

Written submission regarding the proposed listing and significance of the so-called Ultimo Tramways Power House in terms of the email from Tim Smith OAM, Director Operations, Heritage NSW, Department of Premier and Cabinet as Delegate of the Heritage Council of NSW dated **25 February, 2020**.

Details of the person making the submission are at the end of this paper.

## Introduction

This proposed listing is not aimed at preserving the heritage treasure that is the Ultimo Powerhouse Museum but is a callous, misleading and mendacious attempt to licence the destruction of the museum as an integrated entity, to trash its significance, to degrade the local environment by removing a cultural icon, and to support the wastage of around a billion dollars in the so-called 'move' of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta.

These points are conclusively proved in the third part of this submission (*General Comments, page 3*).

This so-called Heritage assessment is very misleading. Its very title, listing the item as *Ultimo Tramways Power House* with the alternative name of *Powerhouse Museum* led members of the Pyrmont History Group to believe that the whole complex of the postal address 500 Harris Street, Ultimo, 2007 was being preserved, notably including the Harwood Building, the original tram shed. Diligent search has not found any use of the title *Ultimo Tramways Power House*: the title *Ultimo Tramway Power House* has been used occasionally, principally on page 9 of [The Sydney tramways, 1906, pocket guide / issued by New South Wales Railway Commissioners](#). One wonders about the motivation for using this obscure title in this context.

Any assessment of Heritage Significance in this case must surely draw on the facts presented to the *Legislative Council Inquiry into Museums and Galleries*, but the Inquiry is not mentioned once in the assessment. So the so-called independent assessors of this application obviously think that they can ignore the expressed opinions of the authors of the 133 submissions to the Upper House Inquiry who oppose the Powerhouse move – representing 94% of all the submissions about the Powerhouse; these include the National Trust of NSW, Museums Australia, the International Council on Monuments and Sites and many other professional, artistic and historical groups. This is so ridiculous that again one must be very suspicious of the motives of these assessors.

## Terms of Reference

This section demonstrates that the terms of reference for this assessment (a-e below) have not been adequately addressed.

a) an item is important in the course, or pattern, of NSW's cultural or natural history

*The first commercial power station in the country, beautifully built, extended with similar skill, uniquely preserved and converted to a museum that wins world-wide awards is not considered worthy of preservation!*

b) an item has strong or special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in NSW's cultural or natural history;

*Just one example of the importance of the complex is the Engineers Australia significance marker <https://portal.engineersaustralia.org.au/heritage/ultimo-power-house-1899-1963>.*

*There are also the views of  
11,000 signatories to the petition presented to NSW Parliament, 25 Feb 2016  
178 signatories to the Powerhouse Museum Alliance 's 17 Feb 2016 open letter  
countless museum visitors and supporters from across NSW, around Australia and overseas  
and members of many organisations including the Save the Powerhouse Facebook  
group <https://www.facebook.com/savethepowerhouse/>The Powerhouse Museum  
Alliance <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/> and the North Parramatta Residents  
Action Group <http://nprag.org/>*

c) an item is important in demonstrating aesthetic characteristics and/or a high degree of creative or technical achievement in NSW;

*This is Australia's only museum devoted to the interface between the Applied Arts and Sciences, a field that will be vital to the future of Australia and the world. As such it must be preserved, not degraded, and it must remain in its present heritage building, in its present site, most accessible to the people of Sydney, of the state of New South Wales, of the people of Australia and to the people of the world.*

d) an item has strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group in NSW for social, cultural or spiritual reasons;

*The Pyrmont / Ultimo area has a particular interest in retaining this institution in this area. The Powerhouse Museum encapsulates the development of this area over the past 130 years, from open paddocks to inner-city industrial area and now to a residential area with access to nearby educational institutions and a thriving IT / communications hub. For example, the museum holds a major collection of the Harris family, the original European settlers of this area, and, removed from its present situation, this entirely loses its context. The museum is a focal point of the community: just one example is the use of the museum by people with pre-school children. Attendance statistics will indicate that many local parents bring their children repeatedly to relevant activities.*

*The museum is close to the University of Sydney, the University of Technology, Sydney, and the Notre Dame University as well as Sydney TAFE and many other educational institutions, with which it has wide-ranging cooperation. A notable element of this cooperation is with yet another institution, the University of NSW, whose M Sc robotics students make use of the 'Mars Yard' facilities on level 1.*

*The museum in its present form and location also has a wider appeal as exemplified in the way it attracts volunteer workers from a wide area. People from the Blue Mountains, and the Central Coast and Illawarra areas routinely travel to this museum to work as volunteers because of the unique opportunities it offers.*

*The museum has a long tradition of supporting the Australian Design Awards and the HSC TAS student exhibitions. These are held in ideal surroundings and in a place central to the whole state.*

*The museum has over the decades been supported by many affiliated groups. Please refer to <http://maasbusinesscase.com/Affiliated%20Societies/Affiliated%20Societies.pdf>. At the invitation of Ms Havilah, representatives of 14 groups attended a meeting at the Powerhouse on 20 June 2019, and affirmed their willingness to work with the museum. However it is clear that the groups have close attachment to this museum at this site. The aspects of the*

*museum that are relevant to these groups will not apply to the inferior and irrelevant facilities (the proposed Lyric Theatre and so-called Fashion Museum) that will replace the present museum. Geographical plotting of the meeting places and activities of these groups indicate that this location is far more accessible to them than Parramatta would be.*

e) an item has potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of NSW's cultural or natural history;

*The exquisite workmanship of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century buildings cannot be matched in the mass-produced towers that this document is intended to sanction and create. Hundreds of towers with similar design, construction and ethos are being erected all over Sydney. The unique examples of skill, efficiency and public service exemplified by the present buildings will be lost. The 1988 refurbishment of Darling Harbour, celebrating the spirit of the bicentenary, has almost completely been destroyed, and the example of the Powerhouse conversion must be retained, especially in view of the imminent demolition of the Darling Harbour Harbourside Shopping Centre.*

f) an item possesses uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of NSW's cultural or natural history

*The combined Powerhouse original structures plus the Harwood Building plus the exhibition of early trams and associated material within the museum comprise a unique juxtaposition of the total process of electricity generation and transport. The significance of the exhibition of the steam engine collection in the turbine room of Australia's first commercial power station is dealt with elsewhere.*

g) an item is important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of NSW's - cultural or natural places; or - cultural or natural environments. An item is not to be excluded from the Register on the ground that items with similar characteristics have already been listed on the Register.

*This institution in its present location unique in demonstrating the principal characteristics of this time and place in Australian history. This strengthens its case for heritage protection well beyond the minimum standards required by this criterion.*

## General comments

It has been proved beyond the slightest shadow of doubt that the proposal to move the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta is flawed in almost every respect. Alternatives were never examined. Relevant stakeholders, including even the museum trustees and Parramatta Council were not consulted, and were not even informed of the plan before it was announced. The proposed museum is being placed on a site that has never been approved by an elected Parramatta council. The evidence is clear that informed Parramatta people would prefer a museum more relevant to their community on a different site.

If the 'move' idea goes ahead, the best possible outcome will be the establishment of an inferior museum on a more inaccessible site and the waste of, at the best, several hundreds of millions of dollars. These FACTS have been repeatedly submitted to the Government, specifically to the Minister for the Arts and Infrastructure NSW and nobody has been able to produce any countervailing evidence.

From the outset this building has been constructed with skill and care that is unrivalled today. Though the 1897-99 building, the tram lines Pyrmont / Central / Millers Point and first 100 trams were completed in 25 months, there was a great pride in workmanship as is seen in the beautifully

carved lintel and the decorative brickwork of the power station. The essential fabric of the building has been preserved. For example, *in situ* is a 1898 Case overhead crane. In the opinion of Professor Janet Bednarek, Chair of the Department of History at the University of Dayton, Ohio, and trustee of the famous Cincinnati Museum Center in the former railway terminal the presence of such a machine is very rare, even in the USA, and the fact that it was installed in Australia at this time is a wonderful indicator of nineteenth century industrial expertise and international cooperation.

This beautifully built structure has in its turbine hall a collection that is probably among the four or five best collections of working steam engines in the world, and certainly the best in the Southern Hemisphere. The combined significance of building and technology produces an impression on the sentient visitor that could not possibly be recreated in a modern building.

The degree of skill is also seen in the later powerhouse buildings. The art deco brickwork of the 1930's switch building is typical of the care and workmanship that has been a constant feature of the pre-1950 development of the site. It provides a great venue for exhibits that require special lighting. The massive early twentieth century galleries provide a setting for large exhibits that is not to be replicated in the new museum and again show the skill, appreciation of heritage and attention to detail that was a characteristic of this era.

The conversion of these massive buildings was a triumph recognised by international awards. It is a marker of the bicentenary celebrations of 1988 when the country had a feeling of achievement, pride in the past and aspirations for the future. It is highly regarded throughout the architectural community and recognised with appropriate awards. The destruction of the 1988 Convention Centre and the Exhibition Centre, and the pending destruction of the shopping centre, means that the 1988 conversion of this building is a rare reminder of this style of public architecture.

As mentioned above, it has been conclusively proved that there was no proper research into the 'move' process, and it is likewise apparent that there has been no proper research into the proposed uses for the shell of the museum if the disastrous proposal goes ahead. The suggestions of a Lyric Theatre and a so-called Fashion Museum seem to be similarly unresearched.

The museum is surrounded by recently built residential towers. Adding four more huge towers, and removing the Harwood Building and the 1988 additions, will remove variety from the streetscape. It will remove an important cultural and recreational facility from an area in which the population is hugely increasing. It will certainly diminish the amenity of the area.

## Conclusion.

Any move towards degrading this world treasure is an act of vandalism not worthy of a civilised country.

The facts above show conclusively that the present so-called heritage assessment of the museum is nothing of the sort. It is a licence to destroy all but the bare shell of the original buildings. It strips them of their context, removes the exhibits associated with them since the inception of the building, degrades their surroundings, and brands Australia as an uncivilised and ignorant nation.

The whole assessment is so mendacious that the only possible interpretation is that the assessors were chosen because of their willingness to toe the Government line in defiance of proven facts. It casts considerable doubt as to the motives of the assessors and the people who chose them. This whole affair needs thorough investigation by appropriate authorities.

## Authorship of this report

Full responsibility for all statements of fact in this submission is taken by me.

The factual material of this statement, however, comes from a far wider base. Since May 2015 a group of concerned people, now numbering over 200, has contributed to an email group, pooling knowledge and ideas. Their work can be seen on part of the website <http://maasbusinesscase.com/>. It comprises a very wide range of people, including academics in all fields, museum employees and volunteers, people from the local area and from Parramatta, and many others who care for Australian heritage. Their opinions, and their willingness to protect this institution from ill-informed and wanton destruction by all possible means, should not be underestimated.

Tom Lockley  
301/27 Cadigal Avenue  
Pymont 2009