

OBJECTION 2 – POWERHOUSE ULTIMO ‘REVITALISATION’

On 15 June 2024, I made my initial submission about the proposed ‘Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation’

One of my points in that submission was that the entire Powerhouse Museum site should be included in a State Heritage Register listing, supported by reasons why the then current listing was plainly inadequate.

On Friday 12 July 2024, the Government Gazette published a ‘Notice of Listing on the State Heritage Register’ of the ‘Powerhouse Museum Complex’.

This was seemingly good news but a quick scan of the listing revealed ‘Exemptions’ that with the stroke of a pen deny any significance to the post-1980 features of the buildings on the greatly enlarged site described by the extension of the curtilage.

With a sense of political timing that looked like a PR distraction from the onslaught of objections to the EIS, the Minister for the Arts issued a press release on 16 September, a full two months after the gazettal of the expanded listing of the Powerhouse Museum Complex¹, to announce that the SHR listing ‘guaranteed the Museum’s future in Ultimo’. If only that were true – but it isn’t, in terms of any rational understanding of what the Powerhouse Museum represents to the NSW public who own it and its collections.

The State Heritage Register’s ‘Statement of Significance’ for the Powerhouse Museum Complex includes the wording

The Powerhouse Museum Complex has State heritage significance for innovative approaches to power generation and museology in NSW history. Ultimo Power House (former) is of State historic, aesthetic, and technical heritage significance as the first large state-owned electricity generating station in NSW. Its adaptive reuse as the Powerhouse Museum in 1981 and 1988, including the Harwood and Wran buildings (respectively), has State historic, social, and associative significance. As part of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, it has a long association with NSW technical education and industry. Aboriginal people express the ongoing social significance of the place, including as a potential source of pre and early contact information and as a marker of 1980s protests by Aboriginal people.

As mild as this language is in identifying the significance of the site’s use for the Powerhouse Museum, it nonetheless clearly states that the use of the site *as a museum* since its adaptive re-use from 1979-1988 museum use of the site demonstrates historic, social and associative significance. The social significance of the use of the site as a museum is particularly emphasised in the subsequent paragraphs of the listing.

Yet the Minister for Heritage has granted a series of astonishing exemptions that progressively permit a series of acts of heritage vandalism to a supposedly state significant site.

Is the building fabric of the Powerhouse Museum’s interior spaces, which contribute greatly to its success and international reputation as a museum, to be considered ‘significant’ or not?

¹ Refer <https://www.hms.heritage.nsw.gov.au/App/Item/ViewItem?itemId=5068313>

The EIS for the Powerhouse Ultimo revitalisation² is full of assertions for which there is no documentary evidence. For example, under 'Project Background on p.12, the first objective of the project is to

'Deliver and international standard museum on the site of the existing Powerhouse Ultimo...'

No evidence has ever been presented that the current configuration of the Museum - including in particular its existing interior floors - does not provide more than adequate facilities for any international exhibition. This claim may be coupled with the implication contained in the phrase on p.16 that

'The proposal will facilitate the revitalisation of Powerhouse Ultimo and provide world class museum and exhibition spaces...'

This implies that the current purpose-designed Museum has either never offered this or doesn't now.

This is made worse by there being no evidence offered for how the current Museum is inadequate. Certainly the current Museum interiors would benefit from refurbishment but not wholesale demolition.

Another example:

The second objective states that the revitalisation will

'Provide exhibition spaces that are flexible and adaptable to ensure that the museum is capable of showcasing the Powerhouse's significant collection...'

The current interior spaces of the Museum have shown their capacity for 36 years to do just that, while the yawning volumes of the proposed 'presentation spaces' are intuitively much less capable of achieving this. Certainly the presentations by senior museum staff and the architects' representatives failed to make the case for the proposed changes.

For these and many other reasons too numerous to raise in this paper, I **STRONGLY OBJECT** TO THIS FURTHER ASPECT OF THE GOVERNMENT'S DESTRUCTIVE PLANS FOR THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM SITE.

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² Refer <file:///Users/andrewgrant/Downloads/SSD%20Report%20April%202024.pdf>