efficient loading and unloading of collection items...' (*Powerhouse Museum Ultimo Revitalisation Fact Sheet: Design*, May 2024, p.7)

The Harwood Building has its own loading dock, which suggests duplication.

However, one of the reasons for the co-location of the loading dock and conservation labs in the Harwood Building is the 'safe and efficient' delivery and handling of objects requiring treatment. They cannot all be treated at Castle Hill and some will require inspection and treatment in the Harwood Building conservation facilities while they are still on display at Ultimo.

## 7. I OBJECT to the vast reduction in exhibition area in the proposed 'Powerhouse Ultimo'

The plans for the new 'Exhibition Spaces' show a vast reduction in affordable exhibition *capacity*. I use the word 'capacity' to avoid the confusion between exhibition *space* and exhibition *area*. The large volumes created by the proposed removal of mezzanines is claimed to create more 'flexible' exhibition spaces. The claim made in the presentation I attended that there is no resulting reduction in exhibition space is simply not credible.

Answers from the MAAS, INSW and architects' representatives to the questions put by those who attended the presentation were very inadequate and unconvincing. One of the questioners made an enthusiastic case for the existing mezzanines, which I strongly endorse.

The mezzanines offer obvious benefits for the visitors' experience of the internal building spaces and the collections. The claim that the absence of the mezzanines achieves flexibility in exhibition design is confounding. It is precisely *to achieve flexibility* in exhibition design that the mezzanines were designed into the 1988 Museum plans.

The mezzanines are part of an architectural approach that provides spaces that complement the vast differences in scale and nature of the Museum's collections. This was done to establish a clear hierarchical relationship between the building spaces thus created, the exhibition contents and the environments created to interpret them. The mezzanines also enable visitors to appreciate sight lines from so many vantage points within the building spaces that would be largely lost if the mezzanines were removed.

In the presentation about the 'revitalisation' proposal, it was stated that the curatorial team and exhibition designers would be expected to devise ways of presenting multiple exhibitions *on multiple levels* that made use of the vast, 'more flexible' exhibition spaces. So, it appears that the intention is to demolish the existing mezzanines so we can build new mezzanine levels within exhibition structures! This makes no sense, especially from a cost perspective. The CEO and her team have clearly stated that they want short term not long term exhibitions and installations, so how could the construction costs of exhibitions requiring load bearing structures on multiple levels be cost effective? What operational experience of running a large museum have any of the senior managers or the design team had?

Lastly, I offer these remarks and opinions in good faith. They are based on my 33 years' experience as a curator of transport and engineering and exhibition development manager at the Powerhouse Museum (1980-2012) and 10 years' experience as a movable heritage consultant.

Sincerely

Andrew Grant