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Response to the listing of the “Ultimo Tramway Power House “ for inclusion on the State’s Heritage Register.

My name is Ian Debenham OAM, a former Curator of Transport (aviation) of thirty years’ duration (1980-2010) at the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (Powerhouse). I received my OAM for furthering the study of Australia’s aviation history while at the Museum and, as a ‘by the way’ I am a second-generation employee of the Museum. My father’s brother worked as an assistant botanist at the Museum from the 1950s to 60s carrying out research into essential oils. Since retirement I have been a volunteer providing my knowledge of the aviation collection and liaising with kindred volunteer organisations. Thus I have some considerable ‘skin in the process’ as the saying goes. My purpose in writing is to object to the current listing of the Powerhouse Museum under the misleading title of the “Ultimo Tramway Power House” amongst other aspects of the current listing.

I also take issue with the quality of the report delivered by the consultant Cracknell & Lonergan that appears to me as the proverbial borrowing of the State Government’s wrist-watch by the consultant to be able to tell the Government the time. The latter knew that the watch was faulty and the former gave the Government the time it wanted. Thus the report is dogged by errors and superficial analyses.

Taking the lesser of my objections first the listing should be for the “Powerhouse Museum” rather than the misleading “Ultimo Tramway Power House” that limits the heritage aspect of the building and hence the reduction of the ‘protected’ outline to, broadly, the Turbine Hall, Boiler House, Switch House. Moving on from this, the listing should also include protection of the three cranes that remain in the Turbine Hall and other original fittings also still in situ as these are features existing from the building when it operated as a power house, not only for the tramway system but for the electrical requirements for an expanding Sydney. The listing should also include the Harwood Building – formerly the Ultimo Tram Depot – that stabled the trams operating on the George Street system. This building is part and parcel of the power house and contemporary with it. The two buildings are inextricably linked.

The listing should also acknowledge the power house as an evolved building that now incorporates in its heritage the museum aspect and, thus, the plan for heritage listing should also add the galleria and the Wran Building. The architectural renewal of the building is an integral part of its heritage – another chapter in the history of the building. As well, the listing should respect the evolved building for its architectural acknowledgement to the interior features that were recreated as the originals did not survive the attempted demolition of the building decades ago. The Sulman award won for the repurposing of the building is also an inextricable aspect of the history of the building as well as of the architectural history of Sydney and its evolution.

The power house and the museum are exceptionally fit for purpose in that the transport and technology collections contained within the museum have a ‘symbiotic’ relationship with the building. One supports the interpretation of the other. Because of the volumes of the Turbine Hall, Boiler House and galleria it has been possible to

display the museum's collection of significant aircraft consisting of aircraft as large, and heavy, as the Boeing Canada built Catalina flying boat "Frigate Bird II" that, in the hands of Sir P.G. Taylor and crew accomplished the first aerial crossing of the South Pacific and return in 1951 and as small and light as the 'microlight' aircraft, the Wheeler Scout, one of two prototypes to allow series production and it is a pioneer in Australia of the microlight aircraft movement. The Wheeler Scout was the first aircraft of its class in the world to have its airworthiness officially recognized. These aircraft are displayed alongside others in the Boiler House allowing visitors to understand their history, design and significance in Australian cultural and technological history and this display is in juxtaposition with the Space exhibition allowing the viewer to venture in their mind beyond the realm of the air into the airless void of space to appreciate the differences in the history, design and technology of space craft. The Turbine Hall has, over time, displayed a number of other aircraft of the museum's collection and the galleria has been the venue for the display of Dick Smith's solo-around-the-world helicopter and the display of the recreation of aeronautical pioneer, Lawrence Hargrave's, kite lift experiment of 1894. By virtue of the volumes and scale and quantity of aircraft displayed, the effect on the museum visitor of suspended aircraft and space vehicles is a sense of awe. The variety of historically and technically significant aircraft on display is unique in Australian museums. One would have to travel to the United States, Great Britain or Europe to see a similar museum aircraft display. Without these volumes and the pre-planning of the internal structure of the museum building that was necessary to accommodate the weight of the combined aircraft, the effect could not be achieved. I would, thus, evoke Article 11 of the Burra charter that states "[t]he contribution which related places and related objects make to the cultural significance of the place should be retained." In short, all the objects that make up the totality of the museum's collections should be included within the heritage listing as they are objects related to the museum function of the evolved building.

I would hope that the attempted, and transparent, detachment of the power house from its full history and, hence, its full heritage value as it is in the consultant's report, should not proceed in its current form. Instead, the listing should be rewritten to give a complete, true and honest assessment without political interference.

Yours sincerely,
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