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## *For once, the right decision has been made for the future of our wonderful city*

[Leo Schofield](#)

Former trustee of the Powerhouse Museum

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Make no mistake, the retention of the Powerhouse in Ultimo is a landmark moment in the cultural history of New South Wales. It is an occasion not for triumphalism but for quiet celebration that sanity and vision have won out over political opportunism.

Equally welcome is the parallel decision to give the good people of western Sydney a cultural institution of their very own, one that reflects their remarkable history, their interests and their ambitions.

[For those of us who opposed the move from Ultimo to Parramatta, it was never a question of "one or the other". *CREDIT: JANIE BARRETT*]

For those of us who opposed the so-called "move" or "relocation", it was never a question of either one or the other. Museums are about collections, and in the Powerhouse's astonishing, eclectic holdings there are enough objects to fill two major museums and, in the future, half a dozen specialist satellite institutions.

Long before the Powerhouse sprang into being, I was taken to a storage facility in Alexandria. There, in vast sheds once used to hold bales of wool before shipment overseas - spaces whose lanolin-soaked floorboards were an invitation to destruction by fire - were hundreds of wooden crates, their contents unclassified.

Some had scant information stencilled on the side - messages such as TEN ASSORTED ORIENTAL OBJECTS - one of which turned out to be a Han period bronze bell of incredible rarity, plunder from the Boxer Rebellion.

Scattered on the dusty floor were the original drawings by Lucien Henry, a unique series of quirky designs for furniture, buildings and decorative schemes incorporating images Australian flora.

[Arts Minister Don Harwin announces the Powerhouse will remain in Ultimo, with a new satellite museum to be built in Parramatta. *CREDIT: JACKY GHOSSEIN*]

In the mid 1980s, a movement emerged to rehabilitate these and hundreds of other hidden treasures, to find a home for them and to exhibit them for the first time in almost a century.

First came a call to the Wran government to relocate the old Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences across the road in Harris Street, Ultimo. A proposal to use the Treasury building, part of the historic Macquarie Street precinct that includes the State Library, the Conservatorium, Parliament, the Mint and the Barracks, was stymied by the then all-powerful head of the Premier's Department, Gerry Gleeson. The Treasury became the Intercontinental Hotel.

As a kind of consolation prize, the government offered the Powerhouse site. With great spaces, ceilings so high one could suspend whole aircraft from them, this repurposed industrial building turned out to be an inspired choice.

In Stage One, an adjacent tram shed was made over while work proceeded on the main building. At the front, a preview exhibition comprised an eclectic sample of the museum's collection including the sublime Boulton and Watt steam engine. Behind, a state of the art storage and restoration facility was installed and the boxes from Alexandria arrived.

Excitement about the project was universal. When the main museum officially opened in 1988, there followed a rush of donations, funded acquisitions and a tsunami of awestruck visitors.

Perhaps it was inevitable that after so much excitement, and as the cultural temperature of Sydney rose, initial enthusiasm for the Powerhouse waned. Some unfortunate directorial appointments were made and a little of the glow of the early days faded.

But when threatened with obliteration, Sydneysiders rose as one in defence not only of a building but of an institution that had served to entertain, instruct and surprise successive generations.

So let's have no recriminations. Just relief and hallelujahs that for once, the right decision has been made for the future of this wonderful, knockabout city.

Now is the time for all of us to ensure this beloved 140-year-old institution, with its ineradicable memories, will make a magnificent comeback. I have loved it for nigh on 80 years, served pro bono and proudly on its board of trustees for ten of them, All that is needed now is more love.

### Leo Schofield

Leo Schofield was a trustee of the Powerhouse for 10 years. He was a member of the executive of the National Trust (NSW) and a chairman of the federal government's committee on new uses for heritage properties