

**Submission made regarding The Powerhouse Museum Ultimo
Revitalisation Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)**

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Introduction.

These comments are made from experience gained in 40+ years as a teacher, and voluntary work at THE Powerhouse MUSEUM 2008-2021, approximately 1½ years equivalent full time. During this time I engaged significantly with more than 20,000 visitors. I have written three booklets about the museum 2015- 2018 which have been distributed to all NSW politicians and since May 2015 have been deeply involved in the affairs of THE Powerhouse MUSEUM and related matters. I visited the museum at least twice a week over the past three years.

Conventions used in this submission:

* - detailed references for this assertion are available on request

‘we’ and its variants mean the writers’ assessment of consensus of the views of the majority of people objecting to this proposal¹.

‘I’ refers to my own statements which may not be consonant with the above,

THE Powerhouse MUSEUM means the fully functioning museum of world class, which has always been Australia’s premier museum of the Applied Arts and Sciences. It is essentially based on the 1988 award-winning adaptive use of the derelict Ultimo Powerhouse, which should certainly be protected as a major heritage item. It may be upgraded but not significantly demolished or degraded.

‘Powerhouse Ultimo’ means the facility described in the EIS. Its main differences from THE Powerhouse MUSEUM are the demolition of 1988 interior structures, the removal of almost all remaining exhibits and the institution of a regime of temporary displays* that are largely ‘unmediated’, ie with little or no explanatory material*. A feature is a ‘creative industries hub’ that considerably extends the arts, fashion and design activities that have always been an important part of the museum’s activities but should not be seen as the prime function of a museum.

‘Government’ refers to the Government and its agencies, notably the Department of Premier and Cabinet, Treasury, Departments of the Arts and Heritage, Infrastructure NSW, MAAS museum as controlled by the Government-appointed, Government-tasked CEO, and the current architects are responding to the design brief. This general group is referred to as ‘they’ or ‘their’.

At the last election, the Government came into the hands of the Labor party, whose campaign platform included a promise to save THE Powerhouse MUSEUM. This promise has not been kept, and this submission regards the Government policy as being unchanged from that of its predecessor.

¹ A list containing some 50+ organisations and over 200 eminent supporters of retaining the present museum is available on request. *Save the Powerhouse* Facebook has sponsored a petition that has over 6,500 signatures with the same opinion.

Questionable legitimacy of this EIS

The declarant certifies on page 19 of the basic document that this EIS ‘contains all available information relevant to the environmental assessment of the development, activity or infrastructure to which the EIS relates’. However:

1. The people who prepared the EIS – even the declarant – have no museum qualifications or experience.
2. There appears to be no input from any people with museum qualifications and experience.
3. Throughout the entire museum development process since 2014 there is no evidence of any person with significant museum qualifications and experience being involved in the basic decisions made.
4. This situation has continued to the present time. There is no evidence that any person with significant museum qualifications and experience has been involved in the preparation of the design brief.
5. No such person has recommended the process, and as far as we know, no such person has approved the process as being superior to the proposal for making basic repairs to the museum, reopening it with appropriate staffing and resources, thereby saving the huge expenditure of the so-called revitalisation, and reopening the museum.
6. We have evidence that the overwhelming majority of people with museum knowledge and experience are opposed to the proposal contained in the EIS.
7. This opposition to the proposal is certainly ‘available information relevant to the environmental assessment of the project’ and should be included in the EIS.

Therefore the application for the EIS should be withdrawn, remedied, and resubmitted,

Notes on the social impact of this project.

This part of the submission objects to the so-called *Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation*, concentrating on social, educational and economic factors which, generally speaking, detrimentally affect the impact of the current environment of THE Powerhouse MUSEUM.

It presents facts that support the view that the complete museum including its collection, should be fully protected as a heritage item and that to proceed with the Government's intentions will be disastrous. Evidence is presented that this so-called 'revitalisation' has nothing to recommend it. It is costly, inefficient, ill-planned, destructive of heritage and unpopular with stakeholders. THE Powerhouse MUSEUM has always been Australia's premier museum of the Applied Arts and Sciences and should remain so, without need for even a temporary closure.

Overall comments

THE Powerhouse MUSEUM was designed to showcase national and world treasures while still retaining the flexibility which has enabled it to host an amazing range of temporary and semi-permanent displays.* We have been unable to find any exhibitions that have had to be declined by the museum because space and other facilities were inadequate. Over the years, both large and small exhibitions have had a great impact on the intellectual environment of the city, the state, the nation and even the world.

The current philosophy of this development seems to be that the facility will be constructed to a predetermined standard, and it will then be up to the museum authorities to utilize the space somehow. This is the opposite of what happened in 1988, and hence THE Powerhouse MUSEUM is a far more interesting place than what is indicated in the 'renderings'.

The design brief seems to have no conception of the synergy of impact created by the positioning of particular objects in relevant settings. The outstanding examples at THE Powerhouse MUSEUM are the steam gallery housed in the beautifully built and fastidiously restored 1899 powerhouse, the inclusion of an example of Sydney's first trams, which ran from the Harwood building, and the inclusion of locomotive 1249## which was made only a few hundred metres from the museum, which itself is on the site of the massive darling harbour railway goods yard. Removing these will certainly lessen the impact of the museum environment.

Powerhouse Ultimo's three huge box display areas will be inappropriate for many small, but high-quality exhibitions.

There has never been any significant problem with people finding their way around the museum. Certainly, it is far better to walk through exciting and attractive exhibition areas (Figure 30 than to have the vast areas of open space seen, for example in Figure 1. This area is only useful for things like the rave party seen in Figure 2. No Museum of world standing would have a space of the appalling quality of Figure 1. This is a significant impact on the museum environment.

A recent comment from a world-recognised museum expert was that the Government would achieve a better result if it spent a few million dollars on essential repairs and burnt the rest. The general view is that properly revitalising the present museum for around \$50 million would achieve a really great result.



Above: Figure 1: the 'revitalised' turbine hall (EIS document 'rendering'). Left, below: Figure 2: the main use of the proposed modified turbine hall. Right, below Figure 3, a small area of the turbine hall of THE Powerhouse MUSEUM before revitalisation.



Education:

Formal programs

1. Designated education space is only seen in one small section of one floor plan in the EIS documents *. We understand that there is to be an educational residential feature with associated learning areas but the details of this are not clear*. What is more important however is that throughout the whole project, we have not seen any statement of the educational philosophy of the museum and released documents do not indicate that there has been any significant planning of curriculum cooperation with the relevant authorities. We have asked for this on numerous occasions. Unless this is properly done the educational environment will be severely impacted.
2. It appears from the most recent practice that there will be no floor covering. This makes it very difficult for teachers to have classes seated to enable discussion of the exhibits.
3. At previous consultations the matter of the lunch area and playground on level one was raised. The standard school visit consists of arrival about 10:00 AM, a couple of hours of museum activity, lunch and a break in the playground, and departure at about 2:00 PM. This break from museum activities is essential. Removing the playground has a negative impact on the environment of the museum.
4. THE Powerhouse MUSEUM Has traditionally been the venue for such events as Science Week and activities concerning student works in the Technological and Applied Studies (TAS) Key Learning Area. This last item is a wonderful learning experience. At its best iteration, the students are exposed to the most outstanding works submitted for the higher school certificate, have small group discussions with their creators and other young designers and have lectures from curriculum experts informing them of paths to excellence. The students also have a general session in the museum, guided by skilled volunteers and the education staff. This environment has a tremendous impact on the students. The loss of the general exhibitions will have a severe impact on these events.

Informal programs

1. THE Powerhouse MUSEUM had areas that were an ideal size for school holiday activities, for example, the open area at the central entrance to the turbine hall. The new rendering of the hall just has one big area, surrounding a central display, which causes problems with ensuring efficiency.
2. The CEO's preference is for 'unmediated' displays with a minimum of explanation*. Explanatory material has been removed from many parts of the museum on the basis that the technology is out of date, but it has never been replaced*. This is coupled with a preference for temporary displays, which means that major items such as the Central Station destination board may never be seen again,
3. There is also a preference for activities that are not interactive*, the prime example being the replacement of *Ecologic* with *100 Conversations*. This attempt at environmental education has therefore very little impact.
4. The CEO has stated that people visit the museum only three times - once as a child, once as a parent and once as a grandparent.* The only source that can be found for this is in the script of an episode of "New Tricks" on TV*. It never applied to THE Powerhouse MUSEUM which has always had a strong general following and a very large educational program. Many teachers brought their classes to THE Powerhouse MUSEUM every year. I was in the museum on the first weekend after the COVID shutdown, and there was a

big crowd attending. The notable feature was the way that parents and children were showing each other around the museum, visiting old favourites and the atmosphere was wonderful. The people in the various renderings are just standing around staring vacantly, and there is nothing in the renderings that would encourage them to visit for a second time.

5. There appears to be no information about the exhibits shown in the rendering (Figure 1) and certainly none of the more modern types of explanatory material that we have been promised in the new museum. This is a serious degradation of the environment of the museum and will greatly lessen its impact.
6. There was a proposal a few years ago for the establishment of a community garden in the museum precinct, which would have a far more positive impact on the environment than the featureless herbage shown in the EIS rendering of the lower courtyard, (playground-lunch area). But the overall need is for a playground / lunch area – see later.

Preschool education

At least 90% of the surrounding population live in apartments or townhouses. Over the years, THE Powerhouse MUSEUM has been a place where parents and children could come. The children could engage in cooperative play. Parents could socialise while watching their children play safely. *Zoe's House* was supplanted by *Wiggles*, and, despite promises, this area was closed prematurely, which is not what would be expected from a sample revitalisation process*. This had a severe impact on the environment of the museum. If there is not a similar area in the revitalised museum, the revitalisation will have had yet another negative impact.

Consultation processes.

There has never been a legitimate consultation process on whether the various Government plans for THE Powerhouse MUSEUM shouldn't be carried out. The very first consultation in June 2017 did not ask if we wanted the museum to be moved to Parramatta, it simply asked what we wanted to see in the new museum and what were our suggestions for the use of the Ultimo site.

A Conservation Management Plan, according to the agreed Burra Charter, is supposed to be prepared for any heritage item before developmental work, including planning, is undertaken.

This should have been done in 2014.

We were at last promised in March-April 2022 that a consultation process would be held to inform the development of a Conservation Management Plan for the museum. Because of past experiences, we secured a clear statement that the current consultation would be genuine – ... *the process will proceed as advertised, the consultations will proceed according to the steps of the Burra Charter, the process will be accurately reported, this will lead to a Conservation Management Plan and that the CMP would inform the design brief for the work to be done at THE Powerhouse MUSEUM**.

Nevertheless, a week after the consultation finished, the Government issued an 873-page document, entitled 'Conservation Management Program' which completely ignored the thrust of the consultation input and sanctioned the destruction process outlined above.

This conclusively demonstrates that the total consultation process is invalid. For the EIS five sessions were held, two online and three 'live'. Attendances were very small – about 10 for the online sessions and even less for the others. Many people who have previously taken part have given up: a typical comment is 'H how many times do we have to start the bleeding obvious?'

It is difficult to believe that a majority of attendees at these small meetings are in favour of the Government's plans, and certainly, other evidence indicates an overwhelming preference for the retention of the museum in its present form.

Case study: Level 1

This part of the submission is a simple tour of just level one of THE Powerhouse MUSEUM, indicating the impact of the revitalisation of the museum as seen from the present practices of the museum administration. It clearly indicates why we regard the planned revitalisation as a looming disaster. It will do more harm than good to the prospects of THE Powerhouse MUSEUM.

Please note that similar comments can be made about levels 2, 3 and 4. A particular point of contention is the plan to remove all mezzanine floors, which have some wonderful attractions. The Art Deco Kings Cinema, with its Photoplayer sound system, is of superb quality and interest, and the loss of displays like this would certainly have a detrimental impact on the environment of the museum.

1. Entry from the goods line is a good idea and already works well. There is no need for change. The planned interior entrance ramp is unnecessary and very costly for at best marginal benefit. The level 1 entry can remain, giving instant access to the heart of THE Powerhouse MUSEUM.
2. The outdoor cafe provides a cheaper alternative to the Level 3 restaurant and such a facility is a good idea, not specifically mentioned in the EIS.
3. The next area is the playground and lunch area which is very important for school visits. Classes usually arrive about 10:00 AM, have a couple of hours of museum activity, have lunch and an outside break with physical activity, then have another hour session in the museum and go home about 2:00 PM. It was a very practical and impactful part of the environment for our multitude of school visitors. The need for this has been raised at previous consultations without obvious response.
4. The entrance to the museum at level one has been perfectly adequate. It was an ideal entrance for people with prams and strollers, with a good pram parking area near the Wiggles activities.
5. About 90% of the population in the immediate feeder area for THE Powerhouse MUSEUM live in apartments or townhouses, as compared to about 35% in the total state. THE Powerhouse MUSEUM provides an excellent opportunity for these people to get out of their dwellings and take the children for enjoyable recreation with benefits to both mind and body. If there is no similar facility in Powerhouse Ultimo this will have yet another negative impact on the museum environment.
6. To the right one enters the turbine hall, built in the early 1900s. It has been subjected to considerable so-called revitalisation over the past five years.
 - a. The interactive *Ecologic* area was very important to our educational activities; it is the subject of burning interest to the tens of thousands of high school students who feel so strongly about climate change that they have conducted major demonstrations on the subject. This area needed refreshment - it was last updated about 2011. But it was pulled down in 2022 and replaced with *100 Conversations* This was a specially built theatrette at which a weekly lecture was given by relevant experts. I attended four of these and the maximum attendance was less than 40. *Ecologic* certainly had far more attendees in an average day than *100 Conversations* had in a week, and their level of involvement was far

greater. Some teachers used *Ecologic* to great effect.

With *100 Conversations* elaborate provisions were made for people to replay videos of the weekly talks, but the only time I saw the video booths being used was one occasion when a teenage boy and girl were getting to know each other very well.

The whole *100 Conversations* exercise could have been carried out in existing theatrettes had a saving of at least \$100,000. If this is the standard of the proposed rejuvenation there will be great negative impact on the museum environment.

- b. The area to the north of *Ecologic* was 'revitalised' by the removal of the massive display cabinets that were a part of the original design. These cabinets contained a changing display of transport items which were used to great effect by the young educators. Using *Visible Thinking*, a teaching technique regarded by many as being entirely appropriate to modern world needs, these teachers always had thoroughly engaged participants. The area was carpeted, which served as noise insulation and the groups could sit anywhere. This area is now open space, the floors are polished concrete (this process was very expensive) and its main use is seen in Figure 2.
- c. The manner in which these displays were removed was appalling, No attempt was made even to cover the exhibits to protect them from dust. As a result, they were first covered with a deep layer of dry dust from the removal of the specially designed carpets, then hygroscopic gypsum from the display cabinets, and finally, metallic dust from the use of angle grinders to cut through the 40 cm girders that were an integral part of the museum building. The aircraft and other exhibits were later cleaned, but the vigorous cleaning required should never have been necessary. This was not good for all exhibits, but for the Blériot it was particularly dangerous because of its wood / canvas / metal construction.
- d. The aircraft, apart from the Catalina and the Beechcraft air ambulance, were removed from the ceiling of the turbine hall. We believe that no specialist aircraft engineer was in attendance for their disassembly. We believe that the Government does not appreciate the difficulty in removing these items. Unless huge holes are knocked in the massive brick walls, the Catalina will have to be taken through the rail entrance door and even when the fuselage is tilted there are only a few centimetres of clearance on each side. The Beechcraft is of monocoque construction and can only be removed if paces are cut from it. This will make it almost impossible to restore. Also, see the comments below about the Apollo rocket engine.
- e. Also in this area was a viewing platform for the aircraft display. It contained relevant information panels. This meant that the aircraft could be viewed from ground level, first-floor level, and, from viewing platforms on the mezzanine floors at the next two levels, and finally from the level five mezzanine floor at the South of the turbine hall. This whole area was spectacular: it cannot be recreated in the proposed revitalisation as seen in the presented plans.
- f. Proceeding further north we come to an area that has not yet been 'revitalised'. We see a horse-driven omnibus, and a tram that ran from the adjoining Harwood

building on Sydney's first tram line, the power for which was supplied by the beautifully built 1899 powerhouse adjoining the turbine hall.

- g. Adjoining that we have locomotive 1243, built in 1882 only a few hundred metres from THE Powerhouse MUSEUM. It has a very popular interactive feature, where participants can hear well-presented explanations of the work of the locomotive and its crew.
- h. On the other side of the platform we have the Governor's carriage which shows VIP transport that precedes the automobile and aircraft.
- i. Further north we have the central station destination board of the mid-20th century. It creates huge interest among people of all ages, and particularly promotes intergenerational discussions and widens understanding of NSW geography.
- j. Adjoining this we have an elevated signal box and manual railway signals that illustrate the way trains were controlled to ensure safety, with additional displays in the signal box.
- k. We then enter the space area. The huge rocket engine dominates. When it is considered that it was only one of five engines that powered the first stage of moon rockets, it dramatically illustrates the size of these vehicles. This is scheduled for removal as part of the revitalisation. It has to be moved in its supporting frame, over 10 metres high and on a 5-metre square base. To remove it it will be necessary to make a corresponding hole in the massive brick walls which are up to 1.5 metres thick. This is a task of great difficulty and cost. and if the wall is breached there will be consequent degradation of its appearance. The EIS will have had yet another serious impact on the museum's environment. Matters such as this are not addressed in the EIS,
- l. The area then features a display of Australia's first satellite and a sample of moon rock. Only 382 kilograms of material have been brought back from the moon. We enter a film area where Australian astronauts describe their activities, then an area that replicates the living quarters of the International Space Station, stressing the physiological problems of weightlessness.
- m. We also have a display of satellites hanging from the ceiling, which fill that void with fascinating and highly educational material. It contains one of the few fully functional Sputnik satellites outside the Soviet Union,
- n. The star attraction of this area is the zero-gravity simulation. It gives participants a simulation of the visual effects of weightlessness. Removal will be damaging, and it will either be dumped – waste of a wonderful attraction – or reinstalled elsewhere, at huge cost.

We then move westward into the *Experimentations* area, demonstrably the most popular area of THE Powerhouse MUSEUM. This provides a Questacon-like experience, involving many exciting physical and mental activities and displays. These are very important for city children who are predominantly apartment dwellers.

It only occupies one floor level, so either it will be retained as the bottom level of the huge box area, wasting all the space above it, or it will not be replaced. There is no indication in the released plans of any other suitable space for this facility. Its loss will certainly have a great impact on the present museum environment.

To the south of this area is the final display mounted by the museum before its closure – *1001 Objects*. This major display has attracted many favourable comments, and certainly the best work done during the 2019-2024 period of revitalisation. It opened in mid-August 2023. It is reported to have cost \$4 million to mount, and if that is so the daily cost of the exhibition is about \$21,800 until the museum closed on February 4. If stripped out as specified in the EIS, this will have a great impact on the museum's environment. But if it is retained it will be an excellent centrepiece for the reopening of the museum.

Further to the east, we have a large gallery stretching almost the length of the museum that has been empty for the last few years and is ideal for temporary exhibitions. Also in the area are facilities already used by creative artists.

The point of the narrative of this section is that level 1 of THE Powerhouse Museum is an exciting and attractive area of the museum. Revitalisation efforts of recent years, except *1001 Objects*, have been disastrous. The Government's present administration has had a very negative impact on the environment of the museum. If sanity prevails, and the museum is not closed for revitalisation, an early priority must be the establishment of a management structure influenced by capable people with museum qualifications and experience.

If the Government goes ahead with its plans it is imperative that they clearly set out their overall aims for the museum and justify the tremendous expense by demonstrating how the new facilities will be better than THE Powerhouse MUSEUM. We do not believe that the Government's proposal will indeed support the revitalisation of the museum spaces for contemporary and flexible use in line with contemporary museum practice and the cultural needs of NSW.

Final recommendation

- The museum should be reopened as quickly as possible, with an interim leadership from a specialist selected person to conduct a salvage operation preventing further degradation of the museum and restoring public confidence and involvement.
- A proper inquiry should be held into the procedures that have been followed, or more correctly, have been neglected, since 2014, and appropriate lessons learnt.
- A high-level and wide-ranging series of conferences should be held to develop museum policy for the future. THE Powerhouse MUSEUM should be a leader in adopting this policy.
- THE Powerhouse MUSEUM must always retain its position as Australia's major Museum of the Applied Arts and Sciences, in its present wonderful heritage building, its present location, most accessible to the city, the state, the nation and the world.