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Foxground founder of Powerhouse Museum fights to save world-class collection

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03 May 2024, 9:00 AM



Lindsay Sharp, founding Director of the Powerhouse Museum

Dr Lindsay Sharp, the founding director of the Powerhouse Museum, says state government plans to move priceless objects, including one of the oldest working steam engines in the world, to Castle Hill while the Ultimo site undergoes destructive renovations “is madness”.

“This proposal wastes tens of millions of dollars, destroys the campus, reduces exhibition areas by more than half, wrecks the Wran Building and Galleria and creates a completely unnecessary carbon load,” says Dr Sharp.

The world-renowned museologist, who lives at Foxground with his artist wife Robyn, is a vocal member of the Powerhouse Museum Alliance.

The Alliance, a group of museum professionals, former trustees and design and heritage experts, opposes plans to remove hundreds of thousands of key objects from the Ultimo site and house them in Castle Hill until the Powerhouse Museum reopens in the city in 2027 and at its sister site in Parramatta in 2025.

The original Ultimo museum opened in 1988 but closed to the public in February to undergo a \$250 million renovation, with the Minns government scrapping a proposed \$500 million rebuild and opting for a less costly “heritage revitalisation”, saying it would create a “world-class museum experience” when it reopens.

But Dr Sharp fears that once “magnificent objects” like the Boulton Watt engine are removed from the museum it may never return to its historical home.

“To put these incredibly fragile objects in Castle Hill is madness,” he says. “It is culturally unwise, unjustified and not properly planned. “First do no harm, as with medicine so with museology,” says Dr Sharp. “A museum’s collection is its core DNA. If the fragile beam of the Boulton Steam Engine is broken during transportation between Ultimo and Castle Hill it will not only be inoperable but not in a condition for display. We’re talking about a heroic piece of history.”

For a museologist the proposed rebuild is heartbreaking, not least because of the risk to the exhibits but also because of concerns about community access.

“All those incredible objects that are an integral part of the Powerhouse Museum collection in Ultimo will be rehoused at Parramatta and Castle Hill,” explains Dr Sharp. “That means that people who come from Kiama, or other regional areas, have to go cross country to access a collection that was right near Central train station. Visiting those [western Sydney] sites will be much more difficult, especially for school students.

“The fundamental reason why museums should exist is to bring joy, excitement and real engagement to the people who own them, the taxpayers. The top down development of museums is very unwise and elitist.

“If you’re going to spend taxpayer’s money you better have a jolly good business case and make sure that’s what the public wants.”

Dr Sharp, who has a PHD in cultural history from Oxford University, has been the director of major museums around the world, including London's national Science Museum Group and the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada.

His overseas tenure was not without criticism and he admits his detractors accused him of being a "show pony", at one point earning him the nickname Showboat Sharp. But back home in Australia he was lauded for his work on the development of the Powerhouse Museum. A letter to Dr Sharp in 1986 from the then Secretary of the NSW Premier's Department Gerry Gleeson states: "Your contribution to the development of this Museum has been the outstanding single force in bringing about its completion. I certainly look forward to the continued association with the Powerhouse Museum because it will be one of the jewels of the Wran era".

There is no doubt the cultural consultant is a passionate exponent of his craft, which is why, for almost a decade, he has continued to fight to preserve exhibits in-situ at the Powerhouse Museum that he helped curate; the "jewels" that tell our history.

"There's this idea that all museums are old hat, but that's a very old fashioned view," says Dr Sharp. "Other museums around the world, in London or Paris, they're doing extraordinary things with immersive experiences, using cutting edge technology, to tell stories and engage people.

"If what is being proposed for Ultimo, taking out all those incredible objects and simply replacing them with immersive projections, was earmarked for a museum in London or Paris it would be laughed at by the museological profession."

Dr Sharp believes the pride of the museum's collection, the famed Boulton and Watt steam engine, first installed in a London brewery in 1785 and known as the "Mona Lisa of steam engines", might not survive a move and was effectively uninsurable. Other expert museologists agree.

Between 1988 and 2018 roughly 20 million people visited the Powerhouse Museum, many came to see the famous steam engine and Catalina flying boat.

"For a relatively small society like Australia that's a lot of people," says Dr Sharp. "When I meet people who say 'I went there with my school and I've taken my children there,' I can't tell you what a thrill that is."

Dr Sharp's passion for preserving culture has not waned over the decades since he embarked on his first job at London's national Science Museum in 1976 as assistant keeper of 2.5 million images.

“Museums should engage people to develop their own opinions, thoughts and feelings and have some wonderful objects as well,” says Dr Sharp, recounting the story of Norm Harwood, a colleague who discovered a priceless train carriage rotting in a field in the middle of nowhere.

“A fellow museologist, an expert in trains, was driving to somewhere like Tibooburra and spotted a train carriage being used by a local farmer as a chicken coop. He knew immediately it was the third class carriage commissioned as part of the first ever train to run in NSW, from Parramatta to Sydney.

“The farmer was happy to be rid of it, he had a brand new chicken coop. So a low loader was procured for 50 quid and the carriage was dragged by a tractor to Sydney where it was lovingly restored over a decade at the Eveleigh (now Carriageworks) railyard.”

Dr Sharp tells this story to highlight the importance of society’s understanding of history, heritage and what is worth preserving. For most people that train carriage was a rusted piece of metal, full of chicken droppings. But its history, its story and its cultural significance is so much richer.

“I feel the same way about the Powerhouse Museum, it’s worth struggling and fighting for,” says Dr Sharp. His battle, and that of the Alliance, is to ensure that balance between innovation and history occurs at the Powerhouse’s Ultimo site. He singles out the Gerringong Library and Municipal Complex (GLaM) as a benchmark.

“This is one of the best municipal libraries in Australia in my view,” says Dr Sharp. “It’s got a lovely, local museum, an incredible exhibition space and some of the most excellent library staff I’ve ever come across. It’s a powerful living example of cultural engagement. And that’s what museums should be doing. That’s what the Powerhouse Museum is designed to do. [Gerringong] is my second favourite library in the world.”

His first? Duke Humfrey’s Library at Oxford University where he spent his formative years studying. As for favourite museums the Powerhouse is undoubtedly one of them.

Dr Sharp and the Powerhouse Museum Alliance will hold a seminar in Parliament House next month to discuss how to plan great museums.

“I will never give up, while I can continue this fight,” says Dr Sharp. “Especially now that the state’s GST revenues will total \$12 billion less over the next four years. This is a disastrous result for the Powerhouse Museum proposal, with more money likely to be stripped from cultural programs.”