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Submission re the Relocation of the MAAS

I am writing to indicate my support for the proposal to relocate the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences to Parramatta, and to address some issues raised by those opposed to it.

I have 30 years experience in regional, state and national museums, including 20 years in senior executive roles encompassing collection management, research, education and public programming; as a member of the board of governance of a major multi-campus state museum network, and national, state and regional committees promoting regional research and development, education, heritage management, the arts, commemorative projects and museum development.

Collection Management

I have been disappointed by commentary on risks associated with relocation of the collection and reinstallation in a new facility at Parramatta.

I do not accept that the collection management and conservation teams who are responsible for managing, conserving, interpreting and moving the collections, or the experts who might be engaged in the relocation, will be less capable than their forebears in that task or in managing risks associated with those tasks.

My experience in working with heritage steam plant and large transport, aviation and industrial artefacts has shown time and again that Australia has world-class expertise in collection conservation and logistics, and that we can deliver wonderful results in conserving, moving and presenting heritage objects for museum visitors.

An appropriate assessment of the real risks and plans for their mitigation will be an essential part of the professional planning and risk mitigation associated with any collection relocation. There is an abundance of skills and knowledge in the sector in Australia to undertake this task proficiently.

Overstating the risks associated with aspects of collection management, conservation, logistics and reinstallation in order to ramp up anxiety over the relocation project is not helpful and diminishes the expertise of the MAAS staff.

Display and Interpretation

Exhibitions are an efficient way of presenting collection items in an interpretive and educational context for specialist and general audiences over extended periods of time. That has been the model of museum exhibition programming and budgeting for many decades.

But semi-permanent exhibitions of this type can also be unchanging, inflexible and less capable of relevance in dealing with emerging issues and new research and knowledge on the subject of the exhibition.

Using spaces to present collection items in deeply researched and authoritative contexts does not have to be so static. More frequent changeover of elements of larger exhibitions or swapping out objects from the collection, will create points of difference and newness over the life of an exhibition, provide for more of the collection to be deployed for visitors, and enable new research perspectives and interpretation to be included.

These micro-installations or changeovers would require a different way of modelling the use of capital. Rather than a 15-20 year cycle of very large-scale investments to replace whole galleries, bringing some of that capital forward and distributing it over several budget cycles would enable continual refreshment of exhibitions of the MAAS collections over a longer period of time.

It will be exciting to see new approaches to exhibition development. This approach would also create more opportunities for new research and perspectives to be undertaken by the expert staff rather than the current expectation of massive and irregular projects of gallery replacement.

New facilities

It seems inevitable that every museum redevelopment, transfer, relocation, new design, reconfiguration, etc., is subject to the same criticism—it can't possibly be as good as what we have had.

And yet capital investment in new facilities is known to be a major attraction for new and current audiences alike. They create an opportunity to present a new face and way of working for visitors that are more reflective of contemporary needs.

New, regularly shaped and functional spaces provide opportunities for new approaches to designing access for visitors and for collection and other operational logistics, new ideas for interpretation, new possibilities, new contexts.

The phase of museums and cultural institutions having to occupy redundant industrial architecture in re-adaptive uses is an artefact of the 1980s and 1990s. It happened all over the world—the Ruhr is full of them; so too the US rustbelt cities with their downtown renewals to turn relict industrial landscapes into civic and cultural spaces. It happened in Australia's major cities too, and of course the MAAS in the old Powerhouse is one of them.

As a museum professional, given a choice, I'd take the opportunity of a brand new building to work with every time.

More efficient, functional access for access to, and the movement of, large and small collection items and their installation makes life for collection management teams so much easier. Similarly better spaces for visitors, with easy and comprehensive access across the public areas and to the collections on display, with more effective orientation and wayfinding, and improved visitor facilities will create a memorable experience for every visitor segment.

Relevance

As someone who grew up in western Sydney, and lived and worked there for 40 years, I know what it was like to have to travel into the CBD for any world-class cultural, sporting or educational activities.

At last, a major museum is making its presence in western Sydney.

The people of western Sydney deserve more than a satellite or local museum of parochial interests. They deserve a world-class museum that opens the world to them and their curiosity, their creativity, their aspirations. They deserve to have something that recognises their place in the world.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Sullivan', with a stylized, flowing script.

Tim Sullivan