

Pyrmont Action is an incorporated community group formed to work with local and state governments to improve the physical and social environment of our city.

1 October, 2024

**Additional submission on the assessment of the SSD application regarding the Powerhouse Ultimo 'Revitalisation' Project.**

It is our view, based on available expert evidence, that if the 'revitalisation' goes ahead a huge amount of money will be spent to destroy a very significant cultural asset and transform it into yet another function centre displaying a few large items of historical interest. Alan Croker, leading heritage architect writes:

***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. ...***

***... 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.***

This submission has been written by Tom Lockley, Powerhouse Museum Project Lead for PA. He has been principal of a K-12 school, and holds postgraduate qualifications in educational administration. His CV includes:

- coordinator for university residential programs for children from isolated country areas.

- volunteer at the Powerhouse Museum, interacting with over 30,000 visitors from 2008 to 2020 (18 months full time equivalent).
- volunteer at the former Australian Aviation Museum at Bankstown 2002-8 as archivist (two years full time equivalent).
- Written three booklets on the history of the Powerhouse Museum and two on the aircraft collection of MAAS Museum. The Powerhouse Museum booklets were circulated to all NSW MPs and relevant agencies, May 2016, August 2016 and August 2018.
- Coordinated celebrations of the hundredth anniversary of the visit of Maurice Guillaux, pilot of the MAAS Bleriot.

He has diligently followed the museum controversy since 2010 and is ready to give supporting information for all assertions contained in this submission: email [tomlockley@gmail.com](mailto:tomlockley@gmail.com).

On the basis of the attached submission we urge the Department of Planning to reject the proposed Powerhouse Museum 'Revitalisation' project as exhibited.

Ken Loudon, Deputy Convenor

Elizabeth Elenius, Secretary

## Introduction

### **Pyrmont Action Inc rejects the latest application submitted by Infrastructure NSW for the Powerhouse Museum Ultimo 'Revitalisation'.**

Against the wishes of many who have commented on earlier versions of this unacceptable proposal, the Government has allowed the closure of the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo and the removal of the aircraft display, the replacement of *Ecologic* with *100 Conversations* and the general diminution of applied arts / science content. It is proposed to demolish the space exhibit, including the popular and informative zero gravity simulation. *Experimentations*, a very popular and educational activity centre, is very important in a city where so many children live in apartments, is also scheduled for destruction. It is likely that many other items will be added to this list, and we have no definite information about what is going to replace them. 'Revitalisation', as carried out since 2020 and proposed for the future, has actually been a process of destruction and degradation.

This submission is in two parts: a general overview of the total program, outlining its deficiencies, and a case study of the 'revitalisation' plans for the 1899 Powerhouse. This latter section describes the deficiencies of the Government's proposed 'revitalisation' of just one section of the museum. Similar comments could be made on all other areas of the museum.

## General overview

The flawed process that has been followed over the past ten years cannot be fully explained in a single document. Many organisations and individuals have rejected both the process, the proposals, and the failure to heed the alternatives put forward by undisputed museum/curatorial/architectural/heritage experts in their many submissions (available on request) including:

- *Alternatives have never been properly investigated for the various proposals over the past ten years regarding changes to the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences and particularly THE Powerhouse MUSEUM. The Governments of the day have simply ordered that their preferred project be carried out.*
- *There has been **no** participation in the planning process by people with significant museum qualifications and experience, including development of the latest proposal. A list of eminent and qualified supporters of THE Powerhouse MUSEUM has been submitted to the Museum and relevant Government departments/instrumentalities to support this assertion (can be supplied on request).*

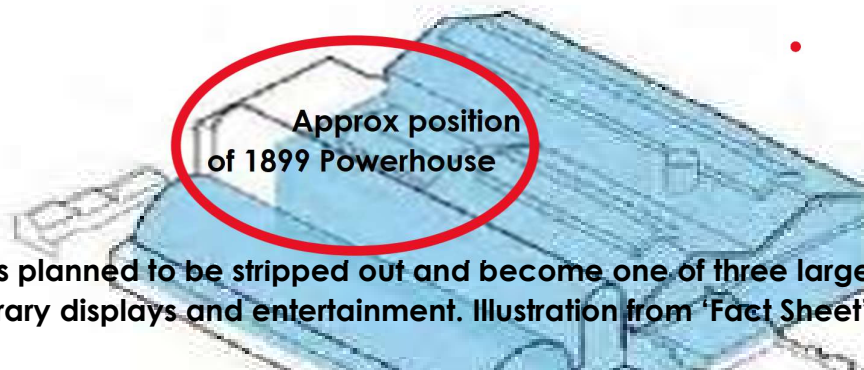
- *Governments have imposed excessive secrecy and taken unexplained, non-democratic measures to avoid following due process, including refusal to provide the business case for its proposals to two Legislative Council Inquiries.*
- *There has been no genuine consultation with any significant stakeholders on basic issues already decided by Cabinet.*
- *Evidence-based and unprecedented opposition to the project from the general public and the museum and arts community have been treated with contempt.*
- *The current proposal represents a large waste of taxpayers' money as genuine refurbishment could be achieved for significantly less than currently foreshadowed.*
- *Restricting the heritage listing to the original powerhouse fails to include the award-winning Bicentennial Museum conversion or the associated Harwood buildings as recommended by heritage experts.*
- *There will be few permanent displays, a 75% reduction of exhibition floor space, a general lack of an Education policy for the Powerhouse Museum, and an emphasis on unexplained, 'unmediated' exhibits, all of which are of great concern to those with museum qualifications and experience.*

The above comments are based on evidence repeatedly provided to successive Governments over nearly 10 years of the development of the current plan without any independent examination. The case for appropriate protection of the buildings made by many organisations and individuals over this period have been totally ignored.

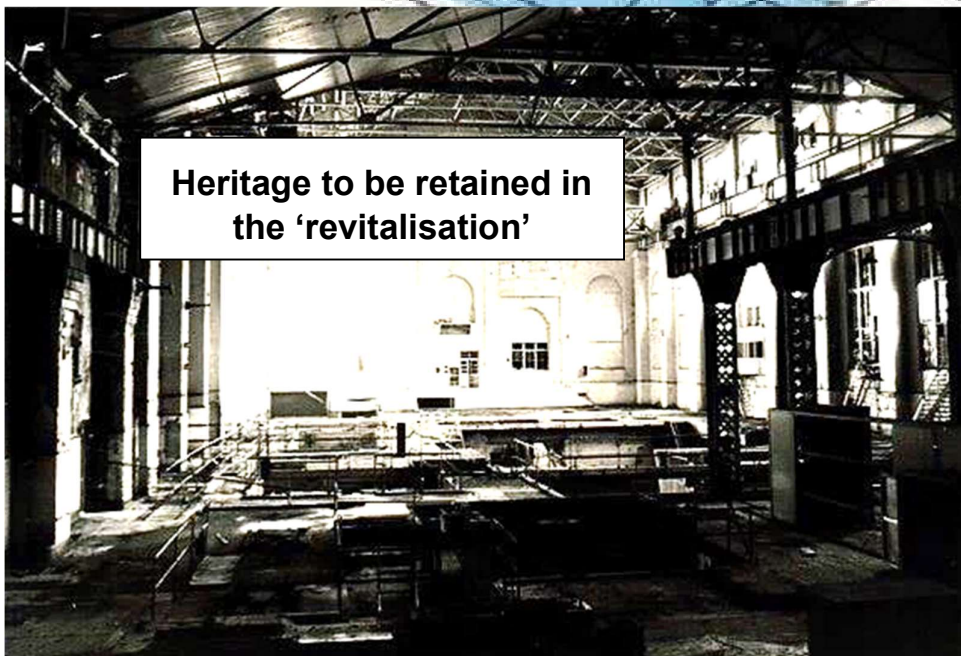
The next section discusses the heritage values of a sample part of the museum, namely the 1899 original Powerhouse building. It aims to demonstrate that the planned 'revitalisation' is nothing more than destruction of this remarkable museum feature, itself a fine example of heritage preservation.

## Case study: Heritage of the 1899 Powerhouse (present steam gallery).

The current SSD application is based on a heritage assessment that regards only the original fabric of the building as worthy of protection. The rest – the mezzanine floors, the permanent exhibitions and smaller display areas are available for destruction, and the plan is to make the blue area below into three large display areas populated by transient exhibits.



The area is planned to be stripped out and become one of three large bare 'boxes' for temporary displays and entertainment. Illustration from 'Fact Sheet' in EO p55.

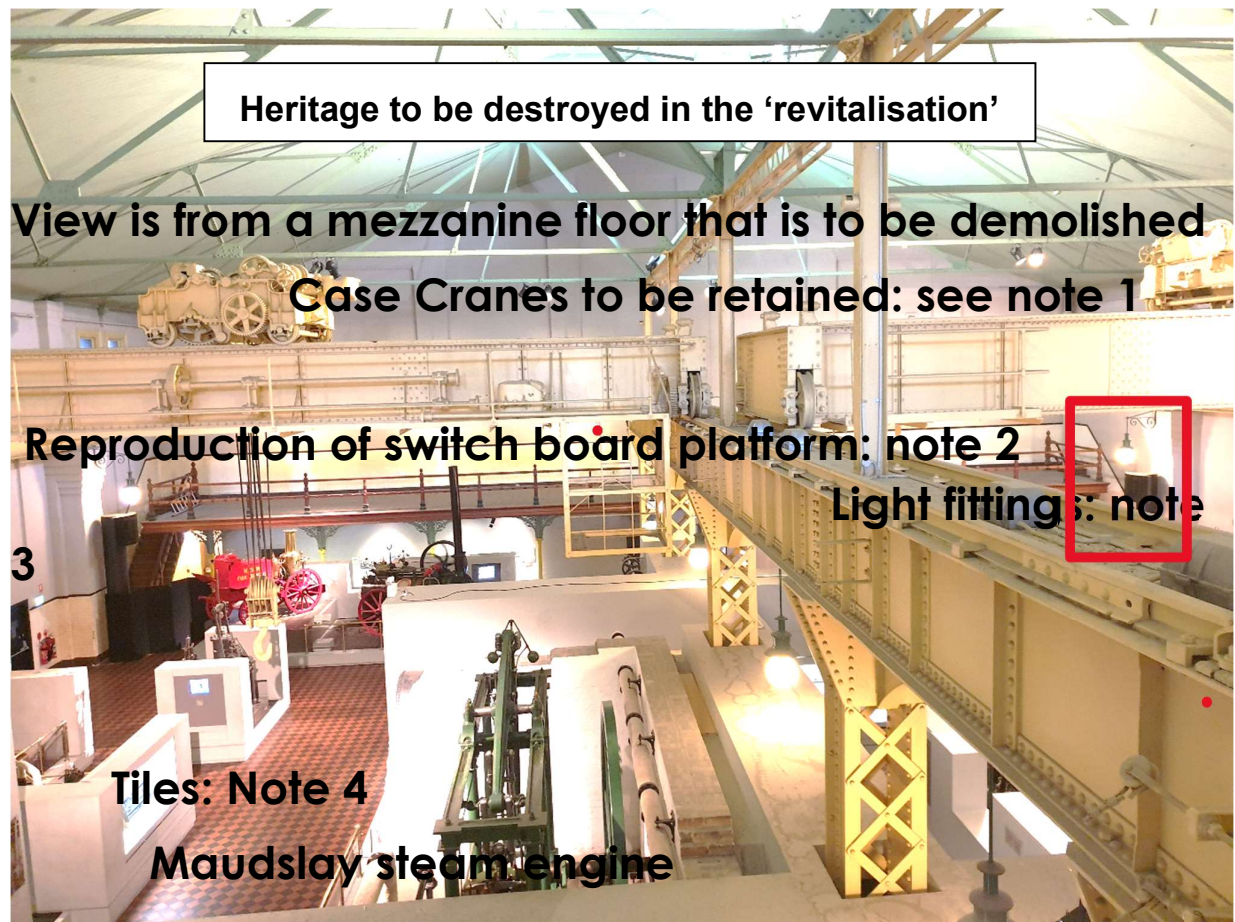


This is the area before the 1988 adaptive reuse: the picture was taken about 1976 by Graeme Dodds, who was involved in an early investigation of the refurbishment of the derelict Ultimo Power Station as a state

headquarters of the School of Plumbing and Sheetmetal for teaching relevant tradesmen. The point is that this area was not very exciting in terms of original building features to be preserved for heritage reasons.



This picture was taken in about 2017 by Tom Lockley in the early morning when the museum was closed. It does not do this area justice but does illustrate some of the heritage features introduced by the 1988 adaptive reuse.



Between November 1897 and December 1899 Sydney's first major power station was built, supplying 10 kms of tram track for 100 electric trams. Despite the quick building process, workmanship throughout was of superb quality. The whole process was of amazing efficiency, especially when an entire new technology was being introduced. Australia was far distant from the sources of the technology and the only quick communication was by cable.

**Note 1:** The Case Cranes. These are an undervalued treasure of this museum. Prof Janet Bednarek, former chair of the Department of History at the University of Dayton, Ohio is known worldwide as a leading transport heritage expert. She notes that examples of these cranes *in situ* are very rare, and the fact that they are installed so far away from their source adds greatly to their significance.

These must be retained during the 'revitalisation' as they are part of the original powerhouse and add greatly to the significance of the building as a museum.

However, they will lose much of their impact if they are just decorations for an amusement hall/function centre, which seems most likely.

**Note 2:** Switchboard platform. The 1988 project reproduced the wooden platform that gave access to the original switchboard. The joinery of the platform and staircase is of the exquisite standard of the original, destroyed decades before.

**Note 3:** Light fittings. A few original light fittings were retained and the original lighting layout was reconstructed with reproductions of the originals and are an important example of early electric lighting and the elegant design of the time.

**Note 4:** Tiles. The original powerhouse floor was tiled with specially commissioned tiles. These were reproduced for the 1988 project.

Volunteers often conducted tours of the area as part of the history of the building. Participants were invariably interested in these matters and appreciated the total heritage of the building. This outcome will be less effective if the 1988 reproductions are destroyed.

**The preceding material demonstrates that the heritage value of the building is significantly enhanced by the 1988 work, and that demolishing this will almost entirely remove the audience's appreciation of the original.**

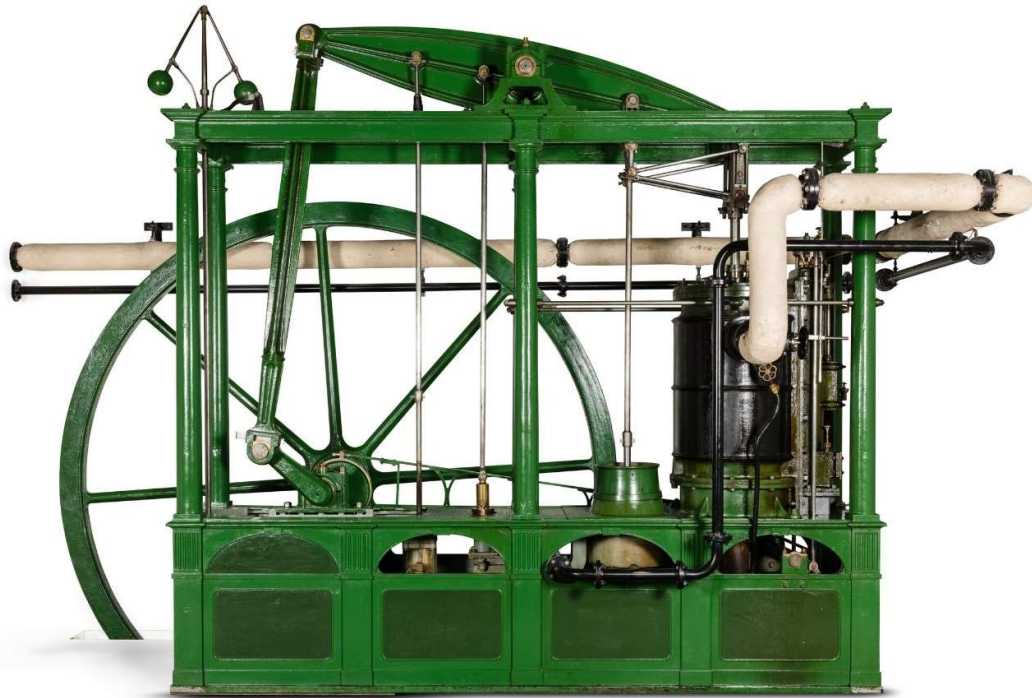
Governments have consistently avoided answering the relevance of the current exhibits to the heritage aspects of the museum claiming that this is a matter for Museum management. This is disingenuous in two regards:

- a. The significance of both the building and its exhibits is enhanced if there is a connection between them. In this case, the match of the steam engines with the first power station provides a rare and powerful impact.
- b. These items cannot easily be removed and replaced with temporary exhibitions, eg experts have testified that installing the Maudslay engine in 1988 was a huge undertaking, and any removal/reinstallation will be disproportionately costly in comparison with leaving it where it is. Also, the lack of experienced steam engineers in 2024 compared with the 1988 situation, means that it is highly possible that it will not be installed to working condition.

No world-class museum has dispensed with its basic permanent collection, and we

need our museum to have permanent core displays, temporary displays and theme displays that will have temporary items on rotation.

The heritage of steam is brilliantly demonstrated in the present setup, which includes eight working engines and several significant static displays such as the revolutionary Parsons steam turbine of 1994. The 1839 Maudslay beam engine is an outstanding example, but moving several of the other working machines will also be expensive, difficult, and counterproductive in terms of setting up an appropriate display.



*The Maudslay engine was carried from Sydney to Goulburn (ca 200 km) by bullock dray in 1839 and was used for flour milling and brewery activities until 1921. It is a remarkable example of entrepreneurial initiative that can serve as a fine example for present times.*

The popularity of the steam gallery must also be stressed. It is the second most popular permanent display area after *Experimentations*. Since 2020 both displays have outperformed almost all major temporary displays, notably *Clay Dynasty*, *Robert Rosen Photography*, *Unforgotten* and *A Line, A Web, A World*, which were expensive to mount, attracted far fewer visitors and provided a less interesting experience for most clients (observations of Tom Lockley, who visited at least twice a week from 2020 till the closure of the museum).



Another characteristic of the 'revitalisation' activities since 2020 has been a downgrading of interactive involvement. None of the displays mentioned above had any such characteristics. The steam gallery has a range of such activities – eg the two reproductions of the steam engines of Heron of Alexandria, which date from the first century BCE, the hand-powered generator, the model of the Boulton and Watt engine and the lift pump demonstrating water supply pre-reticulation. These are very popular with clients.



*None of the 'renderings' of 'revitalised' sections of the museum, as per this example, indicate that there is interesting information material or any interactive exhibits.*

*Also, the 'renderings' typically display an emptiness within the 'museum'. The Government has argued that the present museum is too cluttered and does not provide easy access. They have dealt with this supposed fault by removing nearly everything so that people can move easily! This is clear evidence of the destruction of the vital, living museum that has persisted since 1988 and even earlier.*

There are also glaring inaccuracies in the information provided. The items are out of scale. The circle indicates a position in which the Catalina is depicted: it could

not possibly be seen from this point, and positioning it would involve major demolition of walls that are over 60cm thick and in the protected walls of the 1899 building. The production of this image, even as a concept illustration, indicates that the perpetrators have an inappropriate understanding of this wonderful building.

The errors, irrelevancies and impossibilities of this 'rendering' clearly indicate that there has been no serious thought about what will replace the wonderful things that will be destroyed/removed. This impression is heightened when it is noted that the overall philosophy of the 'revitalised' museum is unclear, exacerbated by the non-release of an actual educational policy, both formal and informal, if it exists at all.