

OBJECTIONS TO PROPOSED 'POWERHOUSE ULTIMO MODIFICATION 1' STATE SIGNIFICANT PROJECT APPLICATION SSD-67588459-Mod 1

This submission sets out reasons for my STRONG OBJECTION to the above proposed Modifications to the DA for 'Powerhouse Ultimo', specifically to the intention to demolish and replace the Wran Building and Galleria.

My objections to the so-called 'Powerhouse Ultimo revitalisation' were clearly set out in my previous submission (May 2024). The most significant proposed modification - the demolition and replacement of the Wran Building and Galleria - is utterly unacceptable and is a clear violation of the tenets of the Burra Charter, the basis for all heritage legislation in Australia.

More detailed comments are made below.

1. Proposed demolition of the Wran Building and the Galleria

Three independent opinions have confirmed the heritage significance of the buildings that comprise the Powerhouse Museum complex¹, notwithstanding the 13 'exemptions' that, in effect, severely compromise the listing of the Museum on the State Heritage Register.

These exemptions do not respect the opinions expressed in the independent reports and they have permitted, if not encouraged, any proposed demolitions of post-1980 built forms on the site. This was a transparently cynical strategy clearly designed to manipulate the approvals process to achieve an outcome in line with the misnamed 'revitalisation'. It reveals a cavalier disregard by the proponent for the undeniable heritage value of the site, including the post-1980 elements.

Therefore, this submission contends that the entire approach taken to both the substantive SSD Application for 'Powerhouse Ultimo' and the exemptions within the SHR listing was fundamentally flawed in not providing the necessary protection for the existing built form of the Powerhouse Museum Complex.

The documentation supplied with the SSD Modification states that all three tendering companies advised that the Wran Building and Galleria should be demolished and replaced for structural and safety reasons. Because the original approach taken by the proponent was to wilfully ignore the importance of post-1980 built elements of the site, it is to be expected that the proposed 'modification' to demolish and replace the Sulman award-winning Wran Building and Galleria with similar structures would completely lack any credibility from a heritage perspective. The brick facings of the existing design are offensive enough to the 1988 architecture; to now recommend the *demolition* of the Wran Building and Galleria shows how far this lamentable project has strayed from any semblance of an approach that respects the architectural and design legacy of the Powerhouse Museum. To attempt to redress this by replacing these heritage buildings with similar architectural forms is deficient of any integrity² and shows a deplorable lack of understanding of built heritage practice. It is also inexcusably devoid of any awareness of the cultural heritage value of the former Powerhouse Museum, once one of Australia's greatest cultural destinations.

¹ Design 5 Architects draft Conservation Management Plan for the Powerhouse Museum (2021) commissioned by Create NSW; *Architectural Heritage in NSW of the Last Quarter of the Twentieth Century*, Robertson and Hindmarsh Architects (2022), commissioned by Heritage NSW, and Powerhouse Museum Heritage Assessment by Lovell Chen (2024), commissioned by the City of Sydney

² The proposed 'Modification' states that the outcome of demolition and replacement of the Wran Building and Galleria will 'maintain the building form and expression'. Hollow words in an attempt to disguise heritage destruction.

The approved SSD67588459 and this proposed Modification reveal that neither the Government nor the proponent has ever understood, recognised or respected the cultural heritage value of the site. One of the independent heritage assessments of the Powerhouse Museum complex states that

Critical to the Powerhouse Museum concept was a process of tailoring the hybrid visitor attraction model to the existing buildings, their setting, the collections (applied arts and science) and the expertise embodied within MAAS.

and

The Powerhouse Museum complex is conspicuous as a place embedded within and responsive to its setting.

In the documentation accompanying the SSD-Modification Application, there is even an attempt to make a virtue out of a necessity by claiming that

There is...an opportunity to enhance the efficiency of the structural design with new steel member sizes whilst maintaining the building form expression and materiality of the approved scheme.

(Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation Modification 1 Design Statement p11)

An opportunity to achieve a result more aligned with the 'approved scheme' is, in fact, a move even further away from retaining the built heritage value of the site.

The proponent has claimed that the heritage significance of the Wran Building has been compromised by the modifications to the southern end of the structure carried out between 2011 and 2013. This view is not held by the three independent consultants mentioned above. For example, the Lovell Chen report notes that the Wran Building 'retains a high level of integrity, including the overall form, planning and materiality.'³

Reference to the tenets of the Burra Charter readily demonstrates the utter unacceptability of the proposed demolition of the Wran Building and Galleria. Specifically, Article 8 Setting, states that

Conservation requires the retention of an appropriate setting. This includes retention of the visual and sensory setting, as well as the retention of spiritual and other cultural relationships that contribute to the cultural significance of the place.

New construction, demolition, intrusions or other changes which would adversely affect the setting or relationships are not appropriate.

(The Burra Charter, The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance, Australia ICOOS Incorporated, Burwood, Victoria, 2013, p.5)

Lastly, and most compellingly, I defer to the opinion of Alan Croker, perhaps Australia's leading heritage architect. Referring to the original SSD Application, he stated that

³ Refer *Powerhouse Museum Heritage Assessment* by Lovell Chen, commissioned by the City of Sydney, 2024, pB44

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.

(Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation, Submission in Response to SSD Application, Design 5 Architects, 30 May 2024, p6)

The Modification of the SSD is a direct result of the 'act of vandalism' that is the 'Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation'. It is inevitable that the SSD Modification to demolish and 'replace' the Wran Building and Galleria be condemned as a product of such needless and unforgiveable cultural vandalism.

2. Cancellation of the loading dock and Harwood Building reinstatement

The Harwood Building was and remains a unique and highly valuable museum facility in Australia. Its unhindered functions of collection storage, management, treatment and handling and other specialist services are essential to the continuing operation of the Powerhouse Museum *as a museum*. Therefore, the exclusion of the Harwood Building from the substantive SSD betrayed the thinking of the Government and the proponent that there was no intention of operating 'Powerhouse Ultimo' as a museum.

The realisation that the Harwood Building's loading dock can continue to serve the requirements of 'Powerhouse Ultimo', thus avoiding the obvious duplication in the substantive SSD Application, is therefore welcomed but with the comment that it reflects very poorly on the level of planning that went into the SSD Application.

3. Statement by Infrastructure NSW about the SSD-Modification 1

I note that documentation provided with this SSD-Mod 1 requires a statement explaining how the proposed Modification is 'substantially the same' as the original development. The statement made is

The proposal will facilitate the revitalisation of Powerhouse Ultimo and provide world-class museum and exhibition spaces, which will deliver important cultural, industry and economic benefits to the community.'

This is a sweeping assertion that lacks any supporting evidence and is typical of the language used to seemingly justify this destructive project. For example, the unarguable loss of 75% of the former exhibition space in the original form of the Powerhouse Museum by the conversion of gallery spaces mediated by mezzanine floors into three large volumes deemed as 'presentation spaces' does not support the lofty description of 'world-class exhibition spaces'. Such language suggests either a determination to convince those with decision-making authority of the illusive merits of this deeply unpopular project or an absence of hands-on museum industry experience of those preparing such verbiage, or both.

The opinions expressed in this submission and others of my colleagues are based on decades of experience both in the planning, development and operation of the Powerhouse Museum and in the wider museum industry, in my case for almost half a century. This enables me to recognise flim flam when I see it – and I have read a lot relating to 'Powerhouse Ultimo'.

In conclusion, I refer to my summary statement of May 2024 in my submission to the substantive SSD for the 'Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation':

This extravagant and wasteful project should be immediately abandoned and replaced with a less costly program that aims to re-open the Powerhouse Museum (PHM) to the public as a priority, to rebuild public confidence and restore the unique brand and identity of the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo as a *museum* of applied arts and sciences. This project should employ those with the necessary expertise to develop a coherent vision and draw on the Museum's rich collections to build on the existing permanent galleries⁴ and develop fresh new exhibitions, public programs and events that interpret the collections and address the emerging challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

Sincerely

Andrew Grant

Former Curator, Powerhouse Museum, 1980-2012

Positions held:

Assistant Curator, Transport and Engineering (1980)

Curator, Transport and Engineering (1980-1984)

Group Leader, 'Bringing People Together' exhibitions (1984-1988)

Senior Curator, Transport (1988-2012)

Acting Manager, Collection Development and Research (1995-1996)

Transport Heritage Consultant, AG Transport Heritage (2013-present)

⁴ The then 'existing galleries' have since been mindlessly demolished, including the magnificent *Steam Revolution* gallery, one of three permanent live steam exhibitions in the world, and the iconic 1784 Boulton & Watt beam engine exhibition, which symbolised the relationship between built form and collection. However, the demolition of the former exhibitions changes nothing about the recommended way forward to correct the current disastrous course of this wayward and overfunded project.