

Heritage Council of NSW,  
Locked Bag 5020,  
Parramatta, NSW, 2124  
[heritagemailbox@environment.nsw.gov.au](mailto:heritagemailbox@environment.nsw.gov.au)

**Re Notice of Intention to consider listing on the State Heritage Register of the 'Ultimo Tramways Power House'. (sic)**

To the Chair:

**Statement:**

I write as a member of the Powerhouse Museum Alliance to object to the nomination for the 'Ultimo Tramways Power House' as it is proposed.

As the logical and responsible next step, I support the nomination of the Powerhouse Museum in its entirety for listing on the State Heritage Register.

**Credentials:**

I write as the former Deputy Director, Collections and Outreach, Powerhouse Museum from 2001 to February 2009. I began my career at the Museum in 1978 as museum assistant, curator then senior curator, decorative arts and design. I was a key member of the Powerhouse Museum redevelopment team before taking up senior executive positions in 1988 - Assistant Director, Associate Director then Deputy Director. All these roles always had responsibility for the Collection, Registration and Conservation and for periods, Exhibitions, Education, Library, Sydney Observatory, Museums Discovery Centre, Regional Services and the Migration Heritage Centre NSW.

I was a member of the National Cultural Heritage Committee from 1999 – 2008, From 2007 - 2012, I was a member of the External Advisory Panel, Design Research Institute, RMIT University, Melbourne. I am now a heritage and museum consultant. In 2001 I was awarded the Centenary of Federation Medal. I am a member of ICOM, TICCIH, AMaGA and the National Trust.

**Summary:**

There are many reasons to oppose this listing, not least of which is that there is no such place as the Ultimo Tramways Power House. The fact that the proposed listing's site boundary is limited to only the brick shell of the former Ultimo Power House supports the Government's plan to demolish and sell the excluded buildings which, together with the extant Ultimo Power House and its in-situ remnants, comprise the much loved and respected Powerhouse Museum.

The deficiencies in fact and in understanding inherent in this proposed listing and, the accompanying unacceptable 'Independent Assessment of Heritage Significance' by Cracknell & Lonergan, underline the absolute necessity of listing the Powerhouse Museum in its entirety. This will of course include the former Ultimo Power House, Tram Depot/Harwood building and in situ transport, engineering and technology collections as well as the Museum's collection.

**Background:**

The overriding and core reasons to reject this proposed listing are that it ignores, dismisses or is unaware of:

- the challenging and innovative project to renew and adapt the magnificent industrial remnant of the Ultimo Power House into the award winning Powerhouse Museum.
- the fact that 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 – a Museum born of the Industrial Revolution.
- the fact that the Powerhouse Museum celebrates its industrial context, not only through exhibitions of significant artefacts of our engineering and technological legacy but also through contemporary interpretations via science interactives, - developed in-house - which have been a popular feature of the Powerhouse experience since its opening.
- the distinguished achievements of the world renowned Powerhouse Museum since 1988 have been ignored by the Assessment Report which does not consider the site's history and significance as a Museum. (See att List of Awards 1988 – 2008). Its contribution to museology, to cultural and movable heritage interpretation and, to education have been ignored in this limited nomination and, the deficient Cracknell and Lonergan Report. (C&L)
- the history of the Ultimo precinct which was developed on the model of London's South Kensington science, arts and education precinct is entirely absent from this nomination. Yet this is the foundation of today's vibrant creative, education and tech precinct which the Museum anchors.

The Museum moved to Ultimo in 1893 from its temporary home in the Agricultural Hall (1882-1893) of the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition. It was this Exhibition which inspired the founding of the Museum, just as

the Victoria and Albert Museum and Science Museum, London the legacy of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry and All Nations, 1851.

Museum's first move was to its second home at 500 Harris St, the Technological Museum (1893-1988). The Museum was moved to this new purpose built home designed by WE Kemp (1893) where it was co-located with Kemp's Sydney Technical College. (1891)

The 1988 opening of the Powerhouse Museum, 659 Harris St, was the second move in the Museum's long history and confirmed Ultimo as a leading cultural, design and education precinct.

The Powerhouse Museum has been resident and influential in its Ultimo precinct since 1893 – more than 127 years. C&L are being disingenuous when they assert that the MAAS has only been 'at the Ultimo site' for '30 years'. p17.

- The Museum's Collection is intrinsic to the presentation of the Powerhouse Museum, the building and the precinct because this is the acknowledged primary physical manifestation of the Museum – its home. All museums, especially major museums like the Powerhouse have collection objects held in storage – the Powerhouse is a leader in making its collection physically and virtually accessible. Many museums have satellite sites where focused exhibitions and experiences are presented eg Sydney Observatory.
- C&L display a very limited understanding of museums and museology, particularly best practice curatorial, collection management and exhibitions, when they rabbit on confusedly about objects being 'brought in from all over the state, and tell different stories about the history and development of New South Wales' as an indicator that the collection is 'not integral to the buildings in which it is housed'.

Seriously, it is a tortuous and utterly unconvincing argument that the Museum and its Collection, as presented to the public in the Powerhouse, are somehow disconnected from the Museum as a building because 'the collection can be considered movable.' p17

- The outstanding record of exhibitions which have been presented at the Powerhouse Museum, and in the Stage 1 Gallery in the Harwood building has been essentially ignored. (See att List of Exhibitions). A quick perusal of this list conveys the exemplary scholarship, energy and imagination that characterised the Museum's changing permanent, temporary and travelling exhibition program drawing from the full scope of the Collection.

The emphasis now on artist generated presentations interpreting selected objects from the collection, and on immersive experiences for selfie opportunities at the expense of curated narrative exhibitions presenting the stories inherent in the themes and artefacts in the collection are worrying instances of the flight from history which is increasingly evident in our cultural, educational and academic spheres.

- The most egregious negative outcome of the last five years of obdurate insistence by the Government that the Powerhouse Museum would be 'moved' to a smaller, flood prone riverbank in Parramatta is that donors, the life blood of a museum are now deserting the Powerhouse Museum.

As I warned former Premier Baird, Premier Berejiklian and Minister Harwin, donors give to bricks and mortar – they need to be certain that their gifts, whether apparently modest or fabulously valuable, will be looked after in perpetuity by the Museum. Donors are individuals with cherished possessions who give to cultural institutions to ensure that these objects, when gratefully accepted into the Collection of the Museum, will be professionally curated and made available to the public.

Over the past 5 years I am personally aware that several major, significant collections, which donors had told me would be given to the Museum, are now being given to interstate and national institutions. This is a disastrous outcome of the Government's benighted and uncivilised plan which is slowly and inexorably destroying a great Museum.

Not only is the Powerhouse Museum's home unprotected and under siege – its defining Collection is being diminished and devalued and is at risk of atrophying through the lack of donors and patrons.

Donors do not give to the NSW Government – the Government does not own the Collection – or the Museum. It belongs to the people of NSW.

The Powerhouse Museum in its entirety deserves and needs for its very survival as one of the State's three foundation cultural institutions, the protection and custodianship afforded by Listing on the State Heritage Register.

Furthermore, the case can be made for national and world heritage listing for key objects in the Collection – the Museum's 1785 Boulton & Watt Beam Engine being an outstanding example. This priceless engine is celebrated in the Galleria of the Powerhouse where it is exhibited in steaming order in the

context of the achievements of Boulton and Watt and their Lunar Society colleague Josiah Wedgwood - masterminds of the Industrial Revolution.

Furthermore, through the arches and windows of the Turbine Hall is Steam Revolution, the story of the power and influence of steam technology in Australia presented by rare and impressive engines in steam. Nowhere else in the world is such a story told for the benefit and fascination of visitors young and old.

Instead, the people of NSW and beyond will be lucky if the Boulton & Watt engine is on show at Parramatta – the Stage 2 Design Brief says 'There is an opportunity to examine the possibility of placing the Boulton and Watt engine on display within one of the circulation spaces in the Museum.' p107. Circulation spaces will not have museum standard environmental conditions.

I rest my case.

The Heritage Council must act to protect the Powerhouse Museum in its entirety. This is the nomination that we, the Powerhouse Museum Alliance and the National Trust, will put forward.

Jennifer Sanders  
24 March 2020  
65 Bouvardia Street  
Russell Lea 2046

mob 0411 140 061  
[jenniferl.sanders@yahoo.com](mailto:jenniferl.sanders@yahoo.com)

**Att:** A. ICOMOS 2019 Sydney talk Series No 6 'Policy, Power and the Cultural and Heritage Values of the Powerhouse Museum', J. Sanders and K. Winkworth, 1<sup>st</sup> Oct 2019. See att paper, J. Sanders, 'The Powerhouse Museum: Its Place in the World, Our Nation, New South Wales, Our Neighbourhood and, Our Hearts and Minds' OR 'The Powerhouse Museum: A Tale of two Destructions: Conflagration followed 137 years later by Expropriation and Demolition'.

**Att:** Powerhouse Museum Awards 1988 – 2008  
**Att:** Powerhouse Museum Exhibitions.