

Stephen Cassidy Blogspot
8 May, 2023

<https://cassarticle.blogspot.com/2023/05/too-soon-to-tell-is-powerhouse-museum.html>

indefinite article

Irreverent articles about contemporary Australian society, popular culture, the creative economy and the digital and online world - life in the trenches and on the beaches of the information age

Monday, May 8, 2023

Too soon to tell - is the Powerhouse Museum saved and what happens next?

Over the years I have written several articles about the decline of the once mighty Powerhouse Museum, one of the gems of Sydney and an internationally renowned institution. It was steadily undermined by a State government more at ease with pork-barrelling the suburbs it had long neglected than fostering a great museum and major tourist attraction. Rather than extending and upgrading the museum into the Western suburbs, it seemed intent on establishing a de facto entertainment and functions centre in Parramatta. Now, with a new State Government, that all may have changed.

My next planned article was going to be about the recently announced new national cultural policy of the Albanese Labor Government, but with the Powerhouse issue raising its head again, I thought I'd publish something now. The article about the national cultural policy will follow soon.



The view of the Catalina flying boat from the mezzanine floor above - the former Members Lounge where I used to work from 1995 to 2000.

Hope of end to a debacle

Hopefully, with the election of the Minns Labor Government in NSW, there may be some hope of an end to this embarrassing debacle with the Museum, though there are no guarantees. I include

extracts from a breaking update distributed on behalf of the broad alliance that has been battling for years to reverse this policy failure and halt the sad decline of the Museum.

I haven't written about the saga for several years because I was so unhappy about the whole sorry business. However, I realised today that in all I had written about the decline of the Powerhouse I overlooked the very area of the museum in which I once worked. A few days ago it suddenly occurred to me to check who the current Membership Manager was. Lo and behold, at some point during this trail of destruction the Powerhouse Museum dismantled its membership program.

Powerful connection with audiences

I find it hard to believe that a modern museum in this age where a broad base of support is crucial, would close its membership program. Membership offers a powerful way of connecting with the museum audience and introduces potential donors, sponsors and other benefactors, not to mention encouraging donations of potential collection items. The membership program previously included a Corporate Membership component which further encouraged this. I can only assume the short-sighted and narrow rationale was that when the Museum stopped charging for admission, no-one would want to be a member any more because the only reason visitors became members was to get free admission. Dismantling the membership program would present a quick - albeit relatively small - budget saving in a tight fiscal environment.

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From 1995 to 2000, just after the Olympics finished, I was Membership Manager at the Museum. Membership had peaked in March 1989 not long after the opening when it was offered free. It then plummeted, as many first-time visitors became last-time visitors, not realising that modern museums change their displays regularly. In the absence of an effective publicity campaign to inform them otherwise, they assumed they had seen all the Museum had to offer after a single visit.

There had been a slight improvement from the low that membership had fallen to, but it was still languishing. In the five years I was there we managed to double membership, turning the program around and adding important new elements, such as Corporate Membership. As a result, the membership program became a central component of building the support base for the Museum.

History of a train wreck

Here are the three earlier articles I wrote about the Powerhouse Museum. The process they outline can best be described as a train wreck - apt given the long association between the Powerhouse and trains.

Better late than never - does Powerhouse Museum turnaround signal new promise?

'For years the community campaign to halt the planned closure, transfer and site sell off of the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo, Sydney has struggled to change the mind of a stubborn and out of touch State Government. Given that NSW had the potential to be in the forefront of the new economy - and jobs - of the future, abandoning the promise of the Powerhouse Museum and its vast collection to contribute to this exhibited mediocrity of vision and incompetent economic management. Perhaps, after all the effort by supporters of this great museum, we are now finally seeing some progress', [Better late than never - does Powerhouse Museum turnaround signal new promise?](#)

Going, going, gone - the final spiral of a cultural icon?

'Despite its fragmented nature, the Powerhouse Museum was a great design museum precisely because it was also a museum of science and technology - and a museum of social history, which could place it all in a historical and social context. In many ways design is a central part of the vocabulary of our time and integrally related to so many powerful social and economic forces - creative industries, popular culture, the digital transformation of society. The current travails of the internationally renowned Powerhouse are a measure of a lack of strategic vision, including from successive governments which have never properly grasped the power of culture in shaping society

and the need for the long-term substantial commitment to enable it. The Powerhouse continues to play a crucial role in the area of creative industries, especially design. Yet no-one seems to know about it. Where will exhibitions of this relevance and calibre be exhibited and, more importantly, developed, once these short-sighted changes have become real?', [Going, going, gone - the final spiral of a cultural icon?](#)

The grand design of things - the lost unrealised potential of the Powerhouse Museum

'With its extensive collection of design of all kinds, from engineering to fashion to ceramics and jewellery, and with its links to industry, I always had high hopes for the Powerhouse Museum. Despite its fragmented nature, the Powerhouse was a great design museum precisely because it was also a museum of science and technology - and a museum of social history, which could place it all in a historical and social context. In many ways design is a central part of the vocabulary of our time and integrally related to so many powerful social and economic forces - creative industries, popular culture, the digital transformation of society. That the Powerhouse failed to realise its potential is a measure of the lack of strategic vision, including from successive governments which have never properly grasped the power of culture in shaping society and the need for the long-term substantial commitment to enable it', [The grand design of things - the lost unrealised potential of the Powerhouse Museum](#).

Extract from update by Powerhouse Museum Alliance

An abridged and edited version of an update distributed yesterday, 5 May 2023, follows. It summarises developments so far and suggests the way forward.

This update is sent to hundreds of colleagues, both as individuals and in institutions and organisations across NSW, Australia and other countries, who have established important relationships with the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, and who have expressed concerns about our previous government's plans to firstly demolish and move the Museum, and then 'save it' while vastly changing its role and program. In summary:

- *Keep the main Museum site in Ultimo; Parramatta to have own institutions.*
- *Keep all buildings, and get state heritage listing for 1988 buildings and historic Harwood building.*
- *As core business stay with 'applied arts (industrial and decorative arts, crafts, design) and sciences' (including industrial and technological) and social history, as before.*
- *Encourage release of the secret design briefs and secret business cases.*
- *Pause anything leading towards demolition in Ultimo; encourage only appropriate 'renewal'.*

Just a few weeks after the NSW State Election (25 March, 2023), it is now possible to identify reversals that may be made by our new government, to the destructive plans for the Powerhouse Museum initiated by the previous government in 2014. Even though the Museum was 'saved' in its Sydney city site in 2020, it is still unclear exactly what its future role is, or what its relationship will be with the proposed Parramatta venue. We want it to remain with its original purpose, on its current site, in its current buildings - albeit with appropriate renewal to better access the collection through exhibitions and related events.

Despite the Powerhouse Museum's [website](#) now identifying the historic Ultimo site as a location for exhibitions of 'applied arts and sciences' from the collection and beyond, rather than the controversially formerly cited museum of 'fashion and design' or even 'lyric theatre', there remain many serious concerns. Some significant articles and news reports have documented recent research and serious issues:

<https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/news-chronology-2023-on/>

<https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/letters-to-the-editor/>

<https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/museum-plans-and-problems-into-2023/>

Overall: <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/> including links to two long-term Inquiries.

For those who may wish to follow up with Members of Parliament and media, the following notes are based on summaries of eight years of research and documentation by many individuals as well as those in lobby groups including: the Powerhouse Museum Alliance; Save the Powerhouse Facebook; North Parramatta Residents Action group; Campaign to Save the Powerhouse and many others.

'Even though the Museum was "saved" in its Sydney city site in 2020, it is still unclear exactly what its future role is, or what its relationship will be with the proposed Parramatta venue.'

These informed advocates for retaining the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo as a Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS), make the following points, and recommend that we continue to raise these with the new Government and relevant local members. The new Minister for the Arts has already acknowledged understanding of the issues.

In making a submission, you may like to select from this list, issues of most concern to you and our wide audiences, and to elaborate on them.

- We call for a genuine renewal of the unique Powerhouse Museum, which must remain in Ultimo in the Sydney CBD, its home since 1893 and as the central site for the MAAS, as it is a state museum and must be accessible to a wide range of audiences. It must remain identified as a Museum.
- While a museum engages audiences in a range of stimulating ways, it must not be just a city-based arts pop-up or entertainment adjunct to the proposed 'Parramatta Powerhouse', currently under early construction on a site where a historic building was demolished.
- Responding to what regional Parramatta people are asking for, the 'Powerhouse Parramatta' should be reoriented in their location as a Parramatta Art Gallery, with a Parramatta Museum for its own notable history, as in other adjacent city centres.
- The Powerhouse Museum must be renewed as a Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, displaying and providing insightful information based on its collection, about science, engineering, transport, innovation, social history, decorative arts, crafts and design, across past to present. This is a unique combination of interconnecting collections.
- The government must cancel the \$500 million wasteful and destructive secret demolition plans for the potential 'Ultimo Creative Industries Precinct', where the Museum is being stripped largely of its collections and professional staff. These buildings include the most appropriate and safest spaces for significant large industrial and transport items, as well as extensive collections of smaller objects.
- As well as renewal of some facilities and spaces, the Museum also needs adequate continuing program funding, as well as for professional staff who have museum backgrounds and understand the collection and its audiences, to replace the many who are no longer employed.
- It is not at all clear who has made the current decisions: Museum senior management (how many have museum backgrounds; are they told what to do)? Board of Trustees (no museum members)? Create NSW government department? Arts Ministers in recent years? Who has been responsible?
- Their documents appear to be secret, and need exposing. They have ignored outcomes of two government Inquiries and several community consultation sessions. Any further work on the 'Powerhouse Ultimo' demolition and design scheme must be stopped until the new government has seen, and allowed public access to, all the design briefs and related decision-making documents.
- State Heritage Listing of the whole Powerhouse Museum Ultimo site (not just the old powerhouse buildings) is an urgent priority, and attention is drawn to the new government's agreement to seek release of heritage listing documents, secret design

briefs and any agreements for the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo, and the secret business cases for both Parramatta and Ultimo.

- *Contrary to current design plans, along with the earlier historic buildings this renewal must retain, not demolish, the important 1988 Sulman award-winning buildings, of Wran building and galleria, and include them in state heritage listing.*
- *The adjacent historic Harwood tram shed building must also be heritage listed, and retained to continue its functions as an integral part of the Powerhouse Museum's history, design and project operations.*
- *Controversially, the entire collection has been removed to distant storage at Castle Hill, with concerns expressed about the danger of transportation for many items, and access for museum staff as well as audiences. Many collection and exhibition-based staff are being relocated there, and to Parramatta. Can we rely on such difficult access arrangements?*

So - what is the Powerhouse Museum really heading for, and how can we contribute by passing on what we have experienced in the past and expect in the future?

If you want to write to the new government members, and ask/thank them for their expected support, go to Premier, Chris Minns; Minister for Arts, John Graham; and Minister for Heritage, Penny Sharpe; and where appropriate in NSW, with local members (It is recommended writing a letter attached to an email, rather than just an email).

<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/members/Pages/ministers.aspx>

<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/members/Pages/all-members.aspx>

See also

Better late than never - does Powerhouse Museum turnaround signal new promise?

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Endless attrition at major collections institutions undermines our cultural future

'The endless attrition of the 'efficiency dividend', with its long-term debilitating impact on our major national cultural institutions, continues to do harm. With the periodic announcement of job losses, more and more valuable expertise is increasingly lost and important programs affected. This will undermine the ability of these institutions to care for our heritage and to provide access to their collections for Australians across the country. The long term impact of these cumulative changes will be major and unexpected, magnifying over time as each small change reinforces the others. At some point Australians will ask where valued and important programs have gone and how critical institutions have managed to diminish to the point where return will not be possible,' [Endless attrition at major collections institutions undermines our cultural future](#).

Who owns Australia's 'soul'? Our cultural institutions, our history and our future

'The announcement of a substantial sum from the Government for expansion of The Australian War Memorial has highlighted some crucial issues around shrinking support for our cultural institutions, recognition of our history and heritage, and sponsorship in a time of diminishing budgets. The Director of the War Memorial has commented that "the Australian War Memorial is...a place that reveals our character as a people, our soul." In the end though, Australia's 'soul' might turn out to be larger, longer and wider than our history of wars', [Who owns Australia's 'soul'? Our cultural institutions, our history and our future](#).

Cut to the bone - the accelerating decline of our major cultural institutions and its impact on Australia's national heritage and economy

'I always thought that long after all else has gone, after government has pruned and prioritised and slashed and bashed arts and cultural support, the national cultural institutions would still remain. They are one of the largest single items of Australian Government cultural funding and one of the longest supported and they would be likely to be the last to go, even with the most miserly and mean-spirited and short sighted of governments. However, in a finale to a series of cumulative cuts over recent years, they have seen their capabilities to carry out their essential core roles eroded beyond repair. The long term impact of these cumulative changes will be major and unexpected, magnifying over time as each small change reinforces the others. The likelihood is that this will lead to irreversible damage to the contemporary culture and cultural heritage of the nation at a crucial crossroads in its history', [Cut to the bone - the accelerating decline of our major cultural institutions and its impact on Australia's national heritage and economy](#).

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About me

[Stephen Cassidy](#)

Stephen Cassidy is a researcher and writer who has worked across the Australian cultural sector for 40 years. This has spanned policy, programs and research in government, museums, publishing, community arts and radio in four states and territories at national, state and local level. It has encompassed creative industries - including music and literature - intangible cultural heritage and Indigenous culture and languages. He was Director of the National Cultural Policy Task Force, wrote the proposal that initiated the Digital Content Industry Action Agenda, drafted the Indigenous Contemporary Music Action Plan and played an instrumental role in the adoption of Australia's first National Indigenous Languages Policy. He has been a Community Arts Officer in

local government, ACTU Arts Officer, Development Manager at community radio 2SER-FM and Membership Manager for the Powerhouse Museum. His writing has appeared in a range of publications, been recognised in various literary awards and competitions and included in several exhibitions. He is an Adjunct with the University of Canberra and has previously been on the Board of Craft ACT and a member of ACT arts forum, the Childers Group.

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