

MAAS Visitor Nos and other Stats: charting decline and failure

The 2022-23 MAAS Annual Report reveals a continuing decline across key performance metrics for the museum, although the Annual Report claims total on site visitation grew by 240%.¹ A five year decline across standard performance benchmarks coincides with the appointment of the current CEO and a shift in the museum's exhibition programming to creative industries, contemporary fashion and design, and away from families and education. The same collapse is revealed in the education stats, down 56% over five years. By contrast, at the Australian Museum visitor numbers are up 112% over five years, and education participation is up 36%.

Year ²	PHM Visitors	Sydney Observatory	MDC ³	Total site visitors	Education Nos. and staff	Staff nos ⁴	Recurrent Gov Grant ⁵
2022-23	583,757	3,331 ⁶	20,686	607,994	28,258 5.6 staff ⁷	335.5	\$56,511m ⁸ p.56
2021-22 ⁹	168,741 ¹⁰	NIL ¹¹	10,154	178,895	16,701 4 staff	342.4 ¹²	\$42,835m p.49
2020-21	187,164	49,575	13,493	250,232	? ¹³ 4 staff	289.4 ¹⁴	\$35,448m p.39
2019-20	478,020 ¹⁵	95,135	10,157	583,312	55,000 5 staff	281.1 ¹⁶	\$35,204m p.40
2018-19	757,166 ¹⁷	136,796	15,547	909,509	63,911 5 staff	197.8	\$29,364m p.38
2017-18 ¹⁸	659,340	159,287	17,481	836,108	69,784 5 staff	203.4	\$28,555m
2016-17	561,503	149,270	24,143	734,917	¹⁹ 7 staff	216	\$31,194m
2015-16	569,186	162,605	-	731,791	62,545 5 staff	213	\$34,155m
2014-15	428,177	140,401	5,152	573,730	57,073 3 staff	188 ²⁰	\$34,813,
2013-14	381,582	171,136	18,367	571,085	45,413 4.7 staff	232.07	27,838m
2012-13	381,415	181,197	17,324	579,936	56,357 4.7 staff	251.8	\$29,919m
2011-12	728,034 ²¹	169,276	20,523	917,833	52,287 4.7 staff	277.6	\$28,538m
2010-11	455,931	179,041	19,201	654,173	72,795 4.7 staff	284.2	\$28,487m
2009-10	473,812	180,621	16,915	671,438	63,372 4.5 staff	274.6	\$28,310m
2008-09	565,409	139,210	14,648	719,267	55,949 13 staff ²²	286	\$28,287m
2007-08	527,379 ²³	134,630	13,704	675,712	59,199 10.9 staff	292.8	\$30,515m
2006-07	446,738	163,005	11,925	621,666	²⁴ 17.8 staff	360	\$30,803m ²⁵
2005-06	402,875	132,324	-	535,199	70,000 18 staff	313.7	\$31,252m

It is difficult to believe that MAAS is serious about Parramatta having a STEM education focus when the museum has failed to deliver its current education mission, had a whole floor of vacant education studios before the museum closed in 4 February 2024, and has not appointed any STEM educators or senior science leaders. The senior management team is almost entirely made up of people with a background in contemporary art or hospitality.

The drop in visitor and education numbers suggests an indifference to programming exhibitions that maximise audiences, and points to the decline of the museum's content rich, curriculum linked education programs as more than ten major exhibitions were progressively removed. Responsibility lies with the museum's leadership, not the staff, see also notes 8 and 28. Early in the current CEO's tenure, audience appeal was deleted as one of the criteria for selecting exhibitions. In 20025-06 there were 18 people working in education when there was a roughly comparable number of employees. Now there are just 3 permanent education staff and 2.6 FTE casuals.

When visitor numbers at the PHM crashed to 381,415 in 2013 this rang alarm bells for the government and Trustees. The director's position was advertised and Dawn Casey was not reappointed.²⁶ In 2021-22 visitor numbers were more than 50% below that nadir, and the lowest since 1960, see note 8. Instead of commissioning a performance audit the government is gifting the current management with three concurrent infrastructure projects at a staggering cost of \$1.4 billion when all the performance metrics indicate that the creative industries, fashion and design concept for the PHM is a flop. The likely cost of \$1.2b for Parramatta is more than four times the \$244m taxpayers' investment in Sydney Modern. Benchmarking MAAS with comparable state and national museums, over the past five years the current management at MAAS has significantly under-performed against its museum peers. On the evidence the CEO's new paradigm for museums is an expensive failure. Instead of calling for a performance audit, the government is hiding scrutiny of waste and under-performance through the pre-emptive closure of the PHM on February 4, having promised in September to keep the PHM open.²⁷ This is not a temporary closure. The budget papers show the project completion is not 2026-27 but 2033. Nor is the project in any sense the promised heritage revitalisation.²⁸ The PHM is being defunded, downsized and stripped of its assets, collections and purpose to turn the former museum into a creative industries, arts and entertainment centre, on the same template as Carriageworks West – otherwise known as Powerhouse Parramatta. This is the tragic culmination of more than a decade of neglect, incompetence, governance failures, massive waste, and destructive government interference. As Dawn Casey's 2011-13 'revitalisation' building works showed, fiddling with the museum's building is not a strategy to cover poor performance and failures of programming.

The poor performance of MAAS, relative to its peers, began with stagnating budgets from 2005, followed by cuts to recurrent funding by the state Labor government and the introduction of efficiency dividends, leading to rounds of redundancies and deskilling the museum of its most experienced staff,²⁹ and the ill-advised 'revitalisation' program of works from 2011-13 when this was not the source of the museum's declining visitation. There followed a revolving door of directors under the LNP, further budget cuts, and the closure of more exhibition galleries, which led to the then Premier Mike Baird's decision to 'move' the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta, followed by an unpopular programming focus on fashion and 'creative industries', coupled with the failure to program any exhibitions for kids and families when this was a mainstay of the museum's exhibition program, especially over summer. Other factors over more than a decade of decline include the removal of more than 10 major exhibitions, replaced by nothing but shuttered galleries.³⁰ The only unambiguous popular success in the last five years at the PHM was Leo Schofield's *1001 Remarkable Objects* exhibition, August 2023 to 4

February 2024. It had visitors flocking back to the museum, finally showing its historic collection and the best of its recent acquisitions. It is a travesty that this exhibition was closed after just six months, given it was two years in development by a team of 120 people, and cost \$4m. In any other museum that cares about its audiences and the investment cost of the exhibition, it would have had a 12-18 month run.

2012-13 was the last year the MAAS Annual Report was framed around reporting on performance and targets laid out in a strategic plan. The continued decline and drift under successive directors has been obscured in the MAAS annual reports by the absence of any reporting on performance targets. Shocking as this may sound for an organisation spending \$1.4b in infrastructure funding and in receipt of \$101m in recurrent funding and other grants in 2023-24, MAAS has no strategic plan in the commonly understood meaning of this term. Among many governance failures by the MAAS Trust this is perhaps the most disastrous and inexplicable.³¹ The 2014 decision to 'move' the PHM to Parramatta was by some accounts related to declining attendance at Ultimo. But it's not the PHM building or its location that has failed, it's the management, and the Trustees, and a succession of arts ministers collectively failing their responsibility to protect the public interest and the endowment of previous generations. In the last four years governments have showered MAAS in public money for ill-advised projects like the Castle Hill J Store development and collections relocation, and the misguided, unsafe and over-scaled 'Powerhouse Parramatta' development. This money has flowed without transparent reporting or any apparent scrutiny of the museum's performance. Over five years the CEO and senior management have not demonstrated they can run a successful museum at the PHM. And now, instead of seeing if the management can deliver the risky and overdue Parramatta Powerhouse development first, the PHM is closed, before plans are even on exhibition, let alone approved. Thus even more public money is raining down on a failing management team who get to blow up the Powerhouse Museum as well.

Kylie Winkworth,

Former Trustee and Life Fellow, 13 February 2024

MAAS directors

Lisa Havilah: January 2019 to present

Dolla Merrillees: April 2016-July 2018

Rose Hiscock: July 2013- December 2015

Dawn Casey: March 2008-July 2013.

¹ MAAS Annual Report 2022-23, p.13. Unlike other cultural institutions, MAAS does not record visitor postcodes which provide a reasonably reliable record of admissions in the absence of paid or ticketed attendance. This also means there is no data about where visitors are coming from. Also unlike other cultural institutions, the MAAS Annual Reports do not differentiate between general attendance and people attending functions, parties and late night events. Nor do the MAAS Annual Reports provide detail on attendance at particular exhibitions, or public programs. A 240% increase in visitation, most to the PHM, should be reflected in increased earned income, but revenue from the sale of goods was up only \$21,000 on the previous year from \$329,000 to \$350,000. <https://cdn.sanity.io/files/wkgts1b4/production/e477984653fc2050d093e812db896fb36ec33623.pdf>

² Figures sourced from MAAS Annual Reports. [https://powerhouse.com.au/the-act#museum-of-applied-arts-and-sciences-act-\(1945\)](https://powerhouse.com.au/the-act#museum-of-applied-arts-and-sciences-act-(1945))

³ Museums Discovery Centre/ Storage at Castle Hill, shared with Australian Museum and Museums of History NSW. In 2023 the MDC was rebadged as Powerhouse Castle Hill, without consultation with other users.

⁴ FTE; not including casuals, contractors and consultants. Staff numbers don't strictly calibrate to recurrent revenue as special projects such as the wasteful and ill-advised collection relocation were funded by a separate grants.

⁵ Excluding capital and special purpose grants.

⁶ Sydney Observatory has had a 97% decline in visitation over five years. The Observatory did not re-open after Covid and was closed for re-wiring and other works from February 2022- July 2022. When it reopened it was only for booked tours at a cost of \$36 for adults and \$24 for children. The Observatory used to be open for general visitation with a program of changing exhibitions on astronomy.

⁷ Three permanent education staff; 2.6 casual positions.

⁸ Total government contributions for MAAS in 2022-23 were \$95,131m. In 2023-24 government contributions rise to \$101,213m, with the museum expected to raise just \$2,502m from the sale of goods and services. Meanwhile the government's funding for the Art Gallery of NSW drops from \$71,069m to \$40,632m with the gallery expected to raise \$39,458m from the sale of goods and services. NSW Budget Papers, Agency Financial Statements 2023-24, 8.1 Jobs and Tourism, p 8-22 and 8-10.

⁹ A staggering **decrease of 77.7%** in visitor numbers over the period from 2019 to 2022. These are not just the lowest visitor numbers since the PHM opened but the lowest since 1960. Underlining the scale of the PHM's disastrous collapse in visitor numbers, and the lack of appeal in the exhibition program, the old MAAS museum on Harris St had **193,438 visitors in 1961**. By contrast the Australian Museum's attendance was 510,000, up 10% on the previous year. For the visitor numbers from 1882-1981 see JL Willis *From Palace to Powerhouse, the first 100 years of Sydney's Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences*, 1982, Appendix V

¹⁰ The precipitate decline in visitor numbers and other metrics at the PHM relative to the Australian Museum's increase suggests this is not about the impact of Covid but about failures in programming and engagement. Visitors voted with their feet and stayed away. For the first time in the PHM's history there was no summer exhibition for children and families. When asked about this in consultations in 2022 the response was 'we're after a different demographic now'. In the 2022 People Matter survey just 30% of staff think senior managers 'communicate the importance of customers in our work'. This telling figure is 30% below the cluster and is a decline of 13% from last year. See Enterprise, Investment and Trade. <https://www.psc.nsw.gov.au/reports-and-data/people-matter-employee-survey/pmes-2022>

¹¹ The Sydney Observatory was closed in 2021-22 and will not re-open until 2023 prompting questions about whether the management is even interested in operating this historic site in the heart of Sydney's tourism precinct.

¹² Includes 99.2FTE working on the collections relocation and major projects, plus 17.6 on the Powerhouse Program.

¹³ Education numbers not supplied, impacted by Covid.

¹⁴ Staff numbers include 110.2 FTE working on collections digitisation and major projects, plus 15 on the Powerhouse Parramatta Program. Minus these positions and MAAS staff numbers are 164.2, the lowest since the PHM opened. Conservation staff numbers continued to shrink to just 5.2FTE, down from 17 in 2019 when the CEO was appointed. There are more than twice as many Senior Executive Staff as conservators at 12 positions.

¹⁵ Visitor numbers and revenue affected by Covid-19 shutdown from late March 2020.

https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp2021/Chronologies/COVID-19StateTerritoryGovernmentAnnouncements#_Toc52275795

¹⁶ Numbers include 93.6 FTE working on collections digitisation and major projects, plus 9FTE on the Powerhouse Parramatta Program. Minus these positions and MAAS staff numbers are actually **178.5**. Curatorial, collections and exhibitions staff numbers were 63, a drop of 21.8 FTE since 2018-19, representing a loss of 25%. Conservation staff dropped 10 positions from the previous year to 6.8FTE, a loss of 60%. Hiring may have been affected by Covid-19 and the museum's budget crisis.

¹⁷ *Star Wars Identities* exhibition attracted over 130,000 visitors, MAAS Annual Report 2018-19, p.8.

¹⁸ Lease of PHM Wran building space to UTS for lecture theatres from Jan 2018

¹⁹ Education numbers not supplied

²⁰ Days after plans were revealed to cut a fifth of the museum's staff, the director Rose Hiscock announces a strategic plan to double visitor numbers and focus on schools and education. How this was to happen when education staff were reduced to just 3 is not clear. This was one a number of rounds of redundancies from 2007-08 that cumulatively deskilled the curatorial and professional staff impacting exhibitions, visitation and education. Rose Hiscock also flagged a focus on fashion which has been a dead end for the PHM and a flop with visitors. The strength of the PHM's collection is dress, not fashion. The NGV's strategic fashion acquisitions listed in their annual reports are a stark contrast with MAAS fashion acquisitions, many of questionable significance.

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/powerhouse-museum-the-plan-to-woo-sydneysiders-back-20140502-zr32j.html>

²¹ Harry Potter exhibition

²² Education and program development, p.86, same for the years 2007-08 and 2006-07

²³ Dawn Casey started as director in March 2008.

²⁴ Education participation numbers include public programs

²⁵ Efficiency dividends introduced from 2006 at 1%, rising to 3% under the LNP.

²⁶ The drop in visitor numbers in 2012-13 came after the bump in attendance from the very successful Harry Potter exhibition. Most museums plan ahead for these anticipated drops.

²⁷ Winkworth, Labor's Ten Broken Promises on the Powerhouse Museum, Dec 2023

<https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/what-the-experts-say/winkworth-labors-ten-broken-promises-on-the-powerhouse-museum-and-more/>

²⁸ See broken promises six, seven and eight above

²⁹ See Deskillling the Specialist Curatorial Staff at the PHM <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/phm-being-destroyed-not-saved-2023-call-to-action/de-skilling-the-specialist-curatorial-staff-at-the-powerhouse-museum/>

Redundancy payments are made by the government not the museum, so there was no incentive for the management to avoid cutting experienced staff who cost more, but had higher redundancy payments.

³⁰ For a deeper explanation of the PHM's declining visitation, including gallery closures, and mismanagement, see Jennifer Sanders, submission 142h, Inquiry into Museums and Galleries, January 2019.

<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/submissions/62611/0142h%20Ms%20Jennifer%20Sanders.pdf>

³¹ Everyone who sits on a board, whether a major company, a small not-for-profit, or a cultural institution, knows that among the board's key responsibilities is setting the strategic direction of the organisation and monitoring delivery of the strategic plan against identified performance criteria, targets or KPIs.