

Notes for Public Forum at NSW Parliament House,  
Wednesday 16 November, by Tom Lockley

I worked as teacher, in many roles and at all levels, for over 40 years, and have had the honour and the enjoyment of being a volunteer at THE Powerhouse MUSEUM



since 2008, the equivalent of over a year full time, with significant interactions with well over 20,000 people. The picture was taken by a colleague on a day where over 300 young people took part in cooperative satellite launches, using the 'discovery station' made by Hette Mollema, a volunteer who was formerly a senior engineer for 3M and in retirement has produced the top 5 display stations in the museum.

I do look back with nostalgia at the days ten years ago, when there were often 600 or more learners in the museum, at all ages and educational standards – in school times and in holiday times and weekends. The young professional educators, dressed, for example,

as astronauts or engine drivers, bonded wonderfully with the children. Along with the volunteers, the Customer Service Officers and involved curatorial staff, we had an atmosphere of joyous learning. Many of the volunteers, including the young interns, have remarkable skills, knowledge and life experience: The undoubted expert in the history of the building and the details of its contents is the 95-year-old Meg Stevenson who has volunteered here since 1988 and is always surrounded by eager learners.

There has always been room for improvement. But these activities are wonderful strengths of the museum, and as the brilliant Chinese military strategist Lao Tse said, you build on your strengths. The Government is destroying them, an act of incredible folly; they say that the space display area, for example is out of date, and scheduled for demolition when all that is needed is for it to be refurbished and brought into this millennium.

The elevated viewing platform and the integrated massive display cabinets in the Transport Hall were brutally and unprofessionally ripped out in early 2020, **allegedly because they did not meet current fire regulations which have not been produced**

**despite many requests.** Our experts agree that this is a ridiculous excuse for an ideologically based act of destruction.

The aircraft, in unique, climate controlled, suspended display areas that cannot be replicated elsewhere, may never be seen together again. The steam gallery is one of the great such exhibitions in the world, housed in the beautifully built first commercial power station in Sydney but is on the menu for destruction. Unbelievably, so is the award-winning museum conversion of 1988.

Another topic: all great great museums of the world have famous permanent exhibits. British Museum: Rosetta Stone: Louvre: Mona Lisa. Enthusiasts from all over the world visited THE Powerhouse MUSEUM to pay homage to the Boulton and Watt engine of 1785. The policy of the new Powerhouse Ultimo is for there to be no permanent displays beyond a few out-of-context icons that will serve as decoration for the emphasis on fashion and design.

All great museums need a mix of permanent and temporary displays. THE Powerhouse MUSEUM has many times proved that it can brilliantly handle both needs. But our temporary displays of the past few years have been light on what Kylie Winkworth and other experts call 'narrative'. There is a sort of feeling of 'so what' when we walk through a static display of electronic keyboards, with no discussion of their social significance or technological development and no live playing. *Eucalyptusdom*, listed as 'a celebration of Australia's cultural history and ever-changing relationship with the gum tree' had some great artworks, but nothing that demonstrated the cutting-edge scientific work done by the museum in about 1900, when it was a world-recognised pioneer of biological analysis.



The work of the society photographer Robert Rosen had a temporary display with over 170 metres of beautifully curated full-height wall space (above) while the aircraft had five small signs, and all the drawings for these had errors, eg the Cirrus Moth was illustrated by a picture of the Tiger Moth, and the flying boat Catalina was depicted as an amphibian.

*100 conversations*, the display that replaced *Ecologic*, only engages visitors for a few hours a week when the weekly talks are given. These could have been held in an existing theatre, leaving an upgraded *Ecologic* interactive exhibition to address the educational needs of our young people who are taking massive direct action about climate change. Is this young lady likely to be inspired by *100 Conversations*, when she could easily find equivalent podcasts from the phone in her pocket? Even the famous Bruce Pascoe (*Dark Emu*) drew only 34 listeners, including several museum staff, and I have never seen anyone replaying any of the recorded 'talking head' interviews.



I could describe probably fifty occasions over the past eight years where significant social and historic content, which is also interesting and relevant, has either been passed over in favour of temporary artworks or simply removed and not replaced. The conclusion that this action is ideological is supported by the current CEO's assertion that their work is underpinned by a desire to 'ignore the weight of history, language and architecture'.

If we destroy THE Powerhouse MUSEUM we are ignoring the long-term economic and social benefits of our heritage. More importantly, if we do not preserve and publicise the remarkable achievements represented by our heritage we have failed those who came before us, and what is worse, we have failed the generations to come.

Even more important is the fate of Australian democracy, of which I used to be very proud. On one school excursion I took to Federal Parliament house, a parent participant, a former refugee from a horrific background, suddenly burst into tears while sitting in the public gallery. I asked her what the problem was, and she said, in a tone of wonder and joy, 'I am sitting in the parliament of my country'. I teared up also, deeply moved and deeply proud.

But in New South Wales we should all be ashamed of the NSW Government's venial, ignorant, authoritarian lack of due process that we have seen over the last eight

years. We must fight this ideologically based destruction of our great museum, and defend Australian heritage and culture and the history of human endeavour. But even more importantly, we are fighting to preserve our heritage and democratic process, to say nothing of a mere two hundred and fifty million dollars. The situation is grim, but this is a task of major importance.

The members of our email group have worked hard over the past seven years, and our fact sheets have produced unchallenged detailed analysis of the appalling lack of due process. Please join our efforts: if you want to be on our mailing list, send me an email. There is a little ray of hope: we put a submission to Department of Planning and Environment to the effect that the State Significant Development approval for THE Powerhouse MUSEUM should not be granted because of the appalling process that has occurred, as part of the assessment the minister has required Create NSW to address the issue. Wish us luck!!

Tom Lockley, retired teacher, active aviation historian, convenor of informal email group campaigning to save THE Powerhouse MUSEUM since May 2015.