

Australian
Museums
and Galleries
Association
Magazine



The Powerhouse Museum: Significance, Consequences, Opportunities



ABOVE: Jennifer Sanders.

BOTTOM: The Burning of the Garden Palace Sydney, September 22, 1882, as seen from Macquarie Street. (Supplement to the *Illustrated Sydney News*, 25 October 1882). Trustees, Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences.

Jennifer Sanders

The Powerhouse Museum is born of the Industrial Revolution. It is unique for the synergy between the Museum's extraordinary collection and the magnificent spaces of the 1899 Ultimo Power House, one of Australia's earliest and most imposing industrial buildings, and the contemporary architecture of 1988 that is the Powerhouse Museum today. The Museum has proven to be a well-purposed, award-winning museum with impressive flexibility, character and ambience.

The Powerhouse encompasses a long history of distinctive cultural events inscribed in the heart of the city's history. Founded in 1880 as the Technological, Industrial and Sanitary Museum, the first phase of the Powerhouse emerged as the legacy of the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition, realised in the large and splendid Garden Palace erected in the Royal Botanic Gardens. Australia's first international exhibition was inspired by the *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations*, which opened in London's Crystal Palace in May 1851. Melbourne's 1880 and 1889 international exhibitions were held in the magnificent building that still exists today in the Carlton Gardens – now a UNESCO-listed World Heritage building.

When the 1879 International Exhibition closed in Sydney, Sir Henry Parkes, Colonial Secretary, proposed that the Garden Palace be dedicated to public use. Advancing this proposal, the Australian Museum's Trustees in 1880 recommended the

establishment of a permanent museum – today's Powerhouse – to be housed in the Garden Palace. In one of the most spectacular tragedies in Sydney's history, the huge Garden Palace caught fire on 22 September 1882, and the enormous conflagration that was witnessed with horror across the colonial city destroyed its contents, including all the collections acquired for the yet-to-open Museum.

The Powerhouse Museum had suffered its First Destruction.

After ten years in a temporary home in the Exhibition's former Agricultural Hall, the Museum opened in 1893, in its new purpose-built home, as the Technological Museum, on 659 Harris Street, Ultimo. Adjacent to the new Sydney Technical College, these two institutions established the activities forming the science, education, creative and cultural precinct that is still thriving today in Ultimo. The new Goods Line pedestrian link and civic hub opened in 2015 (modelled on New York's High Line) has brought a whole new cluster of business and public activities to this area, as it now provides a pedestrian corridor leading from Central Station to the Powerhouse. This new amenity is used daily by locals and tourists seeking to experience Sydney's cultural activities.

In short, when the Powerhouse was brought to Ultimo in 1893, this was the first move of the Museum in response to the needs of a changing city.

With its activities and collections expanding over the 20th century, the Museum steadily outgrew its 1893 home and needed new housing, especially for the public's most important engagement with its collection-displays and changing exhibitions. The NSW government (through its Department of Public Works) embraced a bold vision of redevelopment as a Bicentennial project, and over ten years the innovative project was accomplished to convert and develop the former Ultimo Power House and Tram Depot into the purpose-designed Powerhouse Museum.

In March 1988, the Powerhouse opened at 500 Harris St, Ultimo, as a signature project of the Bicentenary. This was the second major move in the Museum's 139-year history. That is, two moves had been accomplished – not the 'six moves' erroneously claimed in the 'International Design Brief for the Parramatta Precinct'^[1] – a ruse implying that the Powerhouse is 'a pack it up and shift it museum' that's often on the move. Nothing could be further from the truth in an accurate representation of its history.

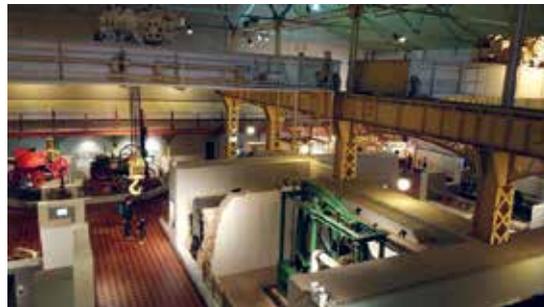
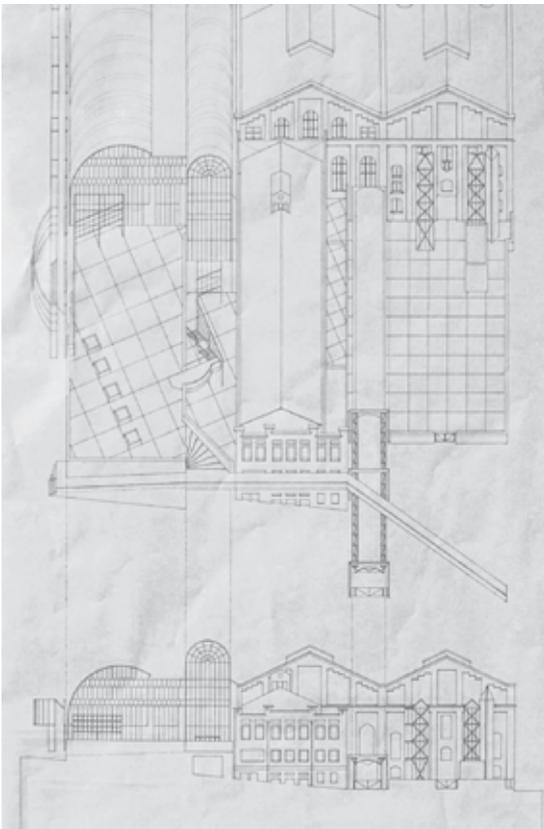
The historical overview in fact reveals why so many people and donors, who have always known the Powerhouse Museum and its distinctive technological history^[2] as an integral part of Sydney's cultural infrastructure, became so astonished when the proposal arose to move the institution right out of the city and away from its long term partner-museums





FAR LEFT TOP: The Technological Museum (left), 1893, Harris St, Ultimo and Sydney Technical College (right), Maryann St, 1891, both designed by William Kemp.

FAR LEFT BOTTOM: The axonometric drawing of the Powerhouse Museum above illustrates the relationship of the old and the new. The Garden Palace is referenced in the rotated grid expressed in various elements of the building such as the paving and boardroom entrance, which link the building to the Museum's genesis in the Botanic Gardens on Macquarie Street.



LEFT: Adjacent to the 1785 Boulton and Watt steam engine, powered by live steam, the Engine House is the perfect location for the Museum's *Steam Revolution* exhibition. The bottom photo is an installation shot documenting the engineering challenge to power these valuable engines, and the priceless Boulton and Watt, with live steam generated in a boiler in the Museum's basement. The cut-down Parramatta museum will not have live steaming on this scale, if at all. The *Steam Revolution* exhibition – unique in the world for its use of steam to bring the eleven engines to life – is an evocative soundscape in motion. A vivid introduction to the history of innovation in steam power, visitors are exposed to a range of working mechanisms. This exhibition could not be replicated in the cut-down Parramatta museum.

The Museum's building – its historic fabric and contemporary architecture, and its Ultimo location – together with its diverse collections, are intrinsic to the overarching narrative that forms the Powerhouse Museum.

(notably the Australian Museum, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and Sydney's historic houses today forming Sydney Living Museums). This collection of historic public institutions with linked histories in the civic heart of a city forms a cluster that distinguishes the most vibrant capitals world-wide.

A NSW Parliamentary Upper House Inquiry^[3] has for some years been examining many of these issues, and public submissions from people from across NSW,

Australia and the world about various options that would retain the purpose-built Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo, and not see a major public building torn down. Despite all submissions carefully arguing a contrary case, the NSW Government is continuing with its \$1.5bn-plus plan to 'move' the Museum to Parramatta – an impossibility, not least because of the technical issues involved, the physical size of the collection, and the smaller facilities that would

Reviewing a museum's history as a unique cultural asset in its state capital



TOP LEFT: This group of Venetian glassware was made by the Venice and Murano Glass Company c.1885 and exhibited at the 1888 Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition. The Museum purchased it in 1889 as an example of high-quality international manufacture. Photo courtesy MAAS.

TOP RIGHT: The Museum's 1926 Chrysler sectioned Chassis which worked with a push button, a forerunner of the interactives which are a distinctive feature of the Powerhouse Museum's exhibitions. Photo courtesy MAAS.



be provided as a result of such a move. Above all, the Museum's building — its historic fabric and contemporary architecture, and its Ultimo location, together with its diverse collections — are intrinsic to the overarching narrative that forms the Powerhouse Museum. The planned relocation would result in a second and final destruction of the Powerhouse Museum and all that it has brought together at a civic site in Sydney over the 19th, 20th and now 21st centuries.

For many of the Museum's staff, the last few years have been very difficult and disheartening. The NSW Public Sector Employee Survey, *People Matter 2019*,^[4] discloses an overall rating for MAAS Employee Engagement of 62% — down 2% from 2018 — and the lowest engagement rating in the NSW cultural institutions cluster. Yet the redevelopment project describes a museum embarking on the 'the largest cultural infrastructure project currently being undertaken in Australia'.^[5]

Dozens of Powerhouse Museum alumni, and nine Directors emeriti, have raised reasoned and well-documented objections to the current plan, highlighting the project's disruptive logic for what it is — in effect, the destruction of the Powerhouse Museum as a Sydney asset, arguing that a completely different cultural asset at Parramatta will be the outcome. It should be said that all defenders of the Powerhouse Museum's retention support the case for a major facility at Parramatta — but believe that Parramatta's own civic leaders and community should have been consulted about the best case for their cultural needs in the heart of a western-Sydney centre. The Powerhouse would be an ideal civic partner — along with other Sydney museums — to ensure that the state's collections can be regularly shared with western Sydney citizens and form the basis of ongoing educational displays and exhibitions, as the greater Parramatta area deserves.

However, the proposed Parramatta PHM will be

smaller (Ultimo floor area: 42,595 sqm; Parramatta Museum: 21,200 sqm).^[6] It will have less exhibition space, with fewer Museum objects on display. It will have less on-site access to the varied Powerhouse collections — to be stored off-site and dispersed around NSW — that is, if sufficiently safe, secure and accessible locations can be identified and negotiated. The Powerhouse collection will never again be presented as an integrated and powerful statement of Australia's cultural heritage, and our place in the world.

For Museum staff, supporters and benefactors, the Parramatta plan has undermined the status of the Museum as a permanent institution — that is, independent of government whim or sudden disruption of its board's responsibilities as a 'public trust', and the long-term commitments of an institution to its supporters across generations. Donors are known to be changing their intent and their wills — promised gifts and bequests will be redirected to interstate and national museums.

The current plan ignores the ICOM Statement on the independence of museums, Paris, 27 March 2018.^[7] The NSW Government's lack of transparency, and the Museum's lack of control and authority over its own future in the past five years of surprise new 'planning', are testament to the critical risks to the viability and status of the Powerhouse Museum, as would occur with the loss its purpose-designed home in Ultimo.

The people of Parramatta and region desire and deserve cultural development on their own terms, and after careful consultation with their local bodies and public. The Parramatta City Council Cultural Plan, 2017^[8] seeks an iconic gallery and exhibition space to show local, touring and international blockbuster exhibitions; it seeks to celebrate the region's Indigenous heritage and culture, colonial history, and contemporary cultural diversity. Parramatta's cultural identity and future does not need to be saddled with

1. <https://competitions.malcolmreading.com/maasparramatta/news/six-design-teams-announced-for-powerhouse-precinct-at-parramatta>

2. A 1933 UK (Carnegie-sponsored) report on Australian museums singled out the MAAS/Powerhouse museum in Sydney and the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne as the two outstanding collections of the period in Australia: 'Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide certainly have collections rivalling those of other cities in the world, excluding only the largest. They are well-arranged, well-curated and fairly well-housed, and Melbourne for art, and Sydney for technological collections, are probably superior to any other city south of the Equator.' (S.F. Markham and Prof. H. C. Richards, *A report on the museums & art galleries of Australia*, to the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Museums Association [UK], London, 1933, p. 2.)



an uprooted vestige of the Powerhouse – which cannot be in any way comparable to the present Museum in its Ultimo home, since ‘less’ would be publicly available in the final proposed outcome in the western region.

Finally, there are unreasonable costs involved in the current plans – in effect the taxpayer is paying twice, when the Powerhouse is already a purpose-built public asset achieved as recently as the 1980s. The NSW Government, in consultation with the community, can achieve a landmark cultural development in Parramatta, the renewal of the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo, and support museums and communities across NSW, for less than the costs of ‘moving’ the Powerhouse to Parramatta. These different strategies would be sustainable, fiscally responsible, and would build community pride and resilience at a time when there are many challenges affecting the people of NSW.

The unnecessary destruction of the Powerhouse – already the people’s museum – would be a serious and unprecedented blow to Australia’s cultural life. ■

Jennifer Sanders began her career at the Powerhouse Museum in 1978 and is a longstanding member of AMaGA and ICOM Australia. As senior curator she was a key member of the Bicentennial redevelopment team and, from 1988, a member of the museum’s executive. From 2001 to 2009 she was Deputy Director, Collections, Content Development and Outreach. Jennifer was a member of the National Cultural Heritage Committee 1999 – 2008. She is now a heritage and museum consultant.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Tools for copper wheel engraving made by Frank Piggott Webb in England, c1879-1942. Photo courtesy MAAS.

1879 Sydney International Exhibition (Webb display at centre rear).

Crystal tumblers featuring Australia flora designs engraved by Frank Piggott Webb of Sydney in 1912. Webb came from England to Australia to demonstrate glass engraving at the Sydney International Exhibition of 1879-1880. Photo courtesy MAAS.



For details of review process, see:

- www.powerhousemuseumalliance.com
- www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/inquiries/Pages/inquiry-details.aspx?pk=2403#tab-reportsandgovernmentresponses

Citation: Jennifer Sanders, ‘The Powerhouse Museum: Significance, Consequences, Opportunities’, *Australian Museums and Galleries Association Magazine*, Vol. 28 (1), AMaGA, Canberra, Summer 2019, pp. 48-51.

For more information on AMaGA’s response to the relocation of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, read the following media releases in the News section of the website www.amaga.org.au/news:

- The Powerhouse Museum – its future in the balance (7 March 2019)
www.amaga.org.au/news/powerhouse-museum-its-future-balance
- Update on the Powerhouse Museum (16 April 2018)
www.amaga.org.au/news/update-powerhouse-museum

3. <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/ledocs/inquiries/2403/Report%20No.%2040%20-%20Museums%20and%20galleries%20in%20NSW.pdf>
4. *People Matter 2019*, NSW Public Sector Employee Survey, Agency Report, Planning and Environment, Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, p. 3.
5. <https://competitions.malcolmreading.com/maasparramatta/news/six-design-teams-announced-for-powerhouse-precinct-at-parramatta>
6. Steenson Varming for Johnstaff, Attachment F, The Ultimo Presence Project, 8 August 2017, p. 13; Final Business case (Supplement), The New Museum in Western Sydney, Johnstaff, version 6.0, 24 April 2018.
7. https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/CP-Statement-independence-of-museums_EN.pdf
8. https://www.cityofparramatta.nsw.gov.au/sites/council/files/2017-06/Parramatta%20Cultural%20Plan_3b.pdf