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Campaign to Save the Powerhouse

Bulletin 57: just gossip...

The battle for the Powerhouse continues, but there is one bit of unmitigated good news. At Ultimo, the trend for objects to be removed is to be reversed, in one very significant object. The Sputnik replica satellite, which had been removed to Castle Hill after the demolition of the Apollo 11 temporary exhibition, is, we are informed, to be reinstalled in its usual space during October. Sputnik is certainly the most significant exhibit of the space area in the sense that it marks the start of the modern space race and is a vital part of the narrative. Let's hope that it is the start of a flow of exhibits back to the Ultimo museum. Too many of our old friends, traditional icons of the museum, have been quietly spirited away.

At Parramatta there was excellent publicity regarding the visit of the Legislative Council committee to the area. The basic video can be seen here:

<https://www.facebook.com/7NEWSydney/videos/637545026952841>

The short summary is that the present processes are still being controlled by the few Government people who have seized control. While making vague statements have been made that the Ultimo Powerhouse will remain, the degradation of Ultimo proceeds. At Parramatta the 'Government' still is proceeding with their unresearched, autocratic 'move' process, undeterred by the opposition.

For the tragics: some details

The movement to preserve the heritage buildings at Parramatta was outraged to find that 'protections preventing redevelopment of historic Willow Grove were...removed' in April 2019 to allow the building to be demolished to make way the Parramatta Powerhouse. This is well explained in a SMH article on the PMA site at <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/the-powerhouse-to-parramatta-debate-a-news-chronology-2020-now/>. It is clear that this contradicts. [the Premier's assurances that she wanted to preserve local heritage where possible](#). The position is also well explained in the Save the Powerhouse Facebook site.

Our email group is very active in gathering information, and hence this summary of recent developments – or lack of them – mainly regarding Ultimo:

- The Powerhouse Museum has already been rebadged as Powerhouse Ultimo – and the proposed development at Parramatta becomes Powerhouse Parramatta – illogical, but it actually indicates that the proponents of the 'move' have made one small correct judgement – they recognise the marketing power of the Powerhouse name and tradition, even though these are being trashed.
- At the 'consultation' webinars it was made clear that it is intended that Powerhouse Ultimo will have a focus on 'design and innovation' while Powerhouse Parramatta will focus on science and technology. The big worry thus remains that the power, engineering and transport collections will be removed from the PHM. We need reassurance on this.

- Further, as things stand now, the official policy remains unchanged and action is continuing on denuding the Ultimo facilities. Over a third of Level 1, typically an area of great activity, is shut off and plans for using it as a staging area for gutting the museum have not been revoked. Present plans are that the whole collection will be removed from the Harwood building; all storage and remaining curatorial activities will be done at Castle Hill, where most of the staff will be stationed. We hear rumours that the 'Very Large Items' will indeed be retained at Ultimo, but need confirmation from the decision-makers on this matter.

- We need to be constantly reminded that standard display spaces have been removed over years. Over the last decade and more – there has been a vast reduction in spaces available for Decorative Arts and Design (main gallery removed for blockbusters); the Asian Gallery went; the Indigenous gallery on ground floor went – and Community Places social history exhibitions disappeared. Spaces have also been given to the UTS lecture theatre, the café and now, the digitising/packing spaces. Magnificent temporary displays have been mounted across collection areas in the last 30 years: see

<https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/about-the-powerhouse-museum/powerhouse-museum-an-exhibition-archive/>

- Regarding the Harwood building, we hear that there is a business case under development which is looking at three options. None of the options involve the self-evident 'base case' of keeping the collection and collection facilities. Perhaps Harwood will be artists' spaces, low rent studios, creative industries, and maker spaces, possibly with a designers' market. This will mean that properly curated thematic exhibitions, based around a narrative, with outstanding exhibition design for audiences of all ages, cannot be mounted in the remaining Powerhouse Ultimo.

- As previously explained, on 13 May 'the Legislative Council resolved that documents related to the Powerhouse Museum project would be released to the public', with support from all parties. These were duly made available, in 18 document boxes of photocopies. Only an overall list of documents is provided, and there is no indication of which box a listed document can be found. Documents are not separately stapled, and there is no rationale underlying the order in which the documents are presented. These, and other similar problems, are compounded by the conditions of access during Covid: only one person is allowed in the document room at a time, and researchers have to be escorted by a parliamentary staffer at a time when most are working from home except on sitting days when they are too busy to do this. For these and a myriad of other reasons we have formally asked three weeks ago for digital copies to be made available, with no response. It seems that the Government does not want scrutiny even of the relatively limited, often redacted, material that they have been forced to release.

- The current plans for the Parramatta museum do not have adequate preparation and curatorial areas. Major exhibitions will have to be prepared at diminished facilities at Castle Hill, then transported to both Parramatta and Ultimo, a very inefficient and costly procedure.

- Certainly the current plan is that Powerhouse Parramatta will be the flagship and the administrative centre. Administration will be at Parramatta, taking space in an already cramped site.

- There are proposals for changes to the entry to the Ultimo museum, emphasising the lower entry rather than the Harris Street entry. In the last bulletin it was pointed out that the award-winning 1988 museum additions are not covered by the recent Government-sponsored heritage classification so the probability remains that the area fronting Harris Street is still in danger of demolition.

- The consultations appear to be inviting criticism of the PHM building despite the facts:
 - o There remains, throughout the entire process, no recognition of the value of heritage in attracting people to a building. Assessing this is a quantifiable financial process: see Valuing the Priceless: The Value of Historic Heritage in Australia, Research Report 2 November 2005 Prepared for the Heritage Chairs and Officials of Australia and New Zealand online at <https://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/info/pubs/valuing-priceless.pdf>

- There has never been a blockbuster display that has not been able to be accommodated by the present museum, and mounting such displays will be far more difficult both at the proposed new museum in Parramatta and at the denuded Powerhouse at Ultimo because of the lack of proper facilities at Parramatta and the repurposing of the Harwood Building at Ultimo.
- To put it as mildly as possible, we have yet to be convinced that the proposed new museum at Parramatta has anything like the grand display scope that is provided by the cavernous ex-powerhouse spaces and the magnificent 1988 gallery at the level 3 entrance. Here, Dick Smith's helicopter and Lawrence Hargraves' kites soar magnificently above Australia's first train and the huge Boulton and Watt steam engine.
- The consultation survey is subtly distracting. There is little opportunity for people to express opinions on broad issues. For example in Question 7 we were asked to put into priority various aspects of 'what makes a world class museum'. All are important, and their priority is largely irrelevant and will change depending on the circumstances. World-class museums achieve their overall effect as a result of synergies among all such factors.
- In Question 8 of the survey, there is a clear inference that the permanent exhibitions never change. This is not so. The iconic exhibits remain as drawcards for the entire world, but lesser exhibits are often rotated. There was talk of displaying more of the PHM's collection by high rotation of objects, although how this can work if the PHM no longer has a loading area is not clear. I was at the museum on a recent weekend, and there were many family groups where a mother, father, grandparent or even a child was being a tour guide and looking at old friends among the exhibits.
- Among many oversights the survey does not mention international travelling exhibitions, or blockbusters which have been a major feature of the museum's offering over recent years. Even these 'turnkey' purchases from overseas (eg Star Wars, Harry Potter) will be harder to stage at either proposed venue than is the case at present at Ultimo.
- A recent Zoom consultation involving some former 'affiliated groups' was held on Monday 21st September from 1pm - 2pm, chaired again by Ms Kylie Cochrane of Aurecon PR. The participants were told that their input was sought to inform the new business case for the Ultimo museum, due out soon. I understand that a number of the participants mentioned the need to strengthen the applied arts emphasis of the museum, and that the meeting atmosphere, in terms of information gathering, was, as usual, good. There is no doubt that there is general support among these groups for the retention of the Ultimo museum and a keenness to get involved once again after being effectively frozen out of involvement since at least 2013-14.
- However the basic problem remains that the Government is determined to pursue their plan to make Parramatta a full replacement for Ultimo, regardless of its 'fit' with Parramatta's needs and Parramatta's great potential for a great unique museum rather than a transplant.
- Other: The decision to reduce the PHM to 'design and innovation' coincides with the Draft Pyrmont Peninsula Place Strategy badging Ultimo as a zone for education, creativity and cultural innovation. Under Opportunities it mentions 'leverage the Powerhouse Museum and expand cultural uses'; 'redevelop sites for education, culture, creativity and innovation as well as student housing'; 'adaptive reuse of heritage buildings'. The Ultimo development priorities include: 1.b reuse heritage buildings for creative, cultural and community uses. This is the time for improving the educational activities of the museum, not diminishing them.
- In Appendix C Key Infrastructure Opportunities, it mentions the Government's idea of having a Powerhouse Museum theatre and performance space. Despite constant requests, any detailed analysis of this has not been provided to the public. The recent joint submission from MAAS and INSW to the Peninsula Place Strategy states that they are under Governmental direction to test options for a new 1,500 seat lyric theatre and creative industries spaces. We await release of a detailed study of needs in this area and any justification for destroying, for example the Harwood Building for this purpose.

- The fundamental problem remains that there has never been proper investigation of alternatives to the Government 'move' diktat. There is a requirement in Treasury guidance documents that such a project as this must be assessed against a 'base case' the option of making no change, but this has been supplanted by taking the Government's decision to make the 'move' as the base case. Despite many requests, no Government group has given details of the process of making that decision or its rationale.
 - o The most sensible 'base case' would be the Powerhouse Museum as it was before say 2013. We have, as a matter of form, asked Mr Crees if this could be done, but expect no positive response.
 - o It is clear that the present program is still dominated by the Government's instruction to INSW to do its bidding as is clearly stated in: Powerhouse Parramatta – Consultation Summary Report – May 2020 Revision 1 19: INSW has been tasked with the delivery of Powerhouse Parramatta in the location outlined in the EIS so consultation on this is irrelevant.

And finally *[not attached to this paper]*

Ms Havilah has released the 'official' version of the 4 September volunteers' consultation meeting, and this is a good summary.

Attachments:

- 1: Minutes
- 2: Questions from Volunteers
- 3: The 20 focus areas for the collection.

Thanks to Ms Havilah (and Marion Barker) for these!

Campaign to save the Powerhouse

Australia's major museum of arts and sciences in Sydney's most evocative heritage building.

For more information

<https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/>

See also: <http://maasbusinesscase.com/> <http://lockoweb.com/phm/>

Facebook pages <https://www.facebook.com/savethepowerhouse/> and

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Community/Powerhouse-Museum-Alliance-325023714672917/>

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