

CAMPAIGN TO SAVE THE POWERHOUSE

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

6 October 2022

Bulletin 75: a situation of crisis?

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[A reminder: the museum is not 'saved'](#)

We all remember the announcement of July 4 2020, when plans for the demolition of THE Powerhouse MUSEUM were, we believed, scrapped.

It was not so. Effectively, it seems that half a billion dollars has been allocated for the destruction of THE Powerhouse MUSEUM as we have known it. It will be replaced with 'Powerhouse Ultimo', a 'creative industries precinct' with a focus on 'fashion and design'. This proposal is very destructive of the significant collection that crosses much wider areas of decorative arts and design, as well as social history and the extensive and significant representation of transport, science and technology.

A start has been made, including the demolition of the transport display on the bottom level, the replacement of the interactive 'Ecologic' display with weekly 'talking head' performances that engender a fraction of the involvement of its predecessor, the loss of the Mars Yard and the robotics display, and even of the Wiggles, so popular with the younger children. The education area on level 2 has been stripped out and has been largely idle since the beginning of the pandemic.

The only thing that is guaranteed to be retained is the framework of the original pre-1988 buildings: the Engine House, Turbine Hall, Boiler House, Office Building, and

Switch House and items associated with the generation of power. All remaining areas may be covered with new seven-storied buildings, and even the award-winning 1988 Wran building is regarded as an 'unsympathetic addition', to the original Powerhouse Buildings. It is dispensable.

Despite many requests for information, no assurances have been made about the preservation of any other items, even the steam gallery. This is certainly one of the ten or so best collections of working steam engines in the world, and its significance is greatly enhanced by being housed in the beautifully built 1899 Powerhouse, the first major power generation facility in the state. As it is, it is a world treasure. There is a fear that the Government might destroy the steam gallery as they did with the Sydney Football Stadium before the last election: despite the massive protests, it was demolished. Before the next election, the same might happen to the remaining traditional areas of the museum meaning that restoring it would be very difficult. There is a bit more discussion of this in the attachment.

Also, six design teams have been chosen to develop detailed designs for the 'rejuvenation' and it is thought that if a rebuilding contract can be signed before the election it may be very difficult for any future government to alter the situation.

The Government asserts that this is a process of rejuvenation and expansion. But the consensus among many museum experts is that for half the proposed budget, THE Powerhouse MUSEUM could once more emerge as one of the world's great museums.

Thus, the fear is that the Government will proceed with autocratic, non-democratic methods, trash great heritage and waste a lot of money in the process.

It looks as if we are engaged in two struggles simultaneously: to restore THE Powerhouse MUSEUM and to ensure that New South Wales democracy revives.

[The Inquiry Report](#)

The report of the second Legislative Council Inquiry into museums, begun over two and a half years ago, was issued last Friday. Two 'findings' were 'that the NSW Government's current plans for Powerhouse Parramatta are more akin to an events centre than a museum, and that 'the NSW Government's plan to break up the museum's collections and strip items of context will diminish their significance as collections and adversely impact their interpretation'.

Though there was copious supporting evidence, we can expect that the findings will be ignored, as was the case with the first Inquiry. You can read the evidence for this assertion on the website for the *Select Committee on the Government's management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in New South Wales*, submission 118a.

[The aircraft](#)

I would like to acknowledge the support of aviation historians in Victoria and Queensland as well as New South Wales in making submissions supporting the retention of THE Powerhouse MUSEUM and its aircraft collection at Ultimo. This campaign has obviously not been successful. Only the Catalina is guaranteed to be

retained at Ultimo, and it has been lowered to the floor level, ostensibly to prepare for a display centred around the Catalina's flight from Australia to Chile in March 1951, opening shortly. But, surprise surprise, the 1914 Bleriot (an aircraft of world significance), the 1927 Cirrus Moth and the pioneering 1976 Wheeler Scout have been removed to enable this to happen. They have been packaged and sent to Castle Hill for storage. It seems that the soaring galleries of the Ultimo building will no longer be used for the aircraft, and it is hard to envisage a better use for these spaces.

Removing the pioneering Beechcraft air ambulance is far more difficult. But if the massive Apollo 10 rocket engine is removed, the whole fabric of level 1 will be gravely affected, making it easier for the Government to claim that rebuilding is required. Again, see the attachment. The space exhibition needs updating and would be another candidate for demolition along the lines of *Ecologic*, even though in its present condition it is still a great drawcard with many positive features that could be retained.

[A personal note: volunteers and the future of these bulletins](#)

For the past 14 years I have been a volunteer at THE Powerhouse MUSEUM. This is an equivalent of more than 1½ years of full time presence at the museum, and I have had significant interactions with over 20,000 visitors. It has been a privilege, an honour and a joy to work at the museum and to experience the thrill of discovery experienced by many visitors, especially children.

Many people have had longer service, and I have worked with some wonderful fellow volunteers. I also must stress that I have great respect for the general staff of the museum, with whom I have worked with great pleasure over the period. Our quarrel is not with these people but with the few people who, apparently without consultation with stakeholders or expert advice, have made the basic decisions.

Three weeks ago when I returned to the museum as volunteer after a considerable break, an official of the museum strongly suggested that it might be best if I stood down, citing my activity in support of the retention of THE Powerhouse MUSEUM as a factor in this regard. This situation is complex and after a lot of thought I am accepting this suggestion, basically because I feel that the process is still being dominated by a few people who will not listen to reason. Working from within the organisation, even at the lowly level of the unpaid volunteer, does impose a restriction on action and expression of opinion.

But I need to make a few things clear.

1. The fact that I am standing down as volunteer carries no implication that I am withdrawing any of the assertions made in our cooperatively produced fact sheets regarding the process of the museum 'move'. The only thing that could cause this to happen is countervailing evidence, which I would circulate widely for assessment by people with expertise and qualifications in public museums. So far the Government has provided no countervailing evidence for any assertion made in our current fact sheet.

2. It is my firm belief that the general idea of changing THE Powerhouse MUSEUM into the proposed 'Powerhouse Ultimo' is opposed by almost all volunteers. I know of only one volunteer who is a supporter of the total process, and I estimate that at least 95% of the longstanding (pre-Covid) volunteers would oppose the conversion. This is consistent with other so-called 'consultations' that have occurred during the past years. I urge all longstanding volunteers who approve the conversion to make their feelings known, and if this number is significant I will quickly withdraw this assertion. However, I know of several volunteers who have withdrawn from activity citing disappointment about perceived downgrading of the science / technology / transport aspects of recent times.

I admire the many volunteers who are continuing with great work even though they may also be distressed about current trends.

The situation is very sad. When Ms Havilah was appointed, her 'open office' practices were a breath of fresh air, and the serious efforts to rekindle the Affiliated Societies in 2019 were welcomed. We hoped for positive outcomes from the vaunted *Curatorial Dialogue* and *Masterplanning Dialogue* of 2021, but they seem to have had no influence on the process.

The public consensus as expressed such means as consultations and submissions and the massive *Save the Powerhouse* Facebook site indicates an overwhelming desire for the continuation of a major MUSEUM of the applied arts and sciences, in its present position, easily available to the city, the state, the nation and the world, and past experience has demonstrated that the museum can simultaneously handle a range of displays, permanent, semi-permanent and temporary, in a wide range of fields.

Six months ago I had intended to withdraw from the controversy. I believed that the Conservation Management Plan consultation would indeed shape future events. I had thought that the steam gallery would not be demolished and hoped that other major features of the museum would be preserved. However, when I mentioned my intention to quit to various people, I was surprised that there was strong support for the continuation of the collection and dissemination of information that has characterised previous bulletins. So if you have suggestions, comments or information, feel free to email me at tomlockley@gmail.com and I will do what I reasonably can. The longstanding policy of this process is that informants' names are never included in public bulletins, but all assertions publicised must be supported by strong evidence.

I conclude with an anecdote. After the interview three weeks ago, I was walking through the museum wearing my volunteer tag and a teacher asked me where the steam gallery was. I took the group to the gallery: they were a special needs group from a western Sydney High School, stages 4 and 5. The machines were working and there were two wonderful volunteers on hand. This group lit up with enthusiasm as the volunteers answered questions and demonstrated things like the merry-go-round calliope. The combination of skilful teachers and enthusiastic volunteers created an atmosphere which confirmed my opinion that at the very least the steam

gallery must be retained, basically 'as is, where is' and that the degradation of THE Powerhouse MUSEUM would be a disgrace to our nation.

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

<https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/> See also:

<https://www.facebook.com/savepowerhousemuseum/>

<https://www.facebook.com/savethepowerhouse/>