

To
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CC
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The Hon. Chris Minns, NSW Premier
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Ultimo, 24 February, 2024

POWERHOUSE ULTIMO REVITALISATION COMMUNITY CONSULTATION SUBMISSION

“Save the Powerhouse” is a community campaign which aims to keep the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo as the recognised world-class Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences **Museum** it has been since its opening on its current site in 1988.

“Save”’s campaign was founded in early 2015, shortly after the former Premier, Mike Baird announced that the Powerhouse Museum would be moved to Parramatta and the Ultimo site sold to developers. It continues to oppose the various inadequate “Ultimo Presence” (Berejiklian), “Ultimo Renewal”(Perrottet) or “Ultimo Revitalisation” (Minns) projects fabricated by the same Museum Management/Create NSW/INSW team that was appointed by the previous NSW Government.

“Save” organises information meetings and events from time to time, communicates with its base through bulk emailing (300+ addresses) and a Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/savethepowerhouse> (5,200+ followers) and co-operate with other groups such as the Powerhouse Museum Alliance (PMA).

“Save the Powerhouse” **STRONGLY OPPOSES** the “Revitalisation” as described on the INSW website <https://www.infrastructure.nsw.gov.au/projects-nsw/in-progress/powerhouse-ultimo-revitalisation/about/> , and **urges the NSW Government to reverse immediately its unjustified decision to close the Museum and not to move any collection and/or exhibit from the Museum (a costly, time-consuming and risky exercise) until a genuine programme of “revitalisation” is developed in full consultation with all stakeholders, especially the public.**

1) THE CURRENT “REVITALISATION” PROGRAM DOES NOT FOLLOW DUE PROCESS

Any museum renewal project focuses on the museum and its collections, its exhibitions, education work and audiences. It is not primarily an architectural or construction process which is how The Museum Management, Create NSW and INSW teams are approaching this project.

1) An **exhibition plan** must be established before any construction design is undertaken which includes a permanent exhibitions pre-design, the type of temporary exhibitions

(whether based on the Museum's own collections and/or imported) which are envisaged, including their physical constraints. **The Plan must have been discussed and agreed with all stakeholders including the public.**

2) Then a "revitalisation" project of the museum buildings adapting the existing structures, **in full respect of their heritage**, could be completed, again in consultation and agreement with all stakeholders. This would include a business case, general built forms and an architectural design brief.

3) It would be followed by an architectural competition, an SSD, a ministerial approval and the procurement of a contractor.

4) Only once this process is completed could the Museum be temporarily closed, and some exhibits temporarily relocated, **if unavoidable**.

The NSW Government has chosen exactly the opposite approach: first unjustifiably closing the Museum and removing the collections without any design approved, then simultaneously processing an SSD without any exhibition design and finally deciding on future exhibitions.

"We are now a week away from this place closing and we don't have a plan. There is no plan. I'll tell you why there is no plan: this is because Lisa Havilah does not have one" declared Public Service Association (PSA) General Secretary Stewart Little at a rally on January 28.

This mirrors the process used in Parramatta and will yield the same result: marked public indifference and/or strong disapproval.

The hasty and unjustified closure of the Museum immediately followed by the gutting of its collection and the hasty disposal of exhibition furniture <https://mgnsw.org.au/articles/give-away-collection-storage-showcases-exhibition-furniture-equipment-and-interactives/> when there is no approved project makes a mockery of the **democratic** SSD process. Approval is taken for granted before any public consultation has taken place.

2) THE "REVITALISATION" PROJECT IS SHROUDED IN SECRECY

- It's nearly 4 years since then Premier Berejiklian and Treasurer Perrottet announced "PHM was saved" and would be staying in Ultimo. The Museum Management team should by now be able to show the public the site masterplan, a museum plan, an exhibition renewal plan, and the design briefs as part of the consultations.

In all comparable museum renewal projects, these documents would be developed through community consultation and be in the public domain as the basis for informed consultation, before any architect is engaged.

The current "consultation" without essential information is not genuine consultation and is unprecedented in any museum renewal project in the world.

It is a major broken promise by the NSW Arts Minister John Graham who said *"I have said all along that we will be transparent with regards to the Powerhouse Ultimo Renewal"* and the public is entitled to ask what he is hiding.

- Before the election the Arts Minister committed to greater openness and wide public consultations and told Save that he looked forward *"to working with you in the future on this important campaign"*. **Once he was elected in March 2023 we never heard from him again!**

- Many of us wrote to ask him not to close the Powerhouse Museum and not to move its collections...but we all received only a stereotyped letter <http://tiny.cc/vh3zwz> from his office on February 11, shortly **AFTER** the Museum unnecessarily and unjustifiably closed its doors on February 5.

- Our Save the Powerhouse/Pyrmont Action Inc./Friends of Ultimo joint petition <https://www.change.org/p/keep-the-powerhouse-museum-in-ultimo-open> opposing the closure of the PHM and the removal of its collections has collected **well over 6,000 signatures** and the Minister is still deaf to our demands.

"(We) donated to the State Labor Party for its election. We will not donate again after being lied to and betrayed by the Minns Government on this very important issue of trust"
commented a Powerhouse supporter

3) THE PROPOSED PROJECT IS NOT A REVITALISATION BUT A MAJOR DOWNGRADING OF THE EXISTING MUSEUM

- Arts Minister John Graham announced that his "revitalised" Museum would be larger than the original facilities. But this was just another broken promise <http://tiny.cc/73wivz>.

- The recently released IFNSW's Powerhouse Museum Ultimo Floor Plans document <https://www.infrastructure.nsw.gov.au/media/q1gbb3o3/powerhouse-museum-ultimo-floorplans.pdf> shows that the total exhibition areas of the "revitalised" Museum will be **6,590m²** <http://tiny.cc/j5czwz>. **THIS IS LESS THAN A THIRD OF THE EXISTING FACILITIES (21,800+m²)!**

"The Powerhouse Museum, Australia's largest and most popular museum...has an ever-changing program of exhibitions covering approximately 20,000 square metres...It presents 22 permanent exhibitions and several temporary exhibitions, complemented by more than 250 interactives."

Collections Australia Network January 21, 2011

<https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20110120193614/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/100602/20110120-1007/www.collectionsaustralia.net/org/171/about.html>

In addition, the current 21,800m² were entirely dedicated to exhibition spaces meeting international museum standards... until the appointment of a new management team. They turned exhibition areas into event spaces and overlooked maintenance of the windows, gutters and roofs.

The proposed 6,590m² will be "flexible international standard exhibition spaces that can support and adapt to new and dynamic programs", i.e. **spaces which could be hired out for private functions, fashion shows or rave parties.**

- The proposed brick building along Harris Street obstructs appreciation of the Wran building with its design references to international exhibitions and the design of railway stations across the world, both fundamental to the museum's history, as well as the relationship with Seidler's Ian Thorpe Aquatic Centre. **We note the project architects have no experience in museum design.**

- Other downgrading includes –

- The "new" entrance on the Goodline (which is **not really new** since it existed until the Museum was closed for the COVID pandemic) opens on a maze of corridors and staircases, very different from Lionel Glendenning's imposing entrance on the Galleria which offered a unique view of Loco No1 in a cathedral-like space. This entrance will now be blocked by staircases and Loco No1 moved away.

- The priceless Boulton & Watt engine will now be isolated at the end of a narrow corridor which allows no room for stepping back and admiring it.

- Precious Museum space will be taken up by an "Academy" with unneeded student dormitories and shops to accommodate **UNDEFINED "creative industries"**.

4) THE PROPOSED “REVITALISATION” IS NOT HERITAGE-BASED

- The whole Powerhouse Museum site should have been state heritage listed to guide the ‘revitalisation’ project, before plans are developed. Instead only the brick shell of the former Ultimo Power Station is heritage listed and the interiors, the Harwood building, the 1988 “Wran” additions and the collections are omitted.
- The hasty and secretive ‘revitalisation’ of the PHM will eviscerate and erase the museum’s design concept, heritage values and major exhibitions - an integral part of the significance of the museum.

5) THE REMOVAL OF THE MUSEUM PERMANENT EXHIBITIONS (TRANSPORT AND SPACE, STEAM REVOLUTION AND EXPERIMENTATION) IS UNFORGIVABLE

- Reducing the transport and engineering exhibitions to only three objects (Boulton & Watt, Loco No1 and Catalina seaplane) will destroy public appreciation and education opportunities. Understanding of major themes and histories can only be appreciated from the exhibition of these objects in context with related objects and evolving technologies. **This is central to the museum’s purpose and the objects in the museum’s Act. A museum’s role is to exhibit its collection.**

No serious museum would destroy the integrity of its major exhibitions showing collections of national and international significance, reducing richly contextualised narrative exhibitions to only three objects

- The themes of power, transport and technological innovation from the industrial revolution to the present must remain as the central narrative of the Powerhouse Museum
 - The dedicated Transport, Flight and Space exhibition in the boiler hall must be retained and renewed, together with the Steam Revolution exhibition in the engine house
 - Live steaming of the steam engines and the 1785 Boulton and Watt must be preserved and continued as a unique part of the museum’s visitor appeal, its heritage values, and conservation and management of the steam engines
 - Loco No1 and carriages, and the Boulton and Watt should remain in the Galleria which was purpose designed for their exhibition, protected in situ during the renewal project

6) THE “REVITALISATION “ PROJECT IS A HUGE DESTRUCTION OF PUBLIC ASSETS AND WASTE OF TAXPAYER’S MONEY

- It appears the management is set on deindustrialising the PHM, and cleansing it of its transport and industrial history so the former dedicated exhibition galleries can be turned into **multi-purpose entertainment spaces for venue hire, parties and fashion parades.** The Powerhouse Museum is Sydney’s last remaining industrial heritage precinct that has not yet been compromised by privatisation, gutting and adaptation for other purposes. It is the last industrial heritage site in the inner city that is essentially a museum about itself, about power and transport. The PHM should concentrate on its unique mission as this state’s **major heritage museum for applied arts and sciences.** Its focus must be the display of the collection, maximising audiences and education impacts.
People want a REAL Science and Technology Museum, not spaces for private entertainment!

- Many museums with similar collections to the PHM have remained open during staged renewal and revitalisation work; for example the National Railway Museum in York, UK and

the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. **The safety and risks to the collection, and retaining public access to the museum, out-weigh the convenience of the construction team.**

- The disassembly and removal of the museum's most significant objects signals that they are never coming back. An unknown number of objects will be relocated to small museums without paid curators or the same security and environmental conditions they have in the PHM. These collections would be safer retained and protected in situ during renewal works.

- There is no case for the conversion of the PHM to a creative industries precinct. It is clear this move to prioritise supporting artists and creatives has already had a negative impact on the museum's exhibitions, audiences, education mission and functionality.

There are other galleries, facilities and precincts in the vicinity that are already working in contemporary art, creative industries and arts centres. More are planned, eg White Bay and the creative precinct at the National Art School. MAAS should not duplicate what other cultural facilities should be resourced to provide.

The creative industries precinct should be at Carriageworks. Even though better support for artists, creatives and studio accommodation is needed in Sydney, the City of Sydney is already working on this. But it should not be achieved by cannibalising the PHM's mission or its purpose-designed exhibition and collection facilities.

- Building a school boarding house in the PHM is wasteful, expensive and unnecessary. Country school students stay at the Sydney Central Youth Hostel when they visit Sydney, only a short walk from the PHM. There is no need for taxpayers to build, fund and operate a 24x7 accommodation service already provided by reputable operators.

- The Harwood building, the former tram depot, must be included in the revitalisation plans. It has mysteriously been excised from the project boundary. The Harwood building is an integral part of the industrial history and heritage of the site, and of its award winning design and adaptation as a museum. It must continue as the PHM's collections, conservation, workshops, research and exhibition handling facility. It must not be sold, privatised, gutted, repurposed for creatives and artists or handed in secret to UTS.

Inserting a loading dock into the PHM is a waste of money when the Harwood building has a bigger and more functional loading dock only 50 metres away. Clearly this is part of secret plans to sell the museum's property and downsize the PHM.

The INSW website states that "The Harwood building will be retained for museum use to provide storage, loading, staff accommodation, workshop and conservation facilities for the foreseeable future" **How far into the future does the NSW Government foresee?**

7) THE CURRENT NEGLECT OF THE CONDITION OF THE STRUCTURES IS NOT AN EXCUSE FOR THE UNJUSTIFIED CLOSURE OF THE MUSEUM (NOR FOR SPENDING \$250M)

- The building fabric problems are only the result of years of **deliberate maintenance neglect** by the current Museum Management Team. They are minor and can be fixed without closing the Museum as part of routine maintenance.

- The photos "supplied" to the media showing an historic crack dating back to 1905 and deliberately preserved by the Architect, a minor roof leak or a damp patch on the boiler hall wall amount to **MISINFORMATION**. The **full building expert visit report** should have been made public instead.

They are the proof that the building is "fit for purpose" since more compelling defect photos would have been produced if they existed.

The Arts Minister's statement that "*the building has significant problems that must be addressed without further delay, including leaks from the roof and large cracks in several walls. These leaks have resulted in mould and damp, putting the collection at risk...To put it bluntly, the current Ultimo building is not up to the standard of a world-class museum that NSW wants it to be*" is **UNSUBSTANTIATED**. The same Minister said in September 2023 that "*we promised at the election that we would...keep the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo open. We are doing just that*". **How could the building have degraded so dramatically in a space of 4 months?**

The Management Team considered that the Museum was fit to accommodate the "1001 Remarkable Objects" exhibition only a few months ago.

- The PHM must be reopened, the box gutters and window seals replaced, services cleaned and maintained, along with other **deliberately delayed maintenance**. The only reason the PHM was closed on false pretences was to hide **management incompetence** and to strip the museum of its major collections.

8) THE ARTS MINISTER'S ANNOUNCEMENT OF A THREE-YEARS CLOSURE FOR REVITALISATION IS UNREALISTIC

- The first year will be used for collection "decanting" (Lisa Havilah's word, meaning exile), SSD process and procurement. The last year will be needed to re-install (unspecified) exhibitions, leaving only a year for construction works. Another 2 years could more realistically be added.

- NSW Treasurer's Budget Papers show the completion date is 2033. Only \$119m has been allocated to the project over the four-year estimates to 2026-27.

- It seems INSW has quietly dropped the improbable 'three year temporary closure' claim imprudently announced by the Arts Minister (**another broken promise?**) and their website now reads: "*Timing of construction commencement and completion is subject to the outcomes of the planning and procurement process.*"

9) THERE ARE ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS, THEY ARE CHEAPER, MORE PROFESSIONAL AND DO NOT NECESSITATE THE MUSEUM CLOSURE AND THE MOVING OF COLLECTIONS

- The Powerhouse Museum Alliance (PMA) offered repeatedly their pro-bono expert assistance which was not accepted. Their "Redux" solution does not require closing the Museum or moving the collections and is substantially cheaper. It would maintain the Powerhouse's world-class Science and Technology Museum status and its 20,000m² of international quality exhibition space.

- The failure to consult the museum's architect Lionel Glendenning during two 'Ultimo Renewal' SSD's EIS processes going back to 2021 is inexplicable, discourteous and a breach of his moral rights.

There can't be any credible heritage revitalisation without the input of the PHM's Architect. **Labor's promise to save the Wran legacy does not have any credibility without the involvement of the architect of record.** That this situation has continued under Labor shows disrespect for the architect who worked closely with Neville Wran and Jack Ferguson to realise their vision of a museum of industry, transport and technological change.

- We repeat our long standing request that Australia's most eminent conservation architect, Alan Croker of Design 5, completes his Conservation Management Plan as the basis for a credible heritage revitalisation of the Powerhouse Museum.

For these reasons “Save the Powerhouse” **STRONGLY OPPOSES** the proposed “Revitalisation” and urges the NSW Government to reverse immediately its unjustified decision to close the Museum and not to move any collection and/or exhibit from the Museum (a costly, time-consuming and risky exercise) until a genuine programme of “revitalisation” is developed in full consultation with all stakeholders, especially the public.

Patricia JOHNSON & Jean-Pierre ALEXANDRE
Co-Convenors

Save the Powerhouse

