

SUBMISSION IN RESPONSE TO CASTLE HILL EIS - Andrew Grant - 29 November 2020

This statement argues that, if the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo is to be retained in a recognisable form in keeping with the spirit of the Government's commitment contained in its announcement to the public of 4 July:

- the proposed relocation to Castle Hill of the Very Large Objects (VLOs) currently displayed at Ultimo would be unnecessary¹
- the construction of a large object storage facility in Building J would therefore be unnecessary
- that the proposed storage facility (Building J) at Castle Hill is seriously deficient in having no wood and metal workshop facility incorporated with and adjacent to the storage facility and
- that the anticipated removal of the wood and metal machine shop facility in the Harwood Building at Ultimo – unique in Australia - should remain intact for its unparalleled strategic advantages to the Powerhouse Museum and the museum best practice that it has amply demonstrated

My curatorial experience has mostly focussed on large transport and engineering objects. The treatment of these objects often involves major intervention, the application of many specialised technical skills and considerable expense and frequent curatorial consultation, so the issue of the loss of these skills and the machinery to work on these objects within the Museum is probably much more apparent to me. It's also partly why I recognise the critical importance of the Harwood Building as a facility that, through far-sighted planning, was designed to accommodate *in the one building* objects of all sizes and materials, together with specialised machinery, equipment and fit-out, dedicated work zones and the full range of professional staff to determine object treatment plans and monitor their progress.

From the early 1980s until the early 2000s, the workshop of the Harwood Building was frequently a hive of productive activity in which large objects from the collection were in constant evidence in various states of disassembly and treatment. This provided a wonderful promotional opportunity for the Museum with its potential sponsors and supporters, who, having first been impressed by what they saw in the Museum, were always fascinated by the experience of also being shown through the workshop, especially when viewed from the upper walkways. The output of the workshop in treated objects, interactive exhibits, exhibition showcases and a host of other display materials instilled a sense of pride and achievement among not only the workshop staff, but the staff in general. It is hard to convey the positive effect this all had on the morale and sense of identity of the Museum, which was envied and greatly respected by other state institutions and regional museums as highly capable and extremely resourceful.

¹ On 29 July 2020, Minister Harwin announced that *three of the largest VLOs*, the Boulton & Watt beam engine, Locomotive No 1 and its carriages and the Catalina flying boat, would *not* be removed from the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo. This was well after the design and VLO accommodation in Building J had been determined from a list of VLOs including all these objects, yet *no changes were made to the amount of VLO storage space*.

The current plans for the development of the Castle Hill site apparently include two workshop facilities, a metal machining shop and wood machining shop, in different stores. This suggests very poor planning and/or very poor advice to consultants on at least three counts when compared with the former operation of the Harwood Building workshop. Firstly, the workshop facilities should be adjacent and mutually accessible; secondly, the workshop should remain close to the Museum for logistical and risk management reasons; thirdly, the separation of workshop from the range of collections and interpretation staff prevents convenient access to objects being worked on and the progressive follow up required to discuss progress with object treatment.

The good sense of co-locating the metal and wood machine shops in the Harwood Building was evident whenever an object comprising both wood and metal was brought in for any major work. The 1920 Aveling & Porter tip wagon (see below) was rebuilt in the workshop in the late 1980s. Its timber body and metal mechanical components were worked on concurrently.



1920 Aveling & Porter tip wagon (top right) in Harwood Building workshop, c1987 (MAAS photo)



Completed Aveling & Porter tip wagon, 1988 (MAAS photo)

Comparison with proposed facilities at Castle Hill Building J

Analysis of the SEARS document for Building J at the Museums Discovery Centre at Castle Hill reveals that none of the facilities in the workshop of the Harwood Building will be replaced. The implications of this are profound for several reasons:

1. Without the facilities in the Harwood Building workshop, *the Museum would lose most of its future capacity to carry out any major conservation or restoration work on the larger objects in its collection.* Only A Store at Castle Hill (built 1978) has any of the facilities boasted by the Harwood Building, and these are very limited in terms of volume, equipment and variety. Loss of the Harwood Building workshop would almost inevitably lead to outsourcing work such as dismantling heavy machinery or machining and fabricating components for engines and vehicles.
2. Loss of capacity to carry out heavy engineering work would inexorably lead to a further loss of in-house skills to carry out this work. There has been an alarming loss of skills and knowledge among Museum staff in engineering conservation work over the past 10-15 years; the plans for J Store at Castle Hill confirm that this trend will gain pace. *I anticipate that within five years the Museum will have completely lost its former reputation for engineering acumen in the preservation of our moveable heritage.* And this, at a time when

education and training in Science Technology, Engineering and Maths was never more important.

3. The *risks to large objects will increase* if they have to be moved to external contractors for treatment, as a result of both transport and handling risks and loss of direct control of how work is carried out.²

Andrew Grant

Former Curator, Transport and Engineering and Senior Curator, Transport
Powerhouse Museum, 1980-2012

Transport Heritage Consultant and Principal, AG TRANSPORT HERITAGE 2013-
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² The Museum set up a “contract restoration program” in the early 1980s in which external contractors were employed to carry out work on objects in the collection to a detailed brief written by the Museum. This was done to complete the enormous amount of work on the collections required to meet the deadlines for opening the Museum. Despite the precision of the briefs, managing the outcomes of this work proved to be difficult mainly because the contractors’ work could not be directly supervised, with frequently compromised results.