

Proposed State Heritage Register listing of the Ultimo Tramways Powerhouse, 500 Harris St Ultimo

To Whom it May Concern

I was the inaugural manager of the NSW Migration Heritage Centre at the Powerhouse Museum from 2004 to 2012 when the collections research centre, developed around community participation in heritage, was abolished during funding cuts.

I do not support the State Heritage Register listing of the former Ultimo Tramways Powerhouse because the assessment does not adequately address the state cultural heritage values of the Powerhouse Museum itself and associated buildings, spaces, interiors and collections. Therefore I object to the fact that the heritage assessment process does not follow the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter and the recognised practice of looking at all phases of the place's development, meanings and values from the 19th century to the present day. The proposed listing does not adequately consider the 20th century history of the site. It does not include the Powerhouse Museum's museum buildings and it fails to assess the aesthetic and architectural significance of the museum's innovative integrated design and unified architectural conception for adaptive reuse of a heritage place to house a collection. This challenging design converting the shell of an industrial building into one of the world's most up-to-date museums was an innovative design and pioneering work for the adaptive reuse of an industrial building in the 20th century. The **whole museum** was deservedly given the 1988 Sulman 'Award for Architectural Merit', the highest architectural prize of the New South Wales chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects. It also won an award from the National Royal Australian Institute of Architects Award for Interiors.

It would be usual practice to assess a major public building, and a relatively contemporary one at 32 years of age, with reference to major contemporary architectural awards when it was constructed. The Powerhouse Museum would have state significance as a major and rare post-modern public building and cultural facility in New South Wales. This architectural movement is now recognised as significant and worthy of preservation in international cities such as London.

Architect Lionel Glendenning imagined how the building's derelict and vast rectangular spaces, classical proportions and arched walls could accommodate the museum's broad collection holdings, with its large objects like the Catalina flying boat, the Boulton and Watt steam engine, and Locomotive one while housing intimate galleries of decorative arts and themed exhibitions. His bold scheme rehabilitated the remaining building fabric and juxtaposed it with a new building that blended with the old, while looking to the future. The Wran building's space was inspired by the grand railway stations and exhibition halls of the 19th century, especially Sydney's Garden Palace.
(National Trust of NSW)

The nomination has also failed to do comparative analysis with other museum buildings in New South Wales. While superficially similar to the Cox designed Australian National Maritime Museum, the Powerhouse Museum was designed around large collection holdings and as an integrated synthesis of design for the adaptive reuse of a heritage building. Further information for reference is in the book *Yesterday's Tomorrows The Powerhouse Museum and Its Precursors 1880 to 2005* which was edited by Professor Graeme Davison and Kimberley Webber.

The museum also has historic significance at the State Heritage level as the major New South Wales Wran Government public works project and cultural facility expression for the 1988 Australian

Bicentenary. The Powerhouse Museum was a significant architectural statement for Sydney and an expression of the rise of the Australian social history movement in New South Wales. The museum is strongly associated with the popular and scholarly development of public history in Australia. This includes story-telling through the experience of ordinary people and associated collections through exhibitions about everyday life in New South Wales and the history of the technology that people used in working lives and human ingenuity through technology and design. The museum is associated with developing national museum methods that influenced public and community museum practice nationally. This includes working machinery, regional services, the NSW Migration Heritage Centre and community participation in heritage, exhibitions on women's domestic work such as 'Never Done' and steam and rural technology preservation. The Powerhouse Museum's reach, influence and development of museum methodology, and its community affection, is demonstrably greater than that of the Federal Government's Australian National Maritime Museum at Darling Harbour. This has not been assessed as a context for the museum building's historic significance in NSW

The nomination fails to consider the social significance of the integrated nature of the Powerhouse Museum building and the collection as a civic public place and people's collection for New South Wales. There has not been a thorough assessment of the social significance of the museum building and its interiors and spaces. The museum also has particular social significance for the Sydney design community evidenced by its association with Sydney Design Week within the space. The Design Institute of Australia, has for example, been involved with the Powerhouse Museum since its inception and collaborated with the museum to produce the first Sydney Design Week in 1997.

The Powerhouse Museum and its hall and exhibition spaces has social significance for the Sydney gay and lesbian community, still to be researched and assessed, for its history as a safe public and civic space for that community with proximity to Oxford Street. The museum was the first state cultural facility to embrace and welcome this community and this is evidenced by the program of collection development and exhibition with participation by the community since the 1980s. This gay and lesbian history was presented through exhibitions, collections and AIDS pandemic commemorative and memorial activities such as candlelight vigils and annual world AIDS day events. This was also the venue for a major exhibition and reunion for 30th anniversary of the AIDS pandemic. In 1996 the Powerhouse Museum presented *Absolutely Mardi Gras, costume and design of The Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras.* The exhibition explored the parade and its history, the Mardi Gras workshop and the impact of individual designers on Australia's largest community arts event. Many of the Mardi Gras costumes in the collection were acquired at that time.

The Australian AIDS Memorial Quilt was launched in 1988 with 35 panels. There are now 122 quilt blocks, each with around 8 panels, commemorating approximately 2,700 Australians who have died of AIDS-related illnesses. The function of the quilt has changed from being a tangible expression of grief, to a site of remembrance, and an opportunity for people to revisit old friends. I understand that the quilt has associations with display and commemorative events in the safe civic spaces of the Powerhouse Museum building, even though it has been stored off site at Castle Hill in more recent years. In 2007 the Quilt Project Sydney, which became the custodian of the Australian AIDS Memorial Quilt in 2000 offered the Quilt to the Powerhouse Museum for acquisition into the collection. A lengthy collaborative process ensued, in order to ensure that both the families of those commemorated and the makers of the quilts were in agreement with this proposal. This is further evidence of the meaning that the Powerhouse Museum has for this community and its parallel

history in Sydney during the 1980s to the present. This social significance has not been assessed in the proposed listing.

The museum building also has, due in part to the civic place's proximity to Central Station and the relevance of the exhibits, social significance for people from rural and regional New South Wales. This includes rural and regional museum volunteers who have found its space, a home away from home, and as a venue for the Powerhouse Museum's regional services program. This social significance has not been assessed in the proposed listing.

The white curved roof of the Powerhouse Museum has social significance and landmark status for Sydneysiders and it is a highly visible built form when approached from Darling Harbour. This social significance has not been assessed in the proposed listing.

The State Heritage Register nomination fails to adequately assess the social value and social significance of the museum building which has values and meanings for the people of NSW. I note that in Victoria a much newer series of buildings and a cultural place, Federation Square, was recently listed in the Victorian Heritage Register, mainly for its social significance as a place. The ongoing Save the Powerhouse Museum campaign, its social media followers, letters to the editor and double page spreads of signatures published in mastheads including the Sydney Morning Herald would normally be considered as evidence of social significance for a 32 year old museum. This has not been addressed in a seriously flawed heritage assessment that fails to assess the museum under a key State Heritage Register criterion with evidence of wide-ranging community consultation about the museum's values and meanings.

The Powerhouse Museum's building was referenced by internationally celebrated Australian architect Harry Seidler to create a civic precinct of white fronted and curved roof buildings with his Ian Thorpe swimming centre 'The expressed steel roof structure recalls the character of Darling Harbour and resolves itself with a colonnade of shaped piloti columns on Harris Street complementing other iconic buildings in the precinct such as the Powerhouse Museum.' (www.seidler.net.au). This precinct of civic and cultural buildings has not been assessed and the place of the Powerhouse Museum within it.

The proposed listing is inadequate and incomplete in its current form and needs further research to include the museum buildings. It requires reference to the people of New South Wales and assessment as a museum for the people and as an integrated design to embrace their collections.

Yours sincerely

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