

**Des Griffin: 'Heading for White Elephant country?' (July 2018)**

Former director (1976-1998) of the Australian Museum, and first President of Museums Australia.

From the information appearing on the webs, the SMH and the post by the Powerhouse Museum Alliance, I can say the following:

One of the important features of the proposal is that the general admission charge currently imposed in Ultimo will be maintained in Parramatta. The evidence from the imposition of general admission charges in museums in the CBD in the 1990s makes clear that even a small charge is enough to work as a disincentive because people have come to view museum entry as free, unlike the Zoo or commercial attractions such as the Aquarium in Darling Harbour. The Art Gallery of NSW avoided the downturn by charging only for special exhibitions and art museums in other centres have done the same. To charge general admission in Parramatta could render significant revenue unrealistic. The proposition that large numbers of people will pay \$34 to visit the planetarium is fanciful. (see: 'Powerhouse museum will double entry fees at Parramatta site' [Read more](#))

The estimated cost of relocating the entire collections minus the fashion items, so far as it is known, is probably too low. (And where will the collections be stored?)

Unless there is very serious analysis supported by contestable and at least reasonably reliable data, this whole project is at least as uneconomic as several of the major toll roads and on that basis is simply not sustainable unless there are very serious and valid reasons for the relocation. Those are so far lacking: the resistance to paying tolls parallels the resistance to general admission charges for museum entry.

The assertion by former Premier Mike Baird, and others, that the people in the west should not have second best but deserve an "iconic" and "world class" museum is meaningless. Is this in terms of the intrinsic interest of the objects? Their interpretation/presentation? Scale of the development? Themes addressed? What exactly? Reference to the Smithsonian Institution, the huge assemblage of diverse museums in Washington DC, demonstrates ignorance!

Not a single word of the evidence in the hearings has identified the special reason why the relocated PHM will meet the criteria which would justify the proposal. How does it compare with the costs and benefits of a museum which addresses what the population in the western suburbs want to see if carefully considered?

The people in the areas to be served by this museum have not been adequately consulted or their views analysed. It is reasonable to conclude that instead of their being given an iconic etc museum/attraction they are having foisted on them something that some elites think they will like. The advocates such as the Western Sydney Director of the Business Chamber and the Lord Mayor of Parramatta are extremely unwise to be making judgements about the project in the absence of a careful and well-analysed proposal. That is not being elitist or rude; it is objecting to the government's overbearing elitism.

Politicians should endorse construction and operation of museums, theatres and the like, after consideration of advice from persons experienced and competent in the relevant areas, and whose opinions are in turn based on careful analysis of all relevant information. The present project is no better than a number of other major projects in which the costs seem to vastly exaggerate the benefits and end up requiring imposing charges elsewhere to balance the books.

Relevant to the proposal is National Gallery of Australia's Director Gerard Vaughan's remark at the recent Museums & Galleries Conference that in England several museums, branches of London museums established in the north of the country, ended up being closed a few years after they were opened. A further important relevant point is a comment made about development of museums in Paris: they are built to appeal to the people who live there. If they are popular with locals then out of towners will follow.

The notion that just because there is good transport system then tourists will travel to Parramatta is utterly fanciful. Where are the other attractions to which people might come?

Serious criticism of the present site of the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo was made when the proposal was first advocated. It was unconnected with surrounding attractions it was said. In mid-June 2018 Sydney's top business leaders and planning and infrastructure experts were told by an expert from the Brookings Institution at a Global Sydney Forum: "Capitalising on the Central/Ultimo/Camperdown Precinct" that "the city must embrace and encourage the growth of innovation precincts in order to grow jobs, create neighbourhoods and boost economic investment". Amongst the hosts of the Forum were the Sydney Business Chamber and Lendlease. Wouldn't a well-supported Powerhouse Museum be well positioned to be an important part of such a development? A Fashion Museum and university lecture rooms would hardly do so!

This project is headed to "White Elephant" country and should never have progressed this far. The original criticism of the present site of the PHM is flawed, the support is insufficiently informed, the costings are inadequate and the economics don't stack up.

A much more successful project in Parramatta addressing history and environment, as well as science and technology type exhibits/attractions, carefully thought through with first class education/interpretive/learning staff well supported and intelligent promotion would make a much greater contribution to western Sydney and be substantially cheaper in net terms. It could be the base for later expansion which could include major travelling exhibitions and such like. Especially if other attractions are drawn to the area. Presenting museums successfully takes good knowledge and experience in a wide variety of fields as well as very good staff and community support. Such a development would achieve the cost/benefit ratios necessary to justify the project.

People visit museums to discover themselves. They visit more frequently when there are new things to see. Every major museum in every major city in the

world realised this by the beginning of the present millennium. Such developments can be the centre of expanding attractions and commercial developments. The NSW government on the other hand seems to have some antediluvian and fanciful view that the bigger the collections held by museums the bigger the museum should be so all its collections can be seen simultaneously. And accountability and transparency are marginalised once again. The State's taxpayers will not escape the costs, both priced and unpriced!