

Elizabeth Elenius

To Transport, Heritage and Planning Committee, 9 Dec 2014

Pymont Action has been opposing, initially, the proposed closure of the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo, and all subsequent proposals presented since which, essentially, will turn the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS) into a glorified function centre displaying a few large objects as a backdrop. In doing so, we will be left with 3 large, cavernous spaces, with 75% of exhibition and internal movement space removed.

We thank the Council for commissioning the heritage report which came about as a result of a resolution put by Cllr Linda Scott in May 2023 which called for the Lord Mayor to congratulate the Minister for Arts on his commitment to ending secrecy and lack of transparency re the PHM plans; and requesting him to take steps to ensure the heritage value of the site is protected and respected.

As described in the Chen report, the whole concept of retaining and transforming the first power station constructed in NSW was brilliant. The Powerhouse Museum showcased early Australian technology that powered the first steam trams which ran up Harris Street. The Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo, including the Harwood building is in context with Ultimo's history. The name has no relevance to the Parramatta facility. And please note that the Government no longer attaches the word "Museum" when referring to either projects.

The Chen report makes it clear that the Powerhouse Museum complex is considered "a landmark of adaptive re-use with a purpose – as the headquarters for the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences". In providing background, the report extolls the talents of the Principal Architect, Lionel Glendenning who brought in Richard Johnson (DCM) to achieve an "exemplary work of design collaboration" typical of Postmodern architecture. Whilst Glendenning focussed on the old and new structures, Johnson designed the interiors, creating the internal experience of the museum being like that of a city, with exhibition spaces linked by pathways, always within view of one of the major large exhibits to provide wayfinding. The PHM was a popular success having hosted approximately 21 million in-person visitors between March 1988 and its closure in February, 2024. The report provides an assessment of whether and how the PHM complex (including the former Power House, the Harwood Building and the modern Wran extension) meets 7 criteria which I'll now summarise.

(Because of time constraints I didn't spell out in detail what the report actually said but this is what I would have said if time permitted.)

Criterion “a” considers whether an item is important in the course, or pattern, of NSW’s cultural or natural history of the local area. The report finds that the PHM complex (including the Award-winning Postmodern Wran extension) satisfies this criterion.

Criterion “b” considers whether the PHM complex satisfies Historical association at the local (Sydney) level, ie if it has a strong or special association with the life of a person or group of importance in NSW’ cultural or natural environment and finds that it does.

Criterion “c” The report finds that the aesthetic characteristics and/or high degree of creative or technical achievement have been achieved at the local level thus meeting this criterion.

Criterion “d” The report finds that the item has strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group at the local level, thus satisfying this criterion.

Criterion “e” an item has potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of NSW’ or local cultural or natural history was found not to satisfy the threshold at State level, requiring further investigation.

Criterion “f” an item possesses uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of NSW’ or local cultural or natural history was not considered to be satisfied at the local level and needs more studies.

Criterion “g” an item is important in demonstrating principal characteristics of a class of NSW’ cultural or natural places; or cultural or natural environment or such classes at a local level elicited the comment in the report that the PHM’s cultural heritage significance is derived from criteria “a” and “b”, not “g”.

On the basis of this report, we strongly urge the Council to reject the proposed demolition of part of the Wran building and removal of internal exhibition and public movement floor spaces and, instead, recommend refurbishment and repairs (from recent past neglect) of the existing configuration of the Powerhouse Museum complex. Not only will the Government’s proposal destroy its heritage, it is also very expensive (on top of the huge cost of the facility at Parramatta). Therefore, we need an urgent and strong public statement from the Lord Mayor rejecting the Government’s plan. By October, 2025, it is highly likely that the demolition will be a *fait accompli* when the process of amending the LEP 2012 is completed.

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