

ABC RN Drive interview of Lisa Havilah by Andy Park 7 February 2023

Transcription of radio interview, with subsequent following anonymous informed comments:

Andy Park: coming up in a moment you will hear from one of the most forward thinking arts leaders in the country who is tackling the sometimes controversial project of renewing and expanding the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney Lisa Havilah my guest is coming up ... [other info] ...

Andy Park: Well in one form or another the Powerhouse in Sydney has been an important institution for more than a century showcasing the best of science and the applied arts and making its mark on a generation of children just like me, who visited there on their excursions and walked amongst the giant steam engines and wonderful forms of transport in the transport hall. But it also became a political hot topic several years ago when the state government announced the Museum would be moving to Parramatta. Now that decision was later changed. in Parramatta will now be a second home for the Powerhouse with a major renewal also beginning for their original space in Ultimo. So what does it take to guide an institution through a time of change like that? Lisa Havilah is the chief executive of the Powerhouse. she joins me now. Lisa, welcome to you.

I understand that you actually started your career by creating DIY art gallery spaces which is an interesting sort of contrast to the spaces that you now preside over. When did you decide that arts administration would be your pathway forward?

Lisa Havilah: Hi Andy, well actually I started out as an art student who grew up in a regional area in NSW and I really wanted a place to show my work and so did so did all of my art school friends, and so we decided to set up an art gallery in downtown Wollongong and to do that we brought in a whole range of different partners from Wollongong Council to BHP to the local bottle shop and I just fell in love with that whole I suppose community and collaboration that happens around arts and culture and so I just started from there and just kept going.

Andy Park: That shows a lot of inspiration for an art student and I mean that in a productive sense you realised the importance of the setting not just the creation very early on.

Lisa Havilah: Yeah I think with engaging with anything from museum exhibitions to a piece of art to having any type of cultural experience it's the context and the story and the relevance that's important. I strongly believe in my practise and in the practise of the Powerhouse here that people want to see themselves reflected back whether it's with an artwork or whether it's with a story or history that they are engaging with.

Andy Park: But history as we know is contested. There are a lot of opinions about what a major Museum could and should contain. How do you sort of navigate those waters when it comes to the wishes of the public, the wishes of the artist, and perhaps the wishes of the state government?

Lisa Havilah: Well I feel one of the things that's really wonderful and in relation to the renewal of the Powerhouse is that the NSW government took a really important philosophical position to say that western Sydney which is one of the fastest growing most culturally diverse regions in the country should have direct access to world class arts and culture and so really made that investment decision to establish Powerhouse Parramatta right in the heart western Sydney and so that policy direction really is part of the guide in terms of how we're thinking about programming in Parramatta. We want it to reflect those culturally diverse communities. We want to tell those histories as well but

also bring forward the great history of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences in terms of the collections that we have and collect connecting those collections and those histories with the issues of the day and I think climate and climate science is a good example of that.

Andy Park: A great example but also an area that has been subject to politics and commerce and they don't always make the easiest bedfellows in terms of a partnership when you come to preside over a space like the Powerhouse particularly when politics become involved

Lisa Havilah: Yeah exactly. I think cities are shifting around the world and Sydney is shifting socially and culturally. Definitions of cities are shifting and we really using that I suppose as a point of change in terms of we really see this investment decision by NSW government as a responsibility to rethink and think about what Museums should be and could be for their communities and making sure that Museums are useful in the world and part of that is really shifting the hierarchy of where Museum sits within a community. Historically museums have been sandstone institutions that they're sort of sitting above a community being very didactic and teaching communities and we really see this new approach to Museums now is community as knowledge holders and really us working in the service of communities to tell important stories. but really that that shift in hierarchy, up ending the hierarchy of how museums work and collaborate with communities to bring histories forward and how we prioritise the stories we tell as well.

Andy Park: Do you think Museums had to change and modernise. I mean certainly in the kind of colonial and western tradition there was this idea of cataloguing and sort of scientifically storing away these important objects regardless of the community's attitudes towards them. Museums had to reinvent, surely.

Lisa Havilah: Absolutely and it's like it's an absolute cultural business operation and social imperative that museums change and that comes down to a range of new approaches that we're taking to how a museum operates: what we collect, how we collect. For example we have we established 18 months ago now a First Nations directorate and really building that team to work with First Nations communities across Australia but also internationally but also to look at instead of collecting and owning objects. We're working on a new way of collecting which is about deeds of deposit where we actually caretaking or looking after objects on behalf of the community but they're still held by the community and these things are really important in terms of that long term community ownership of objects.

Andy Park: When you took over the management of the Powerhouse you said that it was important to give people reasons not just to visit for the first time but to keep coming back in again and again apart from school excursions which is certainly much of my experience of visiting the Powerhouse back in the old days which certainly in those days it had a very monorail feeling to it. So how does that work, what does that mean in practice? How do you drive engagement? How do you keep on giving people a reason to return when it's already taken their children once, twice, three times throughout the school year?

Lisa Havilah: So we actually own part of the monorail now in our collection.

Andy Park: yeah, I thought it was sold off to people as condos in some far off country.

Lisa Havilah: That rethinking is very much embedded in the infrastructure of Powerhouse Parramatta which we building at the moment and so that infrastructure supports changing exhibitions so we will have a constantly changing programme of exhibitions which is very different to the Powerhouse here in Ultimo with some of the exhibitions have stayed the same for 2-or 3 decades and that's really about constantly changing stories but also alongside those changing

exhibitions we've got programmes such as the Academy programme where we've got 60 bed accommodation where young people from across regional NSW and western Sydney can come and stay and do immersive STEM learning so you can sleep in the museum/

Andy Park: I hope it's not in the monorail.

Lisa Havilah: You can sleep at the Powerhouse in Parramatta when it opens and really have an incredible learning experience for you have direct connection to industry leaders right across STEM and that'll be a very STEM focused programme and so it's things like that where we're looking at engaging young people but engaging learners across generations as well with very sort of hands-on experiences.

Andy Park: We spoke about the idea of Museums changing and moving away from the idea of ownership so to the idea of place because many collections are now digitised. That is something that the Powerhouse is doing as well. It sort of dovetails nicely with the idea of bringing in regional teenagers and children to stay at the Powerhouse because it is about access and equity of access to the sorts of artefacts you contain best enabled by technology.

Lisa Havilah: Exactly and we've just completed a project that would be working on over the last four years to digitise 385,000 objects from our collection which has been really exciting because now you can actually go online and really see the collection like it's never been seen before and so technology is really important in terms of digital storytelling but also finding new stories and new connections between what is a very encyclopaedic collection that goes right across applied arts and applied sciences.

Andy Park: Well Lisa it's been an absolute pleasure to talk to you. I've got to get down to see Paradise Camp, one of the upcoming exhibitions that comes directly from its showing at the Venice biennale. I appreciate your time, great to talk to you, thanks for your time tonight Lisa.

Lisa Havilah: Thanks so much, Andy.

Andy Park: Lisa Havilah is the chief executive of the Powerhouse in Sydney. For more information including the current and upcoming exhibitions including Paradise Camp head to www.maas.museum.

Comments about Havilah's statements, and Park's questions, from (unnamed) participants in the Powerhouse Museum Alliance

How she can say these things with a straight face is a source of amazement.

The announcement about the change of 'name' puts egg all over the face of Andy Park for his interview with Ms Havilah. He must be really pissed off about being conned.

So many unexamined statements and oft-repeated slogans add up to lazy journalism. Do people really want to see themselves reflected back? Or do they want to be stimulated to think outside their everyday existence, to have their experience extended and their ideas challenged?

LH: I strongly believe in my practise and in the practise of the Powerhouse here that people want to see themselves reflected back whether it's with an artwork or whether it's with a story or history that they are engaging with.

If this means that the museums should reflect objects that are of interest to the general client group, the museum under Ms Havilah has not lived up to this standard. The museum is scheduled to close at the end of this year for demolition and rebuilding of everything but the original walls and structure of the original powerhouses plus anything that is related to this use. Yet popular and treasured objects are being removed early, and the only explanation for this can be the ideology of the proposed creative arts fashion hub. It will not have permanent exhibits beyond the three main items (Catalina, 1785 Boulton and Watt Steam engine, Loco no 1). An early removal (2019) was the Australian-made Stuart piano, a perfect example of the fusion of arts and sciences that is this museum's brief. It is probably the best engineered piano in the world. It was played by volunteers etc and added much to the atmosphere of the place. Despite constant requests, it has not been returned to Ultimo. We have seen the removal of the Wiggles exhibition without replacement as a place for locals to bring their preschoolers and indeed to socialise. The popular robotics and 'Mars Yard' exhibition have been replaced with a wide-ranging Australian pottery display, of considerable significance but not as popular as the robotic display. The audio and model display that accompanied loco no 1 has been removed and not replaced: the CEO has stated that it was out of date and would be replaced by a more modern explanation, but we do not understand why the existing display was removed before the replacement was ready. There are many other cases.

LH: ... I feel one of the things that's really wonderful and in relation to the renewal of the Powerhouse is that the NSW government took a really important philosophical position to say that western Sydney which is one of the fastest growing most culturally diverse regions in the country should have direct access to world class arts and culture and so really made that investment decision to establish Powerhouse Parramatta right in the heart western Sydney and so that policy direction really is part of the guide in terms of how we're thinking about programming in Parramatta.

There is unanimity among the museum / arts community about the desirability of establishing new museums, and Parramatta is an ideal site. But the existing Powerhouse Museum is Australia's prime museum devoted to the interface between the applied arts and sciences and that should be in its present location, most easily accessible by the people of Sydney, the state, the country, and the world, in its eminently suitable heritage building, the beautifully built original powerhouses with the world-award winning 1988 conversion. Parramatta has its own magnificent history and deserves its own museum that showcases this exciting and vibrant region. The key point is that the whole process has been dictated by the Government with no prior consultation with stakeholders, and 'consultation' input since that time has been edited to ignore comment on these basic issues. The 'move' does not even make economic sense; THE Powerhouse MUSEUM can be retained and brought to world standard for \$250m million, but destroying it and replacing it with the creative industries hub etc will cost at least \$480-\$500 million and produce an inferior outcome.

LH: We want it to reflect those culturally diverse communities. We want to tell those histories as well but also bring forward the great history of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences in terms of the collections that we have and collect connecting those collections and those histories with the issues of the day.

Agreed, and this has been the policy of the museum at Ultimo, which can continue in THE Powerhouse MUSEUM.

LH: ... and I think climate and climate science is a good example of that.

This statement is infuriating. The museum, until February 2021, had a display called 'Ecologic'. It was established in 2002 and refurbished about 2012, and, indeed, needed updating. Yet it still had some excellent material including good interactive activities and graphic illustrations of the scientific principles. It had a high visitation rate and was used for example by class groups with great success. It was ripped out and the brief for climate change education was taken over by Ms Havilah's idea. '100 conversations'. A special stage and seating was built at considerable expense and once a week an eminent worker in the field of climate change is interviewed. The interviews are recorded and can be played as vodcasts. In general, less than 50 people turn up for the weekly talks (Alan Pascoe's crowd was 39 in total). The vodcast facility is rarely, if ever, used in the museum. It may have been a good supplement to Ecologic, but is no substitute for it.

LH: Yeah, exactly I think cities are shifting around the world and Sydney is shifting socially and culturally.

The process of having exhibitions involving First Nations Australian subjects, Australian multicultural groups and temporary exhibitions from all over the world has always been a feature of the museum and the practice now is mainstream and continually developing. It did not require Ms Havilah to start it off or a new museum either at Ultimo or Parramatta to continue it.

LH: Definitions of cities are shifting and we really using that I suppose as a point of change in terms of we really see this investment decision by NSW government as a responsibility to rethink and think about what Museums should be and could be for their communities and making sure that Museums are useful in the world and part of that is really shifting the hierarchy of where Museum sits within a community.

Yes, we need dialogue and education on these matters, but the process that the Government has adopted is one of autocracy, not democracy. This needs to change. There is a huge body of expertise and interest in the wider community that is eager to become involved, but has been ignored for several years.

LH: Absolutely and it's like it's an absolute cultural business operation and social imperative that museums change and that comes down to a range of new approaches that we're taking to how a museum operates: what we collect, how we collect. For example we have we established 18 months ago now a First Nations directorate and really building that team to work with First Nations communities across Australia but also internationally but also to look at instead of collecting and owning objects. We're working on a new way of collecting which is about deeds of deposit where we actually caretaking or looking after objects on behalf of the community but there's still held by the community and these things are really important in terms of that long term community ownership of objects.

These are basic measures that were already in hand and do not require a different approach. The 'deed of deposit' mechanism was in hand before the CEO's appointment. The present system was delivering good results: experts need to evaluate it, tweak it, develop and change. But wholesale destruction, reminiscent of China's cultural revolution, is not needed. The forecast appointment of Dr Ivan Muñiz Reed is of interest as his academic work seems to mainly involve the idea of 'decoloniality' and it will be interesting to see how this is carried out. Again, dialogue is needed with the museum / arts community.

LH: That rethinking is very much embedded in the infrastructure of Powerhouse Parramatta which we are building at the moment and so that infrastructure supports changing exhibitions so we will have a constantly changing programme of exhibitions ...

None of the world's major museums follow this approach. Like these museums. THE Powerhouse MUSEUM needs a core of treasures that draw people to the museum. Our working Boulton and Watt is often visited by overseas travellers. In our case these may be supplemented by themed exhibitions which may have variations in its display (the 'Inspired' display of approximately 2008-2012), temporary displays and annual events such as the Design Awards and the HSC activities, traditional strengths of THE Powerhouse MUSEUM.

LH: ... which is very different from the Powerhouse here in Ultimo. Some of the exhibitions have stayed the same for 2-or 3 decades ...

The working engines of the Steam Gallery, plus the Boulton and Watt engine, comprise one of the world's great such displays. Its impact is enhanced by its setting, in the beautifully built first large-scale power station in Sydney, adjoining the Harwood Building, and the associated tram house and its association with other NSW groups. At any time the Steam Gallery has a greater number of active clients than, for example, the current temporary pottery exhibition.

LH: ... and that's really about constantly changing stories but also alongside those changing exhibitions we've got programmes such as the Academy programme where we've got 60 bed accommodation where young people from across regional NSW and western Sydney can come and stay and do immersive STEM learning so you can sleep in the museum.

This is a good idea but we have searched widely for evidence of consultation with education authorities. In particular we need to tap the expertise of the many classroom teachers for whom an annual visit to THE Powerhouse MUSEUM has been a feature of their work. This is not being done.

LH: ... we've just completed a project that would be working on over the last four years to digitise 385,000 objects from our collection which has been really exciting because now you can actually go online and really see the collection like it's never been seen before and so technology is really important in terms of digital storytelling but also finding new stories and new connections between what is a very encyclopaedic collection that goes right across applied arts and applied sciences.

What is happening, by and large, is not digitisation but a continuation of the digital cataloguing that began in 1995. A good example of digitisation is the Australian Dress Register, much of the work for which was done by volunteers. A future worker could use the ADR to create an accurate replica of an item, whereas the current digitisation of items does not enable accurate replication.

A note about ADR: The Australian Dress Register not only documented rare items of dress and their important stories but also provided a tool to assist regional galleries and museums to collect, store, display and catalogue their collections. Frequent workshops were set up in the regions to share curatorial information, as many regional organisations are run by volunteers. The careful measurements taken allow us to judge the size of Australians in the past and to determine which garments were worn by different members of families - adding depth to the provenance. Replication was not an important consideration.

I am dismayed that so little credit is given to the meticulous work on the collection by so many experienced researchers. Photography for the web was established years ago - not under Lisa's regime. Sadly we keep hearing the same spiel which underestimates the depth and excellence of the real Powerhouse Museum and it's amazing education programs that no longer exist.

LH: Yeah I think with engaging with anything from museum exhibitions to a piece of art to having any type of cultural experience it's the context and the story and the relevance that's important. I strongly believe in my practise and in the practise of the Powerhouse here that people want to see

themselves reflected back whether it's with an artwork or whether it's with a story or history that they are engaging with.

That has not been demonstrated in most recent exhibitions where the focus is on an 'art experience' in dark galleries with very limited contextual information.

AP to LH: When you took over the management of the Powerhouse you said that it was important to give people reasons not just to visit for the first time but to keep coming back in again and again apart from school excursions which is certainly much of my experience of visiting the Powerhouse back in the old days which certainly in those days it had a **very monorail feeling to it**. So how does that work, what does that mean in practice? ...

Apologies in advance for being a bit full on, but I just read a transcript of your Lisa H. interview. ... for the past 8 years I have been an activist, trying to save it. Your comment in the interview – “in those days it had a very monorail feeling” – effected my blood pressure. The Louvre in Paris has some pictures and a few statues that museum could also have a monorail feel. The Mouth Trap play has been running in the same theatre since 1952, same result. In order to try to balance your interview with Lisa, I need to make a few comments:

Lisa was employed to establish a new Museum in Parramatta and hand the Ultimo site over to developers. Then on the 4th July 2020 a miracle, the Museum is to be saved. But of course the devil is in the detail. Three capital objects, Boulton & Watt steam engine (B&W), LOCO 1, and the Catalina Flying boat must remain in Ultimo. (What happens to the rest ?)

A powerful lobby group, working behind the scenes, and lo behold, \$500 mil was put on the table to convert the Ultimo site into an educational/commercial/entertainment hub that, will also contain a Design & Fashion museum.

Lisa has fully embraced this idea and is now the chief mover & shaker to make this happen. The result :

The award winning Wran Building will be demolished

The historic Harwood Building is no longer part of the museum precinct and will eventually be handed over to developers.

The museum will close its doors sometime this year and will not be reopened for several years.

All objects will be removed some temporarily the rest will be lost to Ultimo.

B&W is 250 years old, the 3rd oldest rotative steam engine and the only one of its type still operating under steam. It is very fragile and has to be treated with expert care. It will be packed up and removed and returned as a static object.

The LOCO 1 train set, the 1st passenger train in NSW set off in 1855 bound for Sydney Town, The 1st,2nd and 3rd class carriages were restored and populated with objects and mannequins that depict the lives and times of that period. The carriages have been emptied out. Nobody has denied that the plan is to remove the carriages from Ultimo.

The Museum has been suffering neglect and indifference for well over 8 years. It desperately needs TLC. There is no reason why an applied arts and sciences museum can't coexist with a design & fashion component. May I put it to you that a Design & Fashion Museum, that has B&W , LOCO 1 and the Catalina as some sort of freak show will certainly have a monorail feel about it.

Just to complete the picture, this all started in 2014, when an influential group in Parramatta put to Premier Baird the politically win- win scenario of handing over the Powerhouse site to developers.

The \$250 mil raised can be spent on re-establishing it in Parramatta. The deal would basically be taxpayer neutral. Baird was reflected in 2015 and the rest is history.

The cost for the Museum in Parramatta is estimated at 1.5 bil. Ultimo \$500 mil. Millions are being spent converting Powerhouse Castle Hill into a giant warehouse to accommodate the objects from

Ultimo. There is already visible collateral damage in Parramatta. St Georges Terrace is now a façade. Willow Grove is in storage awaiting relocation and the promised full restoration. The word on that is that what is in storage has junk status.

I guess what I am getting at is that the ABC should be investigating the current MAAS establishment rather appearing to be supporting it.

MORE:

The announcement about the change of 'name' puts egg all over the face of Andy Park for his interview with Ms Havilah. He must be really pissed off about being conned.