

4 October 2024

Ms Annika Hather
Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure
Locked Bag 5022
PARRAMATTA NSW 2124

Submitted via NSW Planning Portal

Dear Ms Hather,

National Trust submission relating to the Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation

The National Trust of Australia (NSW) has long advocated for the protection of the Powerhouse Museum and its important collection. In May 2024, we made a detailed submission on the Powerhouse Ultimo Renewal (SSD-32927319) and noted three key areas of concern:

- There was no Conservation Management Plan to guide the “heritage revitalisation”
- There was little detail about the actual exhibition spaces in the museum
- The actual functioning of the museum in terms of exhibition and display areas was not clear

At that time, we noted:

The first step to any heritage project is to assess the significance of the place. The first step in any museum project is to consider what will be on display. The Powerhouse Museum Renewal project needs to consider these two fundamental issues to ensure it is guided towards a successful outcome.

From the documentation that has been provided in the Response to Submissions – which was, once again, another real opportunity to address these long-espoused community concerns about the project – the National Trust remains concerned for the Powerhouse Museum.

Since the previous documentation was exhibited, the *Powerhouse Museum Complex* (SHR 02045) has had its curtilage updated on the NSW State Heritage Register (SHR) in line with the National Trust’s recommendation to include the Harwood and Wran Buildings as integral to the history and future operation of this place, and noting that “the complex in 1988 was considered at the time to be a highly innovative design, producing a state-of-the-art museum by world standards.”¹

Our comments are made in the context of this new heritage status of the place, and of course with an understanding that this project represents a significant public investment and major renewal of the museum.

¹ Statement of Significance for the State Heritage Register listing for the Powerhouse Museum Complex



A note on the requirements to update the museum, and its changing context

The National Trust need to make clear from the outset that it recognises that our museums, and indeed our cities, change over time. This is true in the context of the Powerhouse Museum, where the revitalised “Goods Line” presents a new opportunity to connect with the city, and new technology and revised museum standards require continued investment in our cultural and scientific institutions.

This reality is reflected in the SHR listing when it states *“ongoing upgrades of fabric and fixtures for museum use reflect changing requirements over time in response to contemporary museum standards and for the museum to exercise the functions and activities of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences Act 1945.”*

Heritage listing does not mean a place is to be “frozen in time”, but it does mean that changes should be carefully considered to ensure that those components which contribute to the significance of the place are understood and preserved.

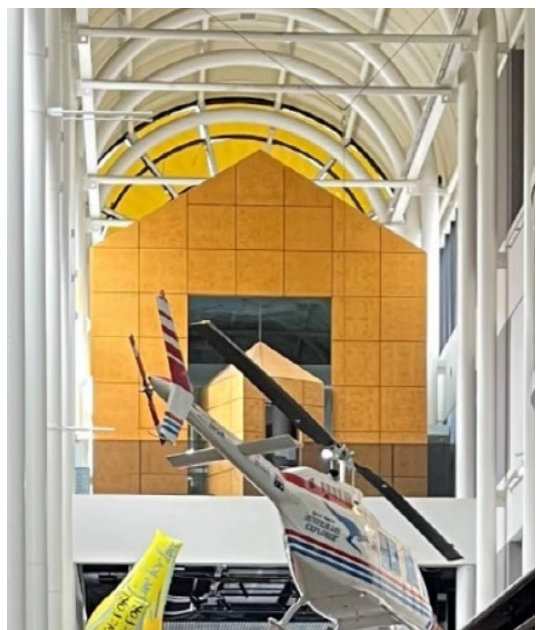
The most basic and longest-established way of doing this is to have a Conservation Management Plan prepared which assesses the place and suggests the best ways to preserve significance. Such documents have recently successfully guided the renewal of the Sydney Opera House and White Bay Power Station.

Despite repeated pleas, and assurances that one would be provided, there remains no updated Conservation Management Plan to guide the heritage renewal of the Powerhouse Museum.

National Trust Recommendation:

A revised and updated Conservation Management Plan must be prepared to guide the heritage renewal of the Ultimo Powerhouse Museum.

Such a document must assess the significance of all parts of the site, including the Wran Building, and consider the actual operation of the site as a world-class museum over a 35-year period.



The original design intentions of the Powerhouse Museum, in particular the Wran building (left) and Galleria (right).



Exhibition Space

The Submissions and Amendment Report (Ethos Urban, 3 September 2024) notes that 162 submissions were received, with 5 in support, 19 commenting and 138 objecting to the proposal. Numerous issues were raised in these submissions, but not all have been satisfactorily answered.

In relation to the exhibition spaces within the museum, the Submission Report notes that *“the Amended Design Report... demonstrates the strategic improvements for the Powerhouse Museum’s capacity to showcase its vast collection and ability to facilitate world-class exhibitions”*. It is unclear where this occurs in the Design Report, which is unparalleled in its lack of explanation. In relation to exhibition spaces, the Design Report (p.9) simply shows a diagram of “exhibition spaces” and notes this *illustrates the location of the four major column free presentation spaces and the program space*.

In the section of the Design Report (p.10) noted “Museum Evolution” the document states that *“completion of the Wran Building arch through removal of mezzanine spaces and ramp enables creation of a dedicated and fit-for-purpose exhibition space for the museum. The retrofitted exhibition space in the Wran Building is brought up to standard through removal of columns and creation of a cohesive, mechanically suitable, sound and light isolated space.”* It then details how expanded aluminium foam lining creates a remarkable and uncluttered space ready for a range of activities “including exhibition of collection items.”

This “fit for purpose space” is illustrated in the report by a very basic visual representation (below) which contains a small number of stick figure people, no collection items or indeed no activity beneath four incredibly utilitarian lighting trusses which dominate what is intended to be an “uncluttered soaring museum room”. With so much investment proposed, this would be an incredibly poor outcome.

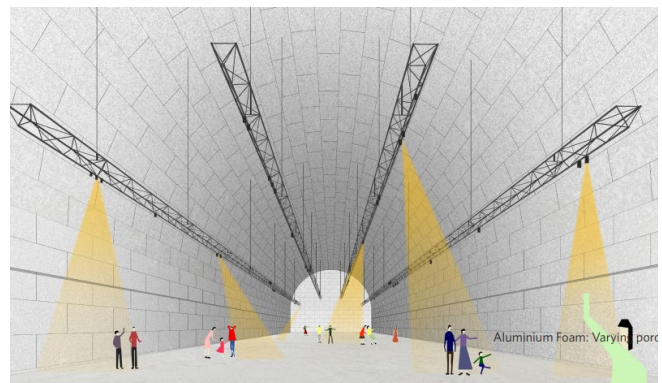
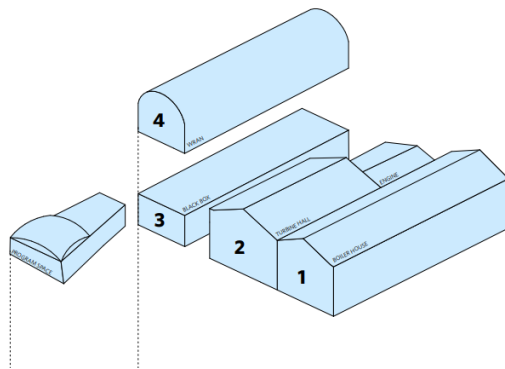


Diagram of “exhibition spaces” and the “Wran Exhibition interior” from the Design Report

Based on the information presented, the National Trust remain unconvinced that the Design Report *“demonstrates the strategic improvements for the Powerhouse Museum’s capacity to showcase its vast collection and ability to facilitate world-class exhibitions.”*

National Trust Recommendation:

It needs to be documented and established how the actual exhibition spaces will showcase the vast Powerhouse Museum collection and ability to facilitate world-class exhibitions.

This is the core function of the museum and has not been clearly shown in any documentation to date.



Heritage Assessment

The Trust remain greatly concerned by the heritage processes guiding this “heritage renewal”. As we have stated on numerous occasions, and again in this letter, a Conservation Management Plan was and is required for this museum. It is our understanding that the entire collection has now been removed, and most of the interiors have been completely stripped.

Once again, the Heritage Impact Statement has simply ignored the actual Powerhouse Museum in its heritage assessment, simply stating (p.96) that *“the design proposes the removal of all interior modern insertions of little and intrusive heritage significance within the Engine house, Turbine Hall, Boiler House, Switch House, the ultimo Post office and the North Annex to allow for the opening up of original, significant internal spaces for multi-height exhibitions.”*

The focus appears to be on stripping out any previous museum fabric and simply returning the spaces to their previous industrial shells, and this is confirmed (p.173) when it states that the significance of the place as an electricity-generating station will be enabled to be read and understood *“through the removal of non-significant post 1980s fit-out, mezzanines and otherwise intrusive elements such as external stairs and lifts to reveal the original industrial heritage fabric of the Heritage Core Buildings.”*

In fact, the HIS now goes on to argue (p.161) that the c.1988 adaptive re-use of the site as a museum *“had their own cumulative and major physical impacts on the Heritage Core of buildings”* and that *“these modern physical insertions have had a major cumulative impact on the readability, and appreciation of the SHR listed heritage significance of the Ultimo Power House (former) and Ultimo Post office (ie: the Heritage Core buildings) in their own right and as part of the overall museum experience.”*

In other words, the heritage assessment has found that the award-winning adaptive re-use of the Ultimo Powerhouse into the Powerhouse Museum – indeed the very things that preserved the industrial heritage of the site and turned it into a museum – have had a major impact upon the historic buildings and been detrimental to the museum experience. This is despite the new state heritage listing arguing that *“the Powerhouse Museum Complex has State aesthetic and technical significance for its successful reuse as a purpose-designed and built museum successfully integrating old buildings with new.”*

The HIS attempts to justify the proposal in these terms. It argues (p.161) that the “bricking up of windows” and the “wholesale removal of historic walls” as part of the original museum experience were examples of major detrimental heritage impacts, while then promoting the entire removal of the main external wall of the Wran Building, and the complete bricking up of the entire galleria are positive outcomes. In terms of the display of items it simply says (p.14) *“retain the Boulton and Watt Steam Engine, Catalina and Locomotive No.1 within suitable spaces in the revitalised museum.”* It does not even assure anyone that the Boulton and Watt engine will remain in-situ.

The heritage significance of the Wran Building was the only component of the site not assessed in the Draft Conservation Management Plan prepared by Curio Projects for the initial SSD in May 2022. The revised state heritage listing of this place was an opportunity to resolve this anomaly, but it is still yet to occur. We cannot agree with the HIS (p.69) that *“the effect of the SHR Listing 2024 is that the intangible values of the Wran building are listed and the tangible values (ie: actual fabric of the building) are not listed.”*

The National Trust acknowledge that this is a robust complex of buildings and that it could facilitate significant interventions, however we have read the Heritage Impact Statement prepared by Curio Projects and we cannot agree with the majority of its findings. We have consistently provided advice on how this could have been rectified, and this has consistently been ignored.



The Galleria

The Trust notes that the proposal includes major modification of the Wran Building, including changing its length, dimensions, shape and materiality.

One core part of the original Powerhouse Museum however, and the location of the Boulton and Watt Steam Engine, is the Galleria. This space had a number of defining post-modern features, and also referenced, through its glazed end walls, the original architectural language of the first “Garden Palace” which was itself an extension of the “Crystal Palace” museum concept from the 19th century. This remains a major component of the site, and could remain a distinctive space linking the Turbine Hall and any reconfigured Wran Building exhibition space.

We note however that this distinctive element will be entirely bricked-in at each end, with the HIS (p.86) noting that *“the Galleria will be transformed to become an exhibition space through the relining of the internal space and exclusion of daylight generally.”* The HIS does not actually assess the impact of this change.

The Trust would argue that the glazed end walls of this particular space are a unique spatial quality of the site - a unique, light-filled transition space between the two enclosed spaces either side. To completely enclose this space would remove the last remaining vestige of the original Powerhouse Museum. We urge that this particular space not be enclosed and that this one point remain where there can be an actual connection between indoors and outdoors, old and new, industrial and modern.



The end walls could of course be reinterpreted in a new and engaging way, but the core qualities of this space – as a place that admits natural light – should remain, from an aesthetic as well as a sustainable viewpoint.

The current proposal, for which no images are shown, will transform this great space into a windowless tunnel.



Conclusion

The National Trust has a very great interest in the Powerhouse Museum, dating back many years. In 1974, the Trust listed the *Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences and its Historical Collection* and has continued to advocate for this institution and its collection since that time. In 2015, we nominated the current Powerhouse Museum for inclusion on the State Heritage Register, and have since made countless submissions to various inquiries relating to the proposals to close the Powerhouse Museum site at Ultimo.

We have welcomed the decision to retain the museum at Ultimo, the commitment to funding the renewal of the museum, and the recent expansion of the State Heritage Listing.

At the core of this involvement has been the simple request of the Trust to:

- (a) recognise the significance of the Powerhouse Museum as a museum; and
- (b) focus on the need for the building to provide appropriate and engaging spaces for the permanent display of its astounding collection.

Yet again, the opportunity to address these two simple concerns has been lost. A Conservation Management Plan still has not been prepared to guide the works, and the actual nature of the exhibition spaces has not been communicated.

With the commitment in the HIS (p.7) that *“the Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation is a transformative investment by the NSW Government to establish a world-class museum that will significantly contribute to an important and developing part of Sydney”* it remains more important than ever that the actual nature of the future museum be outlined, to address the concerns that continue to be raised.