

THE BOILER HOUSE EXHIBITIONS AND SOME UK COMPARATORS

The Powerhouse Museum: buildings in relationship with collections

I recall Lionel Glendenning once saying that the walls of the Boiler House conformed to the pleasing proportions of the golden mean or golden ratio, identified in ancient Greece as the 'divine proportion'. This architectural device probably contributed to the innate reaction of the millions of visitors who have gasped at the remarkable setting for the Transport and Space exhibitions.

As we know, these signature exhibitions are currently in the process of complete removal with no plan to 'renew' them. This is of course an egregious breach of faith with the general public who expect a new generation of the Powerhouse Museum, also featuring its much-loved collections. The notable exception in the Boiler House is the Catalina flying boat, which we are assured will be returned for permanent display. [I will shortly defer to my colleague Ian Debenham for his expert comments on this.]

I will just say this about the Catalina: the current dilemma about where to safely move and store this impressive aircraft for several years is emblematic of the host of problems that are yet to come following the decision to completely remove the collections from the Museum. It is evident that none of this has been thought through. And no wonder, because there are no specialist staff in the Museum with specialised knowledge of the Transport and Engineering collections or how to safely move them. Yet the Museum's CEO has previously staked her reputation on ensuring that the collections are not damaged as the grand plans unfold for this lamentable project. However, it is plainly apparent that this episode - seeking to find a safe place to store the Catalina at the 11th hour - is the latest among a slew of incompetent collection management decisions associated with the Government's obsession to destroy the Powerhouse Museum as we knew and loved it. Of most concern is that the collection yet to be removed from the Museum will be placed at unnecessary risk.

I would like to share with you some images that I took as photographs to a meeting with my then local member, the former Premier Gladys Berejiklian, on 15 September 2017. I was accompanied by Jennifer Sanders, who can attest to the defensive wall of resistance we faced and the dismissive response we received from the then Premier as we tried to explain a constructive 'win-win' scenario, as a written proposal. We genuinely thought this proposal could achieve the Government's objective for a new museum in Western Sydney and yet could also genuinely save the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo - and at much less cost.

The photographs were to illustrate the wonderful exhibition volume of the Boiler House and its fitting industrial heritage, compared with what I believed to be much less impressive equivalent museum spaces in several UK museums I had just visited. I planned to leave the photos with her, but Ms Berejiklian's mood was such that I didn't even manage to show them to her. Perhaps you will be a more receptive audience. So here they are, commencing with the view from the top Mezzanine floor in the Boiler House of the Powerhouse Museum in 2020.



Transport and Space exhibitions, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, 18 June 2020



View of aviation gallery, National Museum of Science and Industry, London, 3 August 2017



Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Holywood, Northern Ireland, 9 August 2017



National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh 14 August 2017



Riverside Museum, Glasgow, 12 August 2017



Main display hall, Riverside Museum, Glasgow, 12 August 2017

(All photographs by Andrew Grant)

There is some background to the success of the Boiler House exhibitions that lies in the carefully coordinated planning for the Powerhouse Museum.

The architectural approach to the project provided spaces that responded flexibly to the vastly differing scale and nature of the Museum's collections. This was done by establishing a clear and hierarchical relationship between the buildings, the exhibition contents and the environments created to best interpret them. Specifically, the grand volume of the Boiler House would complement the awe-inspiring sweep of suspended aircraft and spacecraft; the preserved cranes and tiled floor of the former Engine House would evoke a former industrial setting of the activated engines of the steam gallery; the diverse perspectives and alluring sight lines of the Turbine House would complement the visual appeal and eclecticism of the social history displays; and the intimate exhibition spaces of the Switch House would enrich the visitor's experience of contemplation and engagement with the stunning decorative arts collection.

At the same time, great care was taken to respect the former Power House buildings, despite the loss of so much of the internal structure and finishes from the derelict interior. The architect and the designers worked closely with the Museum to maximise the relationship between building and collection, between exhibit and space and between object and its immediate context. The exhibition design approach, the specification of building services, the relative scale and proportion of exhibits and spaces, considered in a hierarchy, all reflected this integrated process.

This process demonstrates the intrinsic inseparability of the Powerhouse Museum buildings from the collections that they house. This resulted in a Museum that attracted international acclaim, surely a source of great pride.

What a pity that the Government and the Museum management would apparently find this irrelevant and of no interest, given their current plans.

Thank you

Andrew Grant
Former Senior Curator, Transport
Powerhouse Museum
16 November 2022