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Exhibition submission – Powerhouse Museum

Mr Marcus Jennejohn
Planner
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Mr Jennejohn,

I know you've had the Powerhouse Parramatta albatross dumped in your work tray and you are entrusted with trying to make best of what is a dog's breakfast, but seriously, what a complete and utter dud project is being proposed by the NSW Government with the moving of the Powerhouse Museum from Ultimo to Parramatta. The rape of this state's most precious assets by the current NSW Government is only akin to the shocking Government neglect recently seen in Rio de Janeiro when in 2018 a fire at the Museu Nacional saw a potential 20 million irreplaceable items lost forever.

PARRAMATTA ISSUES

1. The proposed development is within a flooding zone of the Parramatta River. In fact the site has flooded within the past year. Infrastructure NSW's solution to this in correspondence to me dated 11th May 2020 to build floorspace up to 25 feet above ground level (equivalent to the best part of a 3 storey building). Then there'll be the equivalent of a further 7 storey structure on top. This raises a number of issues, from the very efficiency of the proposed building itself where so much space is severely restricted and compromised in what it can be actually used for; through to the building's completely over-scaled footprint without showing any relationship or regard riverside to the narrow neck of the Upper Parramatta River it will sit upon and Georgian masterpieces such as Lennox Bridge. The structure, nearly 70 feet high at Phillip Street level will shadow the immediate area and the design flaws will continue through to Phillip Street, where the proposed monolith shows complete disregard to the streetscape. It will also impact on the Old Government House World Heritage listing, stifling vistas to the Parramatta River, a significant part of the listing.
2. The building is totally unsuitable and out of touch with Parramatta. Infrastructure NSW in an email to me dated 11th May 2020, described the building as iconic and of a standard akin to the Sydney Harbour Bridge and Sydney Opera House. If they actually believe this, then the department is totally delusional and totally lost in their own media spin. This building lacks merit in every way, from the inefficient way it uses space; to the lack of clarity on how the museum will be safely presented within it; to the lack of a relationship with the Upper Parramatta River; to the unnecessary demolition of St George's Terrace and Willow Grove; to the destruction of established vegetation in the Willow Grove precinct; to the lack of planning around transport accessibility to the site; to the footprint that will impact a flood zone. The building will not be a drawcard as it is not only mundane, but at nearly 70 feet

high at street level offensive to its surroundings and relegating the Upper Parramatta River to a sewer through overdevelopment on the site.

3. This development is not a museum and should not be classified as such. Correspondence from Infrastructure NSW on the 11th of May 2020 has confirmed this site will have accommodation flats for 40 or more people living there for up to 12 months at a time while elsewhere the site has been identified as a conventions space with retail and coffee shops. The floor space returned to the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences is around a quarter of what they have at the Ultimo space. There is also no significant on-site storage for collections, with media reporting this weekend that the priceless collection is planned to be sold off or dumped in regional museums. With the plan to fill the site with retail food and cafes, I have seen little work on how the museum will discourage scavenger bird populations (that have become problematic at precincts like the Fish Markets) or the effects the development will have on the Church Street “Eat Street” precinct. There is no plan to show how the museum objects will be historically contextualised, just some vague concept they will be just plinthed and plonked around relatively empty halls like some type of weird theme park.
4. A museum does not destroy the heritage it is supposed to preserve. Collection sell offs and disbursement will have significant impacts on this state’s ability to interpret the past and, and in particular the transport revolution that helped develop NSW. The proposed demolition of Willow Grove and St George’s Terrace also erases valuable and rare 19th century links with pre-Federation NSW. Willow Grove has been described in heritage assessments as unique and exceptional for its rare Victorian Italianate architecture, while St George’s Terrace represents some of the last remaining buildings of their type in Parramatta. Both should be preserved as unique and important legacies of the area’s rich and important history. The development proposal is also out of step with the World Heritage Listing of Old Government House and important vistas to the Parramatta River.
5. The footprint across a flood zone. There has been no detailed study that I can see on how this monolith will impact flood patterns along the Parramatta River. There is no indication as to whether there will be additional impacts downstream, including the weir adjacent to the Parramatta Ferry Wharf, or back upstream to the Georgian Lennox Bridge along Church Street. This building has the potential to dam water back, and potentially impact important colonial structures and other riverside dwellings.
6. There is no integration with the rich cultural opportunity offered by local indigenous populations. The proposed development shows no cultural sensitivity at a site where opportunity presents to build an important bridge between the river, the aboriginal population, the technologies they developed to exploit the river and the 19th century architecture of Willow Grove that was built to support women as a maternity hospital as the population grew. The proposal is akin to sticking a 7 storey tower (the height of this monstrosity) on top of the 1816 Parliament House (ex Rum Hospital) building in Macquarie Street Sydney – but worse.
7. The poor planning projections suggesting the site will attract 200,000 people per year. This is highly unlikely as the ever popular Art Gallery of NSW only attracts 160,000 per year. The factual inaccuracies with even these most basic predictions, cast doubt over the complete plan, with wild guestimates made to please a Minister, not tell the truth.
8. Impacts on an existing museum across the river. Parramatta has a very rich local history museum (the Parramatta Heritage Centre) on the other side of the river which will be overshadowed by this development in terms of scale diminishing the local museum’s viability, limiting their potential to deliver on going quality exhibitions that the public will

attend, showcasing the very important localised history of the area. Not only is local history set to be lost with the unnecessary destruction of Willow Grove and St George's Terraces, the local heritage centre is set to be impacted in a negative way. That museum not only captures the local way of life in the area from indigenous times, through to the development of the railway and tramway, retail institutions including Murray Bros and Grace Bros (first metropolitan store in 1935), theatres, churches, institutions and so on, it is an important resource for local historians and tourists alike, and potential collateral damage from this terrible development.

ULTIMO ISSUES

1. The deliberate destruction of a World Class Collection. Before Sir Lawrence Hargrave passed away in 1915, his collection of box kites was offered to Australian museums for the promotion of peaceful flight. Although his box kite designs allowed the Wright Brothers to fly, he was snubbed by Australian museum curators and instead the 176 box kites ended up in the Deutsches Technological Museum in Munich. With the Museum bombed in World War 2, only 25 survived. When we finally woke up to our stupidity in the 1960s and asked to copy the box-kites, the German Museum kindly donated back a number of originals to the Powerhouse which "fly" today in the main hall. This story should forever be told so that history never repeats. Unfortunately, we were stupid then and we are stupid now. There is no full assessment of the items in store at the Powerhouse, their condition or a proper conservation plan. This appalling failure is now leading to plans where some of our most valuable items are being readied for sale, or shoved anywhere they can be crammed in run down museums across the state. This is a failure of Government to preserve our most precious cultural artefacts, for what effectively will be a real estate cash grab across the Ultimo museum site.
2. The collection, it's preservation and display in context. As bureaucrats you probably care little, but the Boulton and Watt Engine is the reason we are all here today. This 1789 steam engine is the most important and oldest radial steam engine in the world. In other words it solved the problem of how to use steam to create motion – a technology adapted to power locomotives and so on. Before this engine, the world walked, used horse and carts or sail to move around. This engine allowed the development of the steam train and with it, the ability for humans to mass migrate. Its world significance is way underestimated in NSW. We only have it because it had become redundant as refining steam technology accelerated in the UK and it was 'sent to the colony' as a hand me down. Nobody seems to be able to produce a cohesive plan on how this item will be preserved at the Parramatta site (if at all) other than some vague idea of plinthing it in a hall without any regard to its context or importance. But it's not only the Boulton and Watt engine, or Hargrave's box kites; it's the boiler of Australia's first locally made steam engine, its other beam engines, it's the internationally renowned Strasburg Clock; the King's theatre display; NSW Engine number 1; Triple Expansion Steam units out of early ferries; kitchenalia; Polyphons; a Catalina Flying Boat; Cable and horse drawn trams and the list goes on. There is no detailed assessment on each of these item's condition; their conservation requirements; how the requirements will be met; where they will be stored; how they will be incorporated in the museum – or sold. This is truly destruction by neglect and one the NSW Government should truly be ashamed of.
3. The heritage value of the Ultimo site. The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences has been in Harris Street Ultimo for more than a 120 years (1893 to be exact). When it was moved across the road to the current Powerhouse site, the development was recognised with the

highly esteemed Sulman award for its visionary architecture. Significantly, it also recognised and protected the heritage value of the former tramway power station and storage sheds that occupied the footprint. The Powerhouse has become an international destination and has shown even through a period where the NSW Government has neglected the Museum, its needs and the collection; it is still a popular place to the extent where closures planned for July 1st 2020 have been pushed back until the end of the year. This site is the spiritual home of our achievements as a state and nation and has a deep cultural affinity, with people flocking to see this most important collection before it is recklessly destroyed. This important site, with its prize winning halls is set to be smashed down in favour of more flats, that will place more pressure on local transport and amenity within the Darling Harbour precinct already significantly shrunk by high density overdevelopment.

The proposal to relocate the Powerhouse Museum is a disgrace and frankly smacks of a deal where developers will be able to put more flats up in Ultimo, without regard for the museum, the collection and the heritage of buildings both at the current site and Parramatta. Any rational assessment would abandon this plan immediately as basic due care and diligence has failed to be met.

I am not overly optimistic that any of the public's input will have any effect on a bureaucracy compliant to Government arrogance and without bold vision, but I call for all work on this project to be terminated.

Further, those pushing the proposal are only repeating the stupidity and immaturity we showed a century ago, when we snubbed Hargrave's box kites, the very designs that allowed the Wright Brothers to fly. Even with the belated recognition in the 60s that we got it wrong, the decisions of a century ago only saw only an 8th of those most precious kites survive.

Thank you.

Ian Dodd.