

I am writing to **OPPOSE** proposed renewal works at the Powerhouse Museum (PHM) in Ultimo, as per: EXHIBITION OF AMENDED STATE SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENT APPLICATION / RESPONSE TO SUBMISSIONS REPORT Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation SSD-67588459.

### **Response To Submissions**

Myself and thousands of other people - including experts and professionals - have signed petitions and spoken out against potential significant changes to our museum. Out of the 162 total submissions received during the previous exhibition period, only five of those supported these changes, with a clear majority of 138, or eighty five percent, opposed.

The National Trust (NSW) believes that this result is due to "the ongoing concern over the integrity of the "heritage" focus of the project, apprehension regarding the quantity and quality of exhibition space, and a lack of clarity about the future of the MAAS collection." I share these concerns.

The response to these submissions - submissions made in relation to the exhibition of this proposal's documentation - in my opinion, tends to raise more questions than answers. Some concerns appear to be simply 'brushed aside,' so to speak, as not being relevant, or deemed the responsibility of 'other departments' etc. The National Trust is also "concerned that the amended development documents do not address many of the concerns raised in the exhibition process." Our concerns with the plans outlined in these documents are relevant and should be addressed. These plans will make alterations to our museum which will impact its ability to continue to display its collection in the way we've come to love over the years. Of course we should be concerned.

### **Heritage Listing**

I also feel the result of some important decisions that were made (and associated information) in relation to heritage, was released close to, or after the deadline for the submission process had ended, meaning we were unable to address this aspect.

I am concerned that the Heritage Council's 'heritage listing' includes multiple 'exemptions' and does not include the PHM collection itself! These items and their connection to their purpose-built home, are the very definition of heritage. The Heritage Council notes that the collection is "not covered by the current SHR listing or the amended SHR listing", however, it is "an integral part of the Power House Museum Complex" and the "inter-relationship of the purpose-built Museum and its permanent displays is relevant." So why then was it not included as well?

## **Proposed Changes**

Any changes, or 'improvements' should put the museum's purpose, heritage, exhibits and legacy, as well as the public interest, first. Our concerns point out that we fear these proposed changes will not 'improve' our museum, but rather destroy its very fabric instead. Our heritage and culture deserve much more respect than this.

The ABC reported that Bob Debus said this project is "the kind of revitalisation that you can only manage once in a century." Since the museum is only thirty six years old, why does it need a once in a century revitalisation already? Therefore, if it needs to be revitalised again, perhaps in another thirty six years time, then that would be *two* in a century.

## **Exhibition Space**

A quote from Neville Wran appears on the PHM website: "Everyone knows we have one of the greatest collections in the world in relation to science and technology, most of which has never been seen by the public. This had been because we've had nowhere to display it, which is a tragedy. The new museum will solve a space problem which has plagued the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences for almost a century."

In my opinion, the planning documents appear to show that the PHM we know and love will unfortunately, be essentially 'gutted'. These documents show that its exhibition space will likely be significantly reduced from that which is available at present. The changes will see the Ultimo museum downgraded from a purpose-designed, award-winning, world-renowned historical museum with a plethora of purpose-built rooms, spaces, galleries, theatres, levels and vantage points to explore the many aspects of our culture and heritage, into a 'function' or 'temporary event' centre with a much smaller capacity.

The many intermediate levels/floors installed within the museum help to create an immersive and three-dimensional viewing experience. They enable visitors to 'float about' around the exhibits and the heritage buildings and their fittings, and not just view them from ground level, but also see them up-close and from above and from various other angles as well.

It is my understanding the proposed alterations will just convert the existing exhibition spaces into several large, cavernous halls, devoid of any permanent display infrastructure. It will become a "gutted shell," according to Kylie Winkworth. Removing all of these internal spaces - intermediate floors, mezzanines, balconies etc, will result in an overall loss of floor space for displaying the PHM collection.

Instead of the collection having suitable facilities for it to be on permanent display, I feel the exhibits will have to be displayed temporarily and rotated within the (reduced) allocated space, as it appears the remaining exhibition space will be prioritised for short-term, special exhibitions and attractions from external, or third-party, sources.

The 'Submissions and Amendment Report' states that "Rather than focusing solely on quantitative metrics, such as net floor space, the proposal represents qualitative improvements in clarity, circulation, and the ability of redesigned spaces to effectively showcase exhibits." I would've thought possessing adequate floor space was the main factor in determining the museum's ability to achieve its primary objective of being able to "effectively showcase exhibits" - that is, *all* of its exhibits, not just a select few at a time.

Gone will be the days when you could easily spend several hours meandering about the vastness of the museum's maze of exhibition spaces, discovering and appreciating the extensive collection, and still not manage to see everything that is out on display! Judging by the artist impressions of the 'revitalised' museum, I fear the resulting 'revitalisation' will see visitors leave after a fraction of this time as they will have run out of exhibits to view.

The 'Wran legacy' must be protected in order to maintain the museum's integrity. The proposed changes will only reduce its operational capacity and undermine its purpose of being a purpose-built and culturally significant exhibition and educational facility. It must be remembered that it is a museum, and that this is exactly how it should be retained and operated.

## **The Collection**

My understanding of the 'Detailed Response to Submissions' document (Appendix D), suggests that the aim of the PHM redevelopment is to split the collection across multiple sites, instead of housing it exclusively at the centrally and conveniently located Ultimo site. This document reveals: "The revitalisation ... is occurring within the context of the wider Powerhouse program that includes the recent expansion of Powerhouse Castle Hill and the establishment of Powerhouse Parramatta."

With the collection currently broken up and 'scattered' all over Sydney, how much of it will return to Ultimo? I fear that suggestions only three major exhibits will return may eventuate, due to this reduced exhibition space and emphasis on operating additional remote sites.

The 'Submissions and Amendments Report' confirms my fears: "The Boulton, Watt Steam Engine, Catalina, and Locomotive No.1. will remain at the Powerhouse Ultimo site," and further explains that "The remaining collection items of the Engine House's Steam exhibition are being moved to the Powerhouse Castle Hill site and will not be permanently displayed at Powerhouse Ultimo following the revitalisation."

So OUR Powerhouse Museum is NOT being saved after all! Its collection IS being broken up and scattered across multiple sites! That is not what the Powerhouse Museum was created for. As Neville Wran declared, "The new museum will solve a space problem," however, that space problem looks set to return as a result of this redevelopment. And the solution chosen to 'solve' this new space problem: break up our collection and spread it across the city. These precious exhibits all belong together in the one location - at their home, in Ultimo. A place that is "Pyrmont's biggest cultural drawcard," as described by the National Trust.

## **Entrance**

Reorienting the main entrance to the eastern, CBD side of the museum, will effectively see it 'turn its back' on Ultimo, its long-time home. The museum's address *is* 500 Harris Street Ultimo, after all. The magnificent and iconic grand entry off Harris Street, via the forecourt and the Wran Building, should be retained and celebrated. It should not be re-purposed and hidden behind new structures, as is proposed. There is no reason the museum can't have equal access from both the western and eastern sides, as I believe it has had in the past. I personally have only ever used the main Harris Street entrance, but Kylie Winkworth explains that, "The PHM has long had an entry from the Goods Line until it was closed."

Prominent entrances from both sides would surely increase the accessibility of the museum and therefore attract potentially more visitors. The 'Detailed Response to Submissions' document explains that, "There is still access available from Harris Street via stairs and a lift that travel down to the main entrance." It sounds like what is described is a less obvious, 'rabbit warren-like' entrance that will likely go unnoticed by visitors or be confused as a non-public access point.

Winkworth also writes, "There are no great museums anywhere in the world without a prominent street address and setting," and what a great setting the openness of the Harris Street forecourt and main entrance creates. It is visible, it is obvious and it is welcoming. There is no mistake - this is the Powerhouse Museum and this is where you enter.

## **The Wran Building**

The Wran Building is an award-winning example of Australian architecture which received the highest accolade for architecture in NSW and is described as "a modern architectural gem" by the National Trust. It should continue to take pride of place and be clearly visible, in all its grandeur, as the iconic entrance to an equally grand museum.

It is disrespectful to cover this award winning building's distinctive exterior with bricks and cladding. It is also disrespectful to partially demolish this award winning building and alter its internal layout. And it is disrespectful to obscure the view of this award winning building with the proposed 'New Building' on the forecourt.

The 'Detailed Response to Submissions' document states the brick cladding is proposed, "to balance the impact of the Wran Building on the heritage significance of the Heritage Core buildings through the use of brick as a sympathetic materiality." However, artist renditions illustrate that what this will actually do, is just 'blend' the Wran Building into the overall site. This then makes it difficult to ascertain which are the original brick heritage buildings and which are not, as it blurs the demarcation between old and new.

The heritage listing exemptions stipulate that, "All works to the exterior of buildings erected on the site since 1980, not including works which would significantly alter the significant visual connections between individual buildings within the complex" are included in the exemptions. Note that it states: "works which would significantly alter the significant visual connections between individual buildings" are NOT included. Since covering the Wran Building with bricks would interfere with this connection, then surely this work would not be permitted by the exemptions.

The 'Amended Heritage Impact Statement' explains that "The New Building design [proposed on the forecourt] ... will ensure that the New Building can be easily read as a contemporary new building," demonstrating the importance of an obvious differentiation between existing and newer structures. Cladding the Wran Building with bricks will result in it and the 'New Building' looking very similar, therefore, again, blurring the demarcation between the older, 'original' buildings and these newer additions.

The Wran Building's present stark, high-contrast, black and white exterior, made with modern materials and techniques, not only clearly shows that it is an obvious and deliberate recent addition, but its shape and colours also create an instantly recognisable image that is easily identifiable as belonging to the PHM.

Further, the rationale for the partial demolition of the Wran Building is to reveal the Switch House in its entirety. However, this and the Wran Building will actually be mostly obscured by the 'New Building' proposed to be constructed on the forecourt. The Switch House is currently clearly visible from both Harris and Macarthur Streets, however artist impressions show that once the 'New Building' is constructed, it will only be visible from a relatively small opening (staircase) in Macarthur Street and via a few "view lines" created by "glazed permeable openings" - or windows - featured in the design of the 'New Building,' according to the 'Detailed Response to Submissions' document. Again, a 'solution' to a 'problem' which just creates more problems.

### **The Forecourt**

It is also explained that the brick wall structure of the forecourt, in Macarthur Street, will be demolished as it obscures these buildings. Unfortunately, this exact same problem will occur when the 'New Building' is constructed, as artist impressions show it includes a 'brick wall' of its own that runs along Harris Street and will obscure the view of the Switch House and Wran Buildings from this perspective. Presently, the forecourt provides a virtually unobscured view of these buildings from Harris Street and the intersection with Macarthur Street. So, demolishing the Macarthur Street wall is not solving a 'problem', it is just moving it 'around the corner'. And again, another 'solution' to a 'problem' which doesn't really solve anything.

The 'Amended Heritage Impact Statement' describes the forecourt "as the main public entrance to the site," however, it also declares that it "provides limited activation." As the main entrance and a public space used for social meetings, dining, assemblies, presentations and exhibitions, it is hardly an underutilised feature! These uses and the unobstructed views of the PHM's buildings it provides should be justification enough to retain this feature. The planned alterations include the demolition of the forecourt, so this will also result in the waste of the millions of dollars spent during the refurbishment project conducted about a decade ago.

### **Public Opinion**

According to Green Left, there have been several "consultative exercises" and "all of which have shown huge support for retaining the Powerhouse Museum "as is, where is"". Additionally, browsing the many reviews of the PHM left on the TripAdvisor website, it's easy to see why the museum in its current configuration is a popular attraction, or "institution," to both locals and visitors from afar:

"We spent a whole day in the museum and had so much fun things to do."

"...there is too much to see at one visit..."

"...an amazing number of objects in the collections."

"...you could spend quite a few hours here."

"We always love coming to this fascinating, varied, and spacious museum. Easy pleasant stroll from Central station."

"Four hours went by..."

"I spend nearly 3 hours here and left enriched and wiser by the experience."

"The exhibitions were really well presented and a great variety."

"It is housed in a beautiful old building where the old architecture has been enhanced with a contemporary touch."

"When are we going back?" is all my son can ask. The museum is set up very well, love that you can see the old building. Very well done."

"It is a great use of this old industrial building and I enjoyed the layout."

"...this cleverly and attractively repurposed electric power plant..."

"Could see the aircraft and space things from a Second floor balcony."

"...has been tastefully added to with modern glass buildings."

"...walking distance to city, and Darling Harbour, so very easy access..."

"...located in the city so you can incorporate into a day looking around the city. Recommend at least a whole morning or whole afternoon to get the most out of it."

"...moved out to the western suburb of Parramatta. I don't know how many tourists will travel that far ... all the way out there, I probably wouldn't."

"Whether I would travel to Parramatta is questionable..."

"...it's a Sydney institution..."

"For tourists, the Powerhouse is easily combined with other sightseeing."

"A great museum in a great location. Hours of interesting things to see and fun for the kids."

The museum's extensive collection, adaptive use of its buildings and its single, convenient and central location are all features which have left a positive impression on visitors. If any of these aspects are altered, as proposed by this redevelopment, I wonder if it would still receive this glowing feedback and be as popular a destination as it is/was? Will visitor numbers be maintained? Will they increase? Will the 'return on investment' deliver value for money? Or could this be the beginning of the end of this previously successful and much-loved facility?

## **Conclusion**

Considering that what remains of our precious heritage is being lost more and more each year, the connections to our past are at risk of being severed forever. It is very important for this group of buildings, and their function, to be preserved, as-is, not only for the present, but for the benefit of

future generations as well.

Again, myself and thousands of other people - including experts and professionals - have signed petitions and spoken out against the potential significant changes to our museum, because as the National Trust explained, it "reflects the ongoing concern over the integrity of the "heritage" focus of the project, apprehension regarding the quantity and quality of exhibition space, and a lack of clarity about the future of the MAAS collection."

Therefore, I would like to reiterate, I OPPOSE these greatly unpopular proposed renewal works at the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo. The people of NSW deserve a plan that will repair, maintain, respect and renew the museum as well as restore its precious and irreplaceable collection of exhibits.

Thank you,  
Brad Hayne.



## References

National Trust (NSW)

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The Heritage Council's submission to the Powerhouse Ultimo SSD

<https://majorprojects.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/prweb/PRRestService/mp/01/getContent?AttachRef=PAE-70275217%2120240611T043901.312%20GMT>

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<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-09-16/powerhouse-museum-ultimo-refurbishment-government-heritage/104348054>

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<https://powerhouse.com.au/stories/historic-technological-museum>

Kylie Winkworth

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Submissions and Amendment Report

<https://majorprojects.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/prweb/PRRestService/mp/01/getContent?AttachRef=EXH-70255721%2120240903T100103.445%20GMT>

Detailed Response to Submissions

<https://majorprojects.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/prweb/PRRestService/mp/01/getContent?AttachRef=EXH-70255721%2120240909T061930.616%20GMT>

National Trust (NSW)

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.au/blog/the-powerhouse-journey-to-save-the-museum/>

Heritage Listing Notice - Exemptions

[https://gazette.nsw.gov.au/gazette/2024/7/2024-7\\_268-gazette.pdf](https://gazette.nsw.gov.au/gazette/2024/7/2024-7_268-gazette.pdf)

Amended Heritage Impact Statement

<https://majorprojects.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/prweb/PRRestService/mp/01/getContent?AttachRef=EXH-70255721%2120240909T061933.809%20GMT>

Green Left

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/powerhouse-museum-concerns-grow-heritage-items-stripped>

Trip Advisor Reviews

[https://www.tripadvisor.com.au/Attraction\\_Review-g255060-d259707-Reviews-Powerhouse\\_Museum-Sydney\\_New\\_South\\_Wales.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com.au/Attraction_Review-g255060-d259707-Reviews-Powerhouse_Museum-Sydney_New_South_Wales.html)