



DESIGN 5

A R C H I T E C T S

POWERHOUSE ULTIMO REVITALISATION

SUBMISSION IN RESPONSE TO SSD APPLICATION

30 May 2024

We write to OBJECT to the 'Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation' proposal presently on public exhibition and under consideration for SSD approval.

To summarise our submission in two sentences:

This 'Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation' proposal almost completely erases the Powerhouse Museum and the intangible and innate connection between the buildings and spaces, AND the collection, and what is not erased is entombed in new structure to conceal it.

The process that has resulted in this proposal has been fatally flawed from the beginning, being driven by an agenda to dismantle and destroy the museum, an investigation and decision-making process that had little to no transparency AND the unwillingness of a new government to call out and rectify these errors.

We know this lack of transparency is true as we were one of those consultants engaged by government to investigate the significance of the Powerhouse Museum and complete a draft Conservation Management Plan (CMP), (commenced by Curio Projects) to guide its future, including major changes. We were appointed because of experience in this arena, specifically our experience with CMPs and our work as heritage conservation architects for a major upgrade at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) in Hobart, completed 2013, and architects for a substantial conservation and refurbishment of the Westpac Long Gallery at the Australian Museum, completed 2017.

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Soon after we presented our draft findings on the significance of the buildings and their relationship to the MAAS collection, our commission was abruptly terminated in March 2022 and our draft report buried – in fact its very existence was publicly denied, in spite of myself and our firm being presented as the author of the ‘to be completed’ CMP at community and stakeholder consultations.

The buried draft report, forwarded to Create NSW soon after our termination, is titled *Powerhouse Museum Conservation Management Plan – Draft April 2022*, prepared by Design 5 – Architects, of which I am the founding director and principal author of the report.

Much of the site is listed on the State Heritage Register but the whole museum site is widely acknowledged as being of state heritage significance. An expanded curtilage to include the Wran Building is currently being considered by the NSW Heritage Council.

Both the process and the result are completely against all principles articulated in the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter.

SUBMISSION DETAILS

We have reviewed the documents presently on public exhibition and make the following comments.

The proposed museum:

- Proposal does not recognise or acknowledge the original design intent of the 1980s work and effectively erases it.
- Destroys the original architect’s references to the origins of the MAAS in the 1880 Garden Palace in the Domain, embodied very eloquently in the built form of the 1980s Wran Building.
- Erases 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.

- Erasure of the facility as 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.
 - considerable downsizing of the extensive back-of-house facilities for conserving and storing the collection, preparing and constructing exhibits, as well as museum management – all presently located in the Harwood Building and requiring considerable space.
- The materiality, form, configuration and character of the new work, as described in the proposal, denies, even subverts the design intent and character of the completed 1980s work. This results in a gross mutilation and misrepresentation of the original architect, Lionel Glendenning's work.

The buildings:

- The original 1890s power station buildings appear to have been completely stripped out, surviving in a shell form, with only selected retention of significant and surviving internal elements, such as the gantries and cranes over the original Engine House (apart from the row of original lattice columns and one gantry beam, these do not appear on the drawings, particularly the sections).
- Except for the lowest public level, all openings between the Boiler Hall, Turbine Hall and adjacent spaces are to be infilled or glazed, substantially reducing interconnectivity and removing it completely at higher levels. This effectively transforms all of these spaces from their presently interconnected, multi-level, flexible exhibition character to being individual, large-scale 'sheds' or 'event' spaces with constrained and very limited potential for exhibition and display – particularly for smaller objects.
The Curio HIS notes this 'closing off' is to address fire separation, but this was solved differently before, and could well still apply. With this concern with fire control and separation of large scale empty spaces, it appears to all intents and purposes to be a Function Centre, masquerading under the illusion of being a museum. It has not gone unnoticed that the word 'MUSEUM' has been quietly removed from the name of this facility.
- The external west wall of the Turbine Hall, despite the importance attributed to it in the Curio CMP, appears to be buried behind new structure that completely conceals its surface as well as the emblematic 1980s steel framing for the Galleria. Such impacts would normally be considered highly intrusive and should not be allowed.

- The Galleria and adjacent broad exhibition area (originally for touring exhibitions), referred to collectively as the Wran Building, is unnecessarily truncated 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. Refer to the architectural drawings.

By way of comparison, if the large glazed walls and ceilings of the Musée d'Orsay or the Pompidou Centre in Paris were replaced with masonry, it would be a brutal rebuttal of the architect's design intent, a denial of the quality and character of the space and building and considered internationally as an act of cultural vandalism. That is what is proposed here at this internationally applauded Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences.

- While it must be acknowledged that changes since the 1980s have gradually diminished the aesthetics and functionality of the museum, it remained largely intact with a range of exceptional spaces and much-loved exhibits. We confirmed this with our own site investigations and research, included in our now buried draft CMP, and were in the process of drafting guidelines and policies for improvement and change that would retain, respect and celebrate its significant values before being abruptly removed from the project. These policies and guidelines would have guided true 'revitalisation', where the current proposal irreversibly fails.

The collection:

- We understand the bulk of the collection has now been removed to the Castle Hill facility and is being displayed there – a very remote and difficult to access location. The historic, functional and scale links many of these exhibits had with the original Powerhouse Museum site are now substantially diminished, robbing the public of being able to understand or appreciate their former context, links and connections.
- The arrangement and display of the collection across a range of spaces and levels, frequently and deliberately connected both visually and functionally, invited freedom of exploration and discovery and was a unique and greatly appreciated characteristic of the original museum. This was a very carefully researched and designed configuration by the original architects and exhibition team, Lionel Glendenning, Richard Johnson and Lindsay Sharp. This configuration is not obsolete by contemporary museum expectations and still worked up until the recent closure and dismantling. This present proposal completely removes all of the subtlety and interconnectedness of the various spaces and exhibits that made this museum such a joy to visit.

The Heritage Impact Statement (HIS):

- We consider the findings that underpin this HIS are flawed. The draft CMP (prepared by Curio) has been previously publicly exhibited but did not include adequate research on the actual fabric of the place and did not explain changes that have occurred since 1988. It also did not acknowledge how the original design intent and principles of Glendenning, Johnson and Sharp were reflected in the existing form, fabric and configuration.
- The HIS notes that changes have been made to the draft CMP but as far as we are aware, this updated version has not been made publicly available. Mention of the draft CMP, is made in the HIS, but it is not included in the SSD package, and there is no assessment of the proposal against its policies.
- **For a SHR listed site, it is standard practice to submit a full CMP for the site, including policies – even in draft form.** This is normally a fundamental submission requirement, but it does not form part of this SSD and therefore is not publicly accessible. **Where is it?**
- The draft CMP that forms the basis of this HIS assessment should be made publicly available and the public exhibition period extended to allow this CMP to be part of the public review period.
- Observations on what appear to be extracts in the HIS from the draft CMP, but not referenced as such include:
 - The Statement of Significance provided in the HIS briefly acknowledges the 1980s work but then goes off on a tangent setting it against First Nations protests at the Bicentennial celebrations elsewhere at the time.
 - The grading of significance diagram appears to respond to a directive to downplay the significance of the Sulman Award winning work.
 - No CMP policies are mentioned! Do they exist?

In this case, the flaws and deficiencies embedded in the CMP, as we understand it, have supported an outcome that is neither culturally, functionally or architecturally appropriate, nor sustainable for an internationally significant Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, aka the Powerhouse Museum.

Sustainability and cost

As a society, and particularly as architects, we have an increasingly urgent obligation to find solutions for our built environment that reduce our carbon footprint, are sustainable in terms of materials removed or installed, cost effective in terms of

achieving the optimal solution with the least cost and functionally and culturally appropriate. The Powerhouse Museum may have required catch-up maintenance, a refresh, a re-orientation to the Goods Line, an upgrade, but if it is to remain as a functioning world class Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, it does NOT require the major destruction, demolition and transformation proposed in this SSD application.

It is worth noting here that the recent major upgrade and reconfiguration of the Australian Museum was carried out without closing the museum to the public.

In conclusion, if approved, this SSD proposal will set a dangerous precedent for heritage conservation and adaptive reuse in this state.

If executed, this proposal could well be regarded as one of NSW's greatest acts of vandalism to a publicly owned and funded cultural institution this century.

This SSD MUST NOT be approved.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alan Croker". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Alan Croker

Director and Principal

Design 5 – Architects Pty Ltd

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