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Northbridge NSW 2063
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Heritage Council of NSW
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COMMENTS ON PROPOSAL TO NOMINATE “ULTIMO TRAMWAYS POWER HOUSE” ON THE SHR

I am writing to record my objections to the proposed listing of the “Ultimo Tramways Power House” in its present form.

1. My credentials

1.1 In December 2012, I retired after 33 years’ experience as a curator at the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (Powerhouse Museum). During this period, I was Senior Curator Transport (1988-2012) and Curator of Transport and Engineering (1980-1988). Since 2012, I have been a volunteer at the Museum, assisting with expert documentation about the transport collection.

1.2 Between 1980 and 1988, I was engaged full time in project management and exhibition development of both Stage I and Stage II of the Powerhouse Museum (PHM). Of particular relevance to the arguments put forward in this letter, I engaged on countless occasions with colleagues, including architects, designers, educators and specialist consultants to achieve an optimal relationship in the interpretive settings of exhibits within the building spaces, including the refurbished “Ultimo Tramways Power House”, that currently form the PHM.

1.3 Since 2013, I have been a consultant in transport heritage, specialising in significance assessments of individual objects and entire collections and have undertaken commissions from clients in local, state and federal government and from private organisations in Australia and overseas.

1.4 I have experience in curating transport and engineering artefacts of up to 200 tonnes, including how they are provenanced, acquired, researched, handled, managed, interpreted, preserved, operated and promoted; what resources they require and how to manage the associated risks of all the above.

2. Powerhouse Museum: building in relationship with collection

2.1 The architectural approach to the PHM project provides spaces that respond flexibly to the vastly differing scale and nature of the Museum’s collections. This was done by establishing a clear and hierarchical relationship between the buildings, the exhibition contents and the environments created to best interpret them. For example, the grand volume of the Boiler House would complement the awe-inspiring sweep of suspended aircraft and spacecraft; the preserved cranes and tiled floor of the former Engine House would evoke a former industrial setting of the activated engines of the steam gallery; the diverse perspectives and alluring sight lines of the Turbine House would complement the visual appeal and eclecticism of the social history displays and the intimate exhibition spaces of the Switch House would enrich the visitor’s experience of contemplation and engagement with the stunning decorative arts collection.

The placement of the Boulton & Watt Beam Engine, restored to steaming condition, in the 1988 Galleria and adjacent to the former Engine House gives views through the arches and openings of the Turbine Hall and the Engine House's square windows to the steaming stationary engines of which the Boulton & Watt was the antecedent.

2.2 At the same time, great care was taken to respect the former Power House buildings, despite the loss of so much of the internal structure and finishes from the derelict interior. The architect and the designers worked closely with the Museum to maximise the relationship between building and collection, between exhibit and space and between object and its immediate context. The exhibition design approach, the specification of building services, the relative scale and proportion of exhibits and spaces, considered in a hierarchy, all reflected this integrated process.

2.3 This process demonstrates **the intrinsic inseparability of the Powerhouse Museum buildings from the collection that they house**. It also illustrates **the gross inadequacy of limiting the listing proposal to what is defined by the "Ultimo Tramways Power House"**.

3. Burra Charter

3.1 As it stands, **the proposal to list merely the "Ultimo Tramways Power House" contravenes at least two tenets of the Burra Charter**.

3.2 As the Burra Charter is the basis for all heritage legislation and decision making in Australia, it is instructive to refer to it here, because of its direct bearing on the recommendation as it stands. In my opinion, at least two of its Articles, Nos. 8 and 11, demonstrate that the current listing proposal is plainly inadequate:

3.3 "Article 8. Setting

Conservation requires the retention of an appropriate setting. This includes retention of the visual and sensory setting, as well as the retention of spiritual and other cultural relationships that contribute to the *cultural significance* of the *place*. (not my italics)

New construction, demolition, intrusions or other changes which would adversely affect the setting or relationships are not appropriate. "

Article 8 supports the contention that the entire site should be listed, which would acknowledge the high cultural significance of the Museum's role since 1988:

3.4 "Article 11 Related places and objects

The contribution which related places and related objects make to the cultural significance of the place should be retained."

There is a demonstrable and provable relationship between the Museum's collection types (science and technology, social history and decorative arts), their scale, materials, shapes and stories and the nuanced architectural responses to those collection types. These spacial relationships result from a collaborative process in the design development stage. They are most readily illustrated by the arched volume of the galleria, designed specifically to provide a grand setting for the Boulton & Watt engine and the first train in NSW. It is also very evident in the *Steam Revolution* gallery, which evokes the type of industrial setting in which the engines that operate in the exhibition might have once functioned. Furthermore, the *Steam Revolution* exhibition is not just the only gallery of its kind

in the state of NSW or Australia, but is still *the only permanent steam-powered museum exhibition in the world*. And make no mistake, the architectural treatment of the former Engine House in which the *Steam Revolution* exhibition is located is not artifice or confection: it is a permanent finish and interpretation of the historical role of that space in the former Ultimo Power House that resonates with its present Museum context.

3.5 Article 11 therefore supports the argument that heritage significance is increased because *the collection itself is integral with the buildings that provide a cultural setting for them*. The overwhelmingly positive and sustained response from millions of visitors to the PHM since 1988 suggests that this relationship between building and collections is one of the key reasons for the broad and enduring appeal of the visitor experience. Therefore, **the entire Powerhouse Museum site should be included in the listing proposal**.

4. Some comments about Cracknell & Lonergan “Assessment of Heritage Significance” review

4.1 Reference: p 24 NSW Heritage Guidelines criterion (a) Historical Significance

“...it is noted that the site has been substantially altered, including demolition of the smoke stacks, as well as the removal of much of the interior fabric (e.g, electric generators) (“that” missing here?) has made the connection to its historical past more tenuous.”

4.2 While it is acknowledged that the degree of extant physical evidence of original fabric of the Ultimo Power House will have some bearing on the assessment of its historical significance, the above statement invites a qualifying response, including some context.

4.2.1 The “demolition of the smoke stacks” (chimneys) needs to be clarified and is erroneous in its present form. The two Boiler House chimneys were demolished to the roof line by a demolition contractor in the mid to late 1960s well before the commencement of the PHM project. At the beginning of the PHM project, the base of each chimney was repaired and these formed a vital architectural and service (air intake and exhaust system) element of the Transport, Communications and Space gallery.

4.2.2 In 1982, a series of coal hoppers and a steel supporting framework were still in place in the Boiler House, all that remained of a much more substantial system of structures that had once been configured on the external and internal walls of the building. However, the burning of coal to fuel the boilers had created such a corrosive environment that most of this steelwork had been removed by the time the Powerhouse Museum project had begun. The steel framework supporting the hoppers was also severely and dangerously corroded and it was considered that the retention of these structural elements was not possible.

4.2.3 Demolition of the Power House buildings and clearing the site for the new Museum had actually been considered prior to the project’s approval by the Government in 1979. The far greater potential of placing the collections of the Museum in a permanent new home and in a fitting former industrial setting was recognised, making the most of the opportunities of that very significant association.

5. Transport and power revolution

5.1 The development of the PHM within the cavernous spaces of the former Ultimo Power House presented a unique opportunity to profile and interpret the Museum’s transport and engineering collections in the context of the power technology revolution at the turn of the 20th century that was contemporary with the opening of the Ultimo Power House itself.

5.2 The use of electric power for lighting our cities and propelling our public street transport are just two of the ways in which the Museum’s collection has been used to explain the importance of this

key development and its effect on daily life. The synergy with the former role of the Power House is obvious and compelling.

6. Powerhouse Museum: promoting the rail preservation movement

The *Transport* and *Locomotive No 1* exhibitions developed by the PHM for its 1988 opening dramatically raised the profile of the railway preservation movement in NSW. In 1986, contracts were signed with the NSW Rail Transport Museum to restore the PHM's steam locomotive 1243 and steam tram motor 1A for display in the *Transport* exhibition. In 1987, the Sydney Tramway Museum assisted the Museum by providing research information and loan exhibits for the display of the Museum's C Class tram, one of the first that had operated from the Ultimo Depot in 1899. By 1992, the Museum had entered into a partnership with heritage train operator 3801 Limited to rebuild another PHM locomotive, the mammoth Pacific class No 3830, which was returned to operation hauling highly popular steam tours in 1997. Meanwhile, volunteers dedicated to rebuilding Sydney steam tram No.103A were invited to use the Museum's steam tram No.1A to take photographs and measurements. No.103A is now part of a group of three steam tram vehicles listed on the State Heritage Register. In 1999, work began to rebuild another of the PHM's steam locomotive, No.3265, which continues to haul heritage heavily patronised steam train tours. In 2005, Rail Corporation NSW (RailCorp), chose to sponsor the redevelopment of the *Locomotive No 1* exhibition as a centrepiece of the 150th anniversary celebrations of the NSW Railways. Locomotive No.1 has been emblematic of the history of the NSW Railways since its acquisition by the Museum in 1884 and it is internationally significant today. In 2011, the PHM lent its O Class tram to the Sydney Tramway Museum, where it has since attracted great public interest as a static and operating exhibit.

In his book *Steam Australia: Locomotives That Galvanised the Nation*¹, the late Tim Fischer is lavish in his praise of the Museum's portrayal of the NSW's rail transport heritage. Gazing at Locomotive No 1 is "to behold an icon of rare beauty...that has been well preserved for over 120 years". He is admiring and reflective about the impressive assemblage of iconic railway exhibits in the *Transport* gallery.

These examples of the preservation and public enjoyment of the state's rail heritage assets have resulted from the PHM's central role in profiling and promoting our railway history through its collection, its exhibitions and the preserved tramway architecture included in the Powerhouse Museum complex. This is clear evidence that **social significance may be attributed to the totality of the Museum, its transport exhibitions and exhibits as a single entity.**

7. Relevant criteria for listing on the State Heritage Register

5.1 In my opinion, the arguments presented above support my contention that **at least three of the criteria for listing on the State Heritage Register apply to the entire Powerhouse Museum site**, including the Harwood Building (former Tram Depot) and Wran Building. These are


- (a) an item is important in the course or pattern of NSW's cultural or natural history.
- (c) an item is important in demonstrating aesthetic characteristics and/or a high degree of creative or technical achievement in NSW and
- (d) an item has a strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group in NSW for social, cultural or spiritual reasons

¹ Fischer, T, *Steam Australia: Locomotives That Galvanised the Nation*, NLA Publishing, Canberra, 2018, p 108

8. Conclusion and recommendation

The **proposal to nominate the Ultimo Tramways Power House for State Heritage Register listing, while a positive step in itself, is plainly inadequate.** The cultural significance of the PHM and its collection, associated with the entire site since 1988, must be taken into account. This means that the entire PHM site, including the former Ultimo Tram Depot now the Harwood Building, must be incorporated in the listing proposal. Therefore, **it is recommended that the entire Powerhouse Museum site and its associated collection be listed on the State Heritage Register.**

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andrew Grant', written in a cursive style.

Andrew Grant
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