

30 May, 2024

Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure

Powerhouse Museum "Revitalisation" – SSD 67588459.

Pyrmont Action Inc has commented at every opportunity provided for community input on proposals associated with the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo, since the previous Government announced the Museum would be transferred to Parramatta and the Ultimo site would be re-purposed. On each occasion, we have strongly opposed the plans put forward, including those from the current Government which went to the last election promising to Save the Powerhouse (Only Labor will save the Powerhouse Museum, media release 22 March, 2023). Yet the proponents of the destruction of this much-loved institution of local, national and international significance have ploughed on regardless, ignoring the advice of Museum and architectural experts and the views of thousands of Australians.

We are particularly disappointed in the failure of the current Minister, Mr John Graham, to support a museum of the highest excellence at the Ultimo site that had "a clear and distinct identity, and which built on its traditional focus on science, engineering, transport, design, the technical arts, and education". Instead, we are presented with a glorified function centre focussed on "creative industries" noting that there are 32 references in the EIS to "creative Industries" being the focus of the project. The Minister also stated that the government remained "committed to the Wran legacy and transparency". Yes, there have been opportunities for members of the public to meet with the Museum Director and senior staff who continue to make statements at odds with the plans now on exhibition but our pleas fall on deaf ears.

We wish to lodge our strong objections to what is currently proposed. We address the issues of concern below:

- 1.0 Premature Closure of Ultimo Powerhouse – In September, 2023, the new Minister for the Arts promised to keep the Museum open but it unjustifiably closed its doors on 5 February, 2024 and the Public Service Association was advised that none of the existing staff (and volunteers?) will be returned. Former Powerhouse Director, and the architect who designed the award-winning Wran extension advise that the repairs required can be carried out whilst the Museum remains open.

Recommendation 1 – The Powerhouse Museum should be re-opened and expert staff returned to keep it running while the essential repairs are undertaken.

- 1.0 Reduction in Gross Exhibition Floor Space – It is clear that there will be a 75% reduction in gross floor area devoted to exhibits. The complex opened in 1988 with a total of 20,000 sq m of exhibition space over 5 levels and 5 buildings. Works in 2011-12



generated a new 1,800 sq.m of temporary exhibition space for international blockbusters in the Wran building, moving the Museum's entry to the Galleria. The level 4 Switch House decorative arts exhibition space of 720 sq.m was converted to a café and shop, creating an additional 1,080 sq.m of exhibition floor space. As it stands today, almost emptied of the fascinating objects and exhibits, exhibition floor space now totals 21,080 sq.m. Yet the drawings (not to scale) now on exhibition depict only 5,100 sq m of floor space for exhibits in 3 huge, cavernous spaces which Museum sources have described as "not fit for purpose". Like the recently completed Museum of Sydney with its vast glass enclosed spaces, it is clear that the underlying purpose of the gutting of the internal mezzanine floors and other purpose-built internal structures at Ultimo is to enable the hiring of the spaces for commercial functions, not the provision of space for additional exhibits of science, engineering, transport, design, the technical arts and education".

Recommendation 2 – The existing purpose-built floor space and fit out of the Powerhouse Museum must remain in place to enable display of objects previously housed in the complex and temporary technological sciences and engineering displays.

- 2.0 Heritage - The NSW Heritage Council is currently assessing all three components of the existing PH Museum – the former power station, the 1988 Wran extension and the Harwood building - for heritage designation. This listing has long been sought by those who worked in and loved the original Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo. It is noteworthy that the plans on exhibition do not include the Harwood Building which provided back-of-house facilities, now proposed to take up valuable space in the other two buildings. It is noteworthy that the Harwood Building has a larger and more functional loading dock, obviating the need for such within the other two components of the Museum. As it stands, the documents on exhibition do not comply with the 2023 *Guidelines for Preparing A Statement of Heritage Impact* and are incomplete in their assessment of heritage significance and impact.

Recommendation 3 – We support the heritage listing of the 3 buildings comprising the Powerhouse complex, noting that Option 3 in the EIS proposes refurbishment of the existing buildings which is in line with the Government's promise of a heritage revitalisation, thus saving the Wran Building and fulfilling the Museum's conservation obligations without compromising its capacity to exhibit its collections.

- 3.0 Education Facilities – An important role of the Powerhouse Museum is education. The latest National Assessment Program report in science literacy, shows the proportion of students meeting the expected standard for science has flat-lined over the past two decades with only 57 per cent of year 6 students hitting the science proficiency benchmark (SMH 29/5/24, p9). The number of children choosing to study STEM subjects is decreasing every year yet the NSW Creative Communities Policy makes no mention of STEM engagement.

The proposed design pays very little attention to spaces designed for children. The theatres that currently exist are being removed in favour of a huge high ceiling, flat



floored auditorium with moveable furniture. This fails to provide a conducive space for children to learn, focus and remain engaged. Whilst the design document states that “dedicated spaces designed for the museum’s learning programs would be provided, along with community spaces” there are no such appropriate spaces in the proposed design. Children need contained spaces where they can make noise and mess and play without impacting on other visitors to the Museum.

It is estimated that dedicated Education space provided in the new plans will shrink by more than 50% and the 3 theatres currently provided in the Museum will be reduced to one. The proposal outlines the demolition of exhibition spaces including Cyber Worlds, Experimentations, Space, Ecologic, all the social history and Australian community galleries, two levels of Switch House Galleries for applied arts, design, indigenous design, kids and very popular family exhibitions like Circus and the Wiggles. Perhaps the most egregious loss will be the removal of the *Steam Revolution* exhibition with Australia’s finest collection of steam engines working under live steam in the Engine House which will be entirely erased and largely demolished.

The Powerhouse Museum website states that Powerhouse Parramatta will be a place where “community, industry and collection will intersect to create a dynamic culturally engaged program” and Powerhouse Ultimo will “present exclusive international exhibitions” and “enable Powerhouse to expand education programming that supports the applied arts and sciences and creative industries”. If Powerhouse Ultimo’s vision is to be central to its education program and central to hosting major and exclusive international exhibitions, this design proposal fails in both endeavours.

We also note the provision of student accommodation within the proposal. This is a completely unwarranted inclusion within a Museum which, over many years has attracted students from near and far with accommodation provided by nearby Youth hostels.

Recommendation 4 – The existing learning spaces for children must be retained and enhanced; the Steam Revolution exhibition must be retained with the steam engines working under live steam in the Engine House; have relevance to its location (ie Innovation Corridor); and student accommodation should not be included in the project.

- 4.0 Harris Street Frontage – We strongly object to the proposed treatment of the Harris Street frontage. The new brick building on Harris Street obstructs and obscures any appreciation of the award-winning Wran building and the design and scale of the 19C Ultimo Power Station. The drawings suggest that the windows of the Wran Building are to be faced with bricks or brick sheeting. This would destroy the exterior fabric of the Wran Building and Galleria. The Harris Street forecourt will be destroyed as more than half of it is to be covered by a new building. There is little open space in Ultimo, with very tall building to the South, and the forecourt should be retained as public open space, not enclosed, with an entry to the Museum, in addition to that proposed next to the Goods Line to the East. If the Harwood Building is included within the total Museum complex, there will be no need for an entry to a Loading Dock within the former power station/Wran building structures.



Recommendation 5 – The Harris St frontage of the Wran Building should be retained as originally designed; the Harris Street forecourt should remain as public open space, free of any structures along Harris Street; the Loading Dock should remain in the Harwood Building.

- 5.0 Exhibits – The closure of the Powerhouse Museum on 5 February, 2024 saw the removal of most of the exhibits from the site, including and now reside at Castle Hill, inaccessible by public transport, with little parking for those wishing to view them. It appears that current plans are that most of them will never grace the Ultimo Powerhouse in the future. Many of these exhibits, donated by people on the basis that they would remain on view, or available at the Ultimo Museum campus will never again be on view in Ultimo .

One such exhibition was that associated with the Pyrmont sandstone quarries which industry saw many people employed extracting this valuable resource from 3 quarries located in Pyrmont to grace significant buildings eg University of Sydney quadrangle, the GPO and the Sydney Town Hall. A number of items were donated to this exhibition, which was commemorated by the book *Paradise Purgatory Hell Hole* by Robert Irving, and visitors, including many school groups, were able to combine a visit to the Museum with a visit to the quarry sites, still accessible to the public. This exhibition would have little or no relevance to people visiting Castle Hill or the yet to be completed Parramatta Powerhouse, both of which should be relevant to, and have a focus on industries associated with Western Sydney, as sought by members of those communities.

It should also be noted that the Ultimo Powerhouse Museum is located in the heart of the Innovation Corridor in close proximity to UTS, University of Sydney, Sydney Institute of Technology and Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, not to mention innovative companies such as Atlassian whose research and work should be celebrated and interpreted at Ultimo Powerhouse.

Recommendation 5 – The exhibits removed from the Ultimo Powerhouse Museum should be returned to Ultimo and be available to be viewed by keeping the institution open whilst essential repairs are undertaken.

- 6.0 Cost – The proposed gutting of the existing Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo has been estimated to cost \$350 million yet only \$250 million is included in the forward estimates, with the remaining funding to be raised by donations. It is noted that UTS has committed \$10M for education programs. Museum and architectural experts have indicated that the necessary repairs to the existing structures and the retention of the interior lay out would cost significantly less, would not require the closure of the Museum, and take far less time to complete, noting that budget papers show that the current proposal would keep it closed for ten years.

Recommendation 6.0 – Re-open the Ultimo Powerhouse Museum; return exhibits and experienced and expert curatorial staff to the institution; undertake necessary repairs to the fabric of the structures; retain the internal layout and fittings; and save NSW



taxpayers millions of dollars of unnecessary expenditure, as well as providing on-going access to this world class institution.

We deplore the closure of our beloved Ultimo Powerhouse, the gutting of its exhibits, the prospect of it being turned into yet another function centre and the unnecessary waste of public money on a project of little educational or general public interest or relevance. We ask that the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure reject the DA in toto. The signs on the hoarding call the proposal "heritage revitalisation" but the EIS delivers heritage demolition. It is Willow Grove all over again. The Department of Planning and the Government must listen to the thousands of voices demanding the return of the exhibits which have inspired and been enjoyed by so many who appreciate its history, relevance and location in Ultimo and consult with experts with relevant museum experience to come up with a new plan to repair and freshen the existing structures and layout at a greatly reduced cost.

Ken Loudon, Deputy Convenor
Elizabeth Elenius, Secretary

