

# **Submission to the Environmental Impact Statement for the construction of the Parramatta Powerhouse**

The New South Wales Branch of the Australian Museums and Galleries Association (AMaGA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Parramatta Powerhouse. Our organisation strongly supports the growth and development of cultural institutions in Western Sydney; however, we have concerns regarding aspects of this proposal, thus we object to the proposal as it is currently presented.

Before making specific comments, we will outline who we are and what we do.

## **Who we are**

AMaGA is the national membership association and peak advocacy body representing museums and galleries. We encompass a wide and diverse range of national, state, regional and community museums, art galleries, historic sites, botanic and zoological gardens, research centres, Indigenous cultural centres, and Keeping Places across Australia. Our 1400 members represent thousands of individual professionals through the large institutions, and thousands more individual volunteers.

All of our members are linked by a shared dedication to culture and the communities they serve. They understand that Australian cultural life is a dynamic ecosystem that generates creativity and innovation and contributes to the social and economic wellbeing of the country.

AMaGA is an advocacy, research, service and professional development organisation. We seek to enhance the value of Australia's collections, public programs and stories by sharing knowledge, developing skills, inspiring innovation and providing leadership and the authoritative voice in protecting and promoting our arts, science and cultural heritage.

We advocate for museums and galleries, identify and undertake strategic research, inform policy, set ethical standards and run a broad range of training programs. More information on the organisation and our members can be found at <https://www.amaga.org.au/annual-reports-0>

We build on a history of museum professional association activity that extends back to the 1930s, have branches in every state and territory, and support professional national networks of expertise. The NSW Branch is one of the largest, with 158 organisational and 450 individual members. The branch has three chapters throughout rural and regional NSW.

This submission draws both on the lived experience of our galleries and museums, and state, national and international research, expertise and standards.

## **Introduction**

This submission is divided into sections which relate to the chapters and sections of the EIS.

### **1.2 Background and strategic need**

AMaGA NSW commends the NSW Government on its recent decisions to provide a new world-class cultural precinct in Parramatta and to retain the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo, however we do not believe that consideration of alternative or additional cultural infrastructure in Western Sydney has been fully considered.

AMaGA agrees with the Government's views that a new world-class museum precinct at Parramatta has potential to:

- attract local and international visitors to Parramatta
- reinforce Parramatta's strategic role as Sydney's second Commercial Business District (CBD)
- contribute to Parramatta's associated economic, cultural and social development, as well as that of the broader Western Sydney region
- go some way towards balancing investment in the arts and culture between Eastern Sydney and the larger Western regions.

The history of the decision for moving the Powerhouse to Parramatta is outlined in the EIS, however we would like to make the point that the decision came directly from government without consultation with senior management at the Powerhouse, the museum profession or affected NSW communities. The 'do nothing' option including modest investment in updating the museum at Ultimo or developing other major new cultural infrastructure in Western Sydney was not included in either the first or second business case. When the riverfront site was initially selected, there was not unanimous agreement that the site was appropriate for a major collecting institution.

We also understand that the selection of the architectural solution was not agreed to as the best option by some experts on the panel. The comment that the current design engages with multiple histories of the site does not reflect the intense Parramatta community concern with saving the socially significant built heritage currently on the site – Willow Grove and the St George's Terrace. Any attempt to represent the significance of these sites through contemporary interpretation after their destruction is in no way acceptable to the local communities or the majority of experts within the museums and heritage communities.

We would also query the reference to *Powerhouse Castle Hill* (page 7). The site is currently the *Museums Discovery Centre* (MDC) located in Castle Hill. This was opened to the public on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2007 as the *Powerhouse Discovery Centre Collection Store*. However, this closed in August 2014. After extensive and careful planning, significant government funding and consultation, on 14<sup>th</sup> September 2016 the site opened as the *Museums Discovery Centre*, an open storage centre shared by the *Australian Museum* and *Sydney Living Museums* as well as MAAS for their collections. AMaGA supports solutions that will meet the needs of all of the state cultural institutions and supports the broad concept of one NSW State Collection.

### **1.3 Objectives of the development**

This section includes the words *Take advantage of the site's highly accessible location by prioritising active and sustainable modes of transport*. Census data from 2016 states that 81.4% of Sydney households have at least one car. This affects the way Sydneysiders travel. While many will use the car 100% of the time, others will use public transport for some travel but car for the rest. The most likely place where public transport is used is for trips to the CBD as congestion and parking costs make it the preferred option. However, for trips to almost any other location in Sydney the car will be used.

Unfortunately to quantify the figures a comprehensive transport study including interviewing potential visitors would be required. This cannot be done as a result of the announcements on 4/5 July 2020 have left a very confusing picture as to what parts of the Powerhouse will be in Parramatta and what will remain in Ultimo. This is developed in the response to Section 2.1.

### **1.5 Secretary's requirements**

Section 3 states that the EIS must *consider any alternative schemes considered, including any designs which could have retained Willow Grove and the St George's Terrace* and to *give specific consideration to the overall site layout, open spaces, interface with the public domain*. No alternative scheme is in the EIS so it must be assumed that none was considered. (See also Sections 6.2.2 and 6.6 below)

### **2.1.3 Transport and access**

The EIS states that the *site benefits from a range of existing and planned transport options*. The 2016 census stated that the City of Parramatta Local Government area (after being enlarged that year) had a population of 226,149 and the ABS estimated that the resident population at 30 June 2019 was 257,197.

In Section 6.6 the EIS states that up to 2 million visitors a year may visit the Parramatta Powerhouse. No lower figure is shown but this number can be compared with visitors to the centrally located (for all of Sydney) Ultimo site. The Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo received 561,503 visitors in financial year 2017, 659,340 in 2018. If we are conservative and double the number of expected visitors, the Powerhouse Parramatta could expect around 1,500,000 visitors per annum. This can be compared with the Art Gallery of NSW Domain site which received 1,500,174 in financial year 2019. The NSW Government has said that the Art Gallery's current *Sydney Modern* expansion will increase its visitation to two million - an increase of 33%.

Professor Barney Glover, the current chair of the Powerhouse Museum stated in an opinion piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that currently visitors go to the Powerhouse Museum three times in their life *once as a child, then once as a parent, and then as a grandparent*. While this may be the experience of some it does not reflect the experience of all visitors.

The Powerhouse does not break down the visitation by geographical area. This is not from a lack of data as visitors are routinely asked for their postcode when entering the museum. Sydney Living Museums (SLM) does break down their visitation by region. In financial year 2019 SLM had a total of 215,624 paid, prepaid and free admissions to their properties. This excludes education, public programs, hospitality visits and visits to grounds only. Visitors from Sydney were 49% of this total. This was further broken down with visitors from Western Sydney being 5.88%. The SLM does not define the exact area of Western Sydney in their reports. Their two other areas called Outer Sydney and North West which account for 5.39% of visitor. While these two areas are unlikely to be only in the west of Sydney their numbers have been included as being in a Greater Western Sydney so not to understate the visitors from the west of Sydney. This makes a maximum of 24,301 possible visitors from Greater Western Sydney.

While there are issues with transposing figures from one Sydney museum to another it is the only approach that can be used as the Powerhouse does not give a breakdown.

Observations by museum professionals and commentators about museum visitation in Sydney indicate that there are not great variations in the geographical distribution of visitors. The percentage of SLM visitors from the west could be greater as SLM currently has three locations in these areas. Using the SLM percentages, 88.73% of visitors will come from other areas of Sydney. Based on the Powerhouse's visitor numbers in financial year 2019, 671,833 visitors came from non-west areas (out of a total of 757,166 visitors).

This will have a major effect on transport and access across the whole of Sydney but the EIS only mentions options which mainly relate to Parramatta and the surrounding area.

It does not consider transport and access requirement for visitors from all Sydney areas or those areas close to Sydney which are not in the west. Specific points made are:

## Ferry

It omits that ferries do not run all the time. The F3 ferry timetable states *Buses replace some ferry services between Parramatta and Rydalmere due to the natural low tides in the upper Parramatta River. Check daily tidal notices at the wharf for service details.*

The EIS also mentions that *The ferry service connects to Circular Quay and Milsons Point.* This is currently only true on Mondays to Fridays when the first up-river ferry leaves Milson Point at 15:32. It does not stop at Milson Point on Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays. This is a service currently geared to the requirements of city bound commuters.

## Vehicle access and parking

Over 80% of Sydneysiders have access to a car and the majority of these use the car whenever they can. The biggest deterrent to using the car for journey is the inability to park easily and perceived high parking fees. The fact that high tolls payable by many is rarely a deterrent is borne out by the number of commuters using toll roads on a frequent basis.

As a result, many who would normally travel by car to most destinations do not travel to the city by car due to the high parking fees. An example is the fees charged by the Darling Square Car Park close to the Ultimo Powerhouse. If a visit is made to the Powerhouse of two hours they would need to pay \$39 for a three hour slot during the week. At the weekend there is a \$16 flat fee regardless of length of stay. While there are discounted early bird rates, they are rarely suitable as you must arrive before 9:30 and stay for a minimum of 5½ hours. The fees for a City of Parramatta carpark near the projected Powerhouse Parramatta is \$10 for 2-3 on Monday and Saturday and free on Sunday (up to 4 hours). These relatively low fees will encourage visitors to drive.

The EIS states that the City of Parramatta currently has nearly 4,000 parking spaces near the site but 504 of these are in the Riverside Carpark that will be replaced by the Powerhouse. This is a reduction of over 12%. Parramatta car parks are usually full or near full during the day from Monday to Friday and this will make it more difficult to park.

The EIS points out that free 15-minute parking spaces are nearby. These may be used by couriers and delivery staff but are of no use to museum visitors or staff.

## 4.0 Description of the Development

It is the Government's objective to create a world-class museum at Parramatta. Elements of the building designs documented by the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will limit the capacity of the new museum to become a world-class institution. Some of these elements are addressed below.

It is understood that the design assumptions included:

- exhibition runs of six to 18 months
- rapid turnovers
- commercial activities operating in the presentation spaces for up to four months per year
- all collection storage off-site.

In this regard, the features of a world-class museum include:

- rare, valuable objects
- security to protect the objects
- AA climate control to protect the objects against variable temperatures, humidity, etc.
- exhibition spaces large enough to conform to international requirements for touring exhibitions.

## Limited museum standard exhibition space

The Ultimo Powerhouse is a world-class museum. It has 21,800 sqm museum standard (AA) climate-controlled exhibition space. The international reputation of its collection and the availability of appropriate controlled space enable it to attract international touring exhibitions, “blockbusters”.

In contrast, the designs at **EIS Appendix B** provide only 5,200 sqm of AA standard exhibition space for the new museum at Parramatta. That is, the new museum would have only 23.9% of the museum standard exhibition space of the Powerhouse (or 41% of the total Parramatta presentation space).

Concerningly, this space comprises only three of the proposed seven presentation spaces. This will not be adequate for the new museum to be perceived as a world-class institution when more than half of its nominal premises do not comply with world-class standards. Further, one of these priority areas, Space 3, is designated to contain seating for 800 people and to host talks and performances, further reducing the availability of precious AA display space.

In addition, the largest exhibition area, Space 1, has been designated for the display of large objects. However, the design provides for this area to be completely open to the river for external events such as rock concerts. The provision of open access for the public surely presents a significant risk of damage being inflicted on any large objects displayed in this area.

## Permanent or long-term exhibition space

The purpose of a world-class museum is to educate the public about, and to support research into, its subject matter. To achieve this, world-class museums:

- collect, store and conserve world-class examples of objects which are relevant to their subject matter
- provide a permanent or long term exhibition of significant objects from their collections to tell the broad story of their subject matter – for example, the permanent collection of a world-class science museum is likely to include displays about important historical scientific discoveries and scientific equipment, the scientific method (i.e. research and experimentation) and current and future areas of scientific inquiry
- provide temporary exhibitions of objects from their collections to provide an in-depth explanation of an important concept or area of study or to highlight a recent important event, discovery, achievement or new acquisition e.g. developing vaccines, nanotechnology, black holes
- host international blockbuster exhibitions which are relevant to their respective subject matter.

Within this framework, the permanent or long-term exhibition is vital as it provides the context for visitors to engage with and learn from temporary and blockbuster exhibitions. It is also vital for curriculum based educational programs that may rely on access to particular objects and exhibitions.

Without a designated permanent or long-term exhibition space, it is difficult to see how the new museum at Parramatta could achieve the level of visitor engagement of a world-class museum.

## Storage

The complete lack of storage space will hamper the achievement of rapid turnovers of exhibitions. At a minimum, an internal **Staging Area** will be essential for this purpose.

Installing and de-installing exhibitions are labour-intensive processes requiring time-consuming procedures for the safe handling of each individual exhibition object. Under current Powerhouse practice, it takes at least one week to de-install an exhibition and can take more than four weeks to install a large exhibition. After their arrival, objects must be safely stored and grouped ready for their installation in the exhibition space. Likewise, de-installed objects need to be safely packed away and stored as they are removed from the exhibition space and are awaiting eventual transport to permanent storage or another museum.

The Staging Area will therefore need to be large enough to ensure the safe accommodation of all of the objects in one or more exhibitions, including sufficient space to allow free staff movement around and between objects. The Staging Area must also be secure, to prevent theft, and AA climate-controlled, to prevent damage to the objects and to comply with the necessary standards for hosting international exhibitions.

## 4.2 Numerical overview

The EIS states No parking is to be provided on site as part of the proposed development. However, it will remove 504 car park spaces from the Parramatta CBD while Parramatta workforce is increasing in size.

## 4.3 Land use

The EIS states that *scientists, researchers and artists will have office and co-working spaces* in the new Powerhouse Parramatta. There is no mention of how these additional staff will operate and integrate with core museum staff or how they will be funded.

The EIS also states that *Serviced apartments, will be included to be used by scientists, researchers, artists and students*. The Powerhouse Parramatta to next to a 36-storey block of serviced apartments. Potentially this space could be used for the provision of world quality collection display spaces instead.

## 4.4 Built form and urban design

The EIS shows *presentation spaces* with extremely high ceilings. Spaces with very high ceilings rarely suit many types of museum exhibitions as this can diminish the impact of the objects.

The ground space has multiple entrances, and this would compromise security, and this would be a deterrent to many overseas and other Australian museums who are asked to lend objects to the Powerhouse.

### 4.8.1 Parking

See above under Section on *Vehicle access and parking*.

## 4.14 Construction management

### Vehicle access and parking

The EIS says *Owing to the extent of works occurring on the site, no on-site carparking will be provided for construction workers. Workers will instead be required to arrive by public transport or park in nearby parking stations.*

It does not say how trades people will be able to carry outsize tools or materials to the site. Not all of these are delivered separately by truck.

### **Construction staging**

The EIS states that that *Archaeological investigations (will be carried out) during the construction process*. It does not explain how these conflicting activities will be planned, managed or carried out.

### **6.2.2 Post settlement heritage**

#### **Surrounding heritage**

Lennox Bridge is located within close vicinity of the site and is an item of State Heritage significance (SHR # 00750). It is a road and pedestrian crossing of the Parramatta River at Church Street and is one of the earliest bridges in NSW and Australia. It is considered an example of early Colonial engineering works.

The scale of the new building will have considerable visual impact on this bridge.

Willow Grove and the St George's Terrace should be preserved, maintained and integrated into the development in a similar manner to the Western Australian Museum.

### **6.6 Social and economic impacts**

The EIS states that *the demolition of Willow Grove and St George's Terrace would have a significant physical and visual impact on the heritage significance of the heritage items, resulting in a total irreversible loss of the conservation values including significant fabric and the visual setting*. The EIS does not show how this has been investigated, if at all.

The EIS also states that *the removal of vegetation on the site within the Willow Grove curtilage will also impact the cultural significance of this place and its garden*. This removal will also impact the heritage of Parramatta.

The EIS states that *The community is identified as having a particular attachment to Willow Grove, as well as the St George's Terrace*. As the EIS proposes that these two buildings be demolished it established that the project believe the views of Parramatta residents can be disregarded. Our organisation strongly supports the retention of Willow Grove and the St George's Terrace. Museum and Heritage practice should be aligned. Many of the communities who are likely supporters and return visitors to a new museum are also supporters of heritage. Destruction of these sites is likely to have a long-term impact on the success of the new museum due to a dissatisfied community.

Parramatta is known for its heritage buildings and the loss of these would impact Parramatta's heritage value and probably result in loss of visitors and therefore economic activity.

#### **Response summary**

AMaGA recommend that further investigation occurs in the context of museums and galleries across the city and NSW. NSW still does not have a dedicated museum of history, communities or immigration, which other states have. There has been a strong submission to create such a museum in North Parramatta which should be seriously considered.

A concerning feature of Parramatta is that there is no existing art gallery/museum where many smaller local government areas have managed to build and develop a thriving gallery/museum. As the current (as of 4<sup>th</sup> July 2020) proposed Powerhouse in Parramatta is



to be technology orientated it is unlikely to have painting and sculpture exhibitions which are the best attended exhibitions in NSW

The EIS also states that *The attraction of up to 2 million visitors per year which may impact neighbouring properties unless effectively managed. Careful consideration needs to be given to the management and operations of Powerhouse Parramatta.*

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