

Powerhouse Museum Alliance

10 July 2023

The Hon. John Graham, MLC
Minister for the Arts
Parliament House
Macquarie St
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Minister,

The Powerhouse Museum Alliance (PMA) strongly objects to the ongoing work on the 'Powerhouse Ultimo Renewal' project, entailing secret plans to dismember the capacity, operations, staffing, heritage assets, and the historic mission of the Powerhouse Museum. Labor hasn't kept the commitments it made to supporters of the Powerhouse Museum before the election. We are disappointed that the 'Powerhouse Ultimo Renewal' plans are proceeding to submission of the SSD/DA EIS, as if there was no change of government in March 2023. This scheme will never have community consent given it is based on a discredited conservation management plan, secret design briefs and the eviction of the PHM's collections. We are particularly concerned about the risks to the museum's internationally significant transport and engineering objects, iconic collections for which the museum was purpose designed. These are an integral part of the significance of the museum as an industrial heritage and transport history site. They must remain *in situ*.

Following the statement you issued before the March election under the heading ***Only Labor will save The Powerhouse Museum***, the community expected that that the SSD Stage 2 design work would be cancelled or paused, that the design briefs and business case would be made public, that the Powerhouse Museum would retain its name, brand and mission, and that work on the collection eviction, demolition and commercialisation of the former PHM would be halted. **Three months on, none of these commitments have been kept.** The 'Powerhouse Ultimo Renewal' is listed on the Infrastructure NSW website as one of the Labor government's state significant projects at a ridiculous cost of \$500 million. <https://www.infrastructure.nsw.gov.au/projects-nsw/powerhouse-ultimo-renewal/>

For the past six years Labor opposed the Liberal government's destructive plans for the 'move' of the Powerhouse Museum and the dismemberment, asset stripping, collection eviction, commercialisation and brand destruction of the PHM. **It is inexplicable that the Minns Labor government would allow any version of the discredited 'Powerhouse Ultimo Renewal' scheme to go on public exhibition as an SSD/DA EIS.** Of 91 individual submissions to the concept SSD/ EIS there were 85 objections and just two submissions in support of the scheme. The SSD concept approval was for a fashion, design and creative industries facility, which is entirely at odds with the significance of the PHM and its mission as a museum of applied arts and sciences. We are advised the lodgement of the 'Ultimo Renewal' SSD DA/ EIS is imminent. Heritage NSW has again deferred consideration of the State Heritage listing of the whole PHM site so as not to stymie the development plans for the demolition of the Wran building and the erasure of all trace of the 1988 Powerhouse Museum design and heritage adaptation.

The 'Powerhouse Ultimo Renewal' SSD is the same scheme detailed in the 2018 business case, led by the same team appointed by former Arts Minister Don Harwin, with the MAAS Trust led by Peter Collins. Their task was and still is the secret downsizing of the PHM, changing the museum's mission and

purpose to a creative industries precinct with a focus on fashion and design. A once popular family museum for the people of NSW will be emptied of its collections and turned into a venue hire and entertainment business hosting occasional exhibitions. No museum anywhere in the world operates like this. The damage to the Catalina flying boat shows that this concept is a risk to collections held in trust for current and future generations. There was no policy process to justify these plans that underpin the secret business case. Eight and half years of community objections have been ignored.

If Labor allows the LNP's 'Ultimo Renewal' scheme to go on public exhibition as an SSD DA/EIS it will carry the implicit approval of the Minns government. **This will lead to a complete loss of confidence in Labor's promise of transparency, and its commitment to saving The Powerhouse Museum.** The project will be assessed as a building development without considering the impact on the museum and its audiences. The PHM brand has already disappeared, courtesy of a \$1.58m branding strategy to delete the museum word from the Powerhouse Museum's internationally recognised brand. 'Powerhouse' can be anything, any place and any activity now.

Is Labor really going to deliver the Baird/ Berejiklian Powerhouse Museum demolition scheme, a notorious boondoggle that has no credibility in the community? Does the Minns government want to own the public odium of the museum's closure at the end of the year? This will set off a storm of controversy about the wasteful demolition of a Sulman award winning museum that is just 35 years old. Labor will inevitably wear the opprobrium of the eviction of the PHM's internationally significant engineering and transport collections from their purpose designed buildings and exhibition settings; the rip-off of the museum's state of the art collection facilities in the Harwood building; the erasure of the PHM's brand; and the destruction of the people's museum - a Labor cultural landmark. Not to mention the waste and opportunity cost of this expenditure in the absence of a museum strategy for NSW.

The PMA is deeply concerned at the culture of secrecy fostered by MAAS and Create NSW. This includes the refusal to release the design briefs for the PHM development, and the refusal of GIPA applications for records that have been routinely released by previous administrations. Any plans for a public museum, endowed by generations of NSW taxpayers, should be in the public domain and be the focus of genuine consultation, including the design briefs and business cases - with redactions where necessary. I note the head of Create NSW denied in the 5 September 2022 budget estimates that there was another conservation management plan (CMP) for the Powerhouse Museum, when just months earlier she terminated Alan Croker's contract after he delivered the draft CMP. We believe this was because his assessment of the high significance of the Powerhouse Museum was inconsistent with their development ambitions for the PHM site.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/apr/25/revealed-the-buried-powerhouse-museum-report-that-could-have-stopped-500m-redevelopment>

In the 100 days since Labor was elected, MAAS and Create NSW have continued to misrepresent the intent and impact of the 'Ultimo Renewal' project. In the past month they have advertised for a PR person to help spin the discredited PHM demolition/ redevelopment plans, wasting more public money. The secret design brief for the 'Ultimo Renewal' calls for multi-purpose 'presentation spaces' to facilitate commercial hire and events. Only three large objects will be left marooned in the former PHM's exhibition spaces so as not to impede the venue hire business with the clutter of the museum's collection. It is claimed the development will enlarge and improve the museum's exhibition spaces, when it will result in **less than half the 20,000smq of purpose-designed, dedicated exhibition galleries** delivered in Lionel Glendenning's design for the PHM. It is claimed there will be a new public domain when the 'Ultimo Renewal' concept plans reduce the museum's current public domain by nearly half with the monster building on the Harris St frontage.

The PHM has a further 11-12,000sqm of public and education spaces, but the 'Renewal' plans will deliver only 5,000sqm. The gross floor area of the PHM including the Harwood building is 42,594sqm. These figures are from the government's own documents, which incidentally say the buildings are in generally good condition. Taxpayers are slugged a double hit, funding the new J Store at Castle Hill, *and* funding new exhibition handling facilities in the former Powerhouse Museum to replace the PHM's state-of-the-art collection storage and exhibition facilities just 50 metres away in the Harwood building. The waste in this scheme is worthy of a Utopia script.

This is the only museum project anywhere in the world to deliver inferior, less accessible and less functional exhibition and collection facilities to what the museum already owns in the PHM and the Harwood building. There won't be a museum left at Ultimo in name or purpose because the Baird Berejiklian Powerhouse Parramatta scheme was always predicated on appropriating the PHM's assets, staffing and recurrent budget for an entirely different kind of facility, a commercially focussed entertainment and function centre at Parramatta, based on a confected business case that has less credibility than Darryl Maguire's clay target shooting facility at Wagga.* Far from complementing the Parramatta development, the Powerhouse Ultimo plans are part and parcel of the same commercial model and business case which claims the former museum can generate \$38.8m per annum in commercial revenue. This is \$10m per annum more than Australia's most popular museum, the National Gallery of Victoria, generates across its two sites in central Melbourne. It is a fantasy.

The plans to repurpose the Powerhouse Museum as a creative industries precinct with some fashion and design displays are not aligned with audiences or cultural tourism interests. The fashion and design focus is a turn off for families. The 'Ultimo Renewal' scheme is an extravagant plan for smaller audiences and education outcomes. This is already evident in the last MAAS annual report, where the PHM recorded its lowest visitor numbers since 1960; and a 73.8% decline in education numbers since 2019 when the current CEO started. <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/museum-plans-and-problems-into-2023/decline-failure-and-irrelevance-now-on-exhibition-at-the-powerhouse-museum/> It's a pitiful output for a museum in receipt of \$61.8m in recurrent funding. (Based on current performance it's difficult to understand why the management team at MAAS is being handed two concurrent capital projects worth \$1.5 billion.) The plans for a creative industries, fashion and design focus in the former PHM are inconsistent with the evolution of the precinct as a tech hub, and with the museum's history in Ultimo, where science, technology, transport, engineering and trades training have been part of the museum's exhibition and education programs since 1893.

Furthermore, figures from Destination NSW show that the top interest of high value, long stay international cultural tourists is visiting history/ heritage buildings, sites and monuments at 67%, followed by visiting museums or art galleries at 56%. Just 9% of international tourists are interested in visiting artist studios, and only 3% of domestic visitors. Still Create NSW is pushing the demolition of Sydney's major heritage museum. It makes no sense to downsize what was a popular and accessible family museum into a creative industries precinct when such a precinct could be accommodated at much lower cost as part of the Eveleigh North development, co-located with Carriageworks. <https://www.destinationnsw.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/cultural-and-heritage-tourism-to-nsw-snapshot-ye-de-2019.pdf> Sydney likes to brag it is a global city, but it ranks a lowly 41 out of 48 global cities for the number of museums. **No other global city has waged such a long and egregious campaign to destroy one of its major cultural institutions.**

The PMA has lost confidence in the competence and leadership of MAAS. So have the staff, judging by recent People Matter Employee surveys which are going from bad to worse. It is clear the Powerhouse Museum can't be saved or renewed under the current management. Labor should separate the PHM

from the Parramatta development and create a new cultural institution for Western Sydney with a distinctive identity and its own board and staff – ideally drawn from the talent pool of communities in Western Sydney. The new arts centre should be able to access the collections of all the state cultural institutions. This re-set would break the toxic legacy of Willow Grove's demolition and enhance Labor's record as the builder of cultural institutions in Western Sydney (Riverside Theatres, Casula Powerhouse, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Penrith/ Lewers Regional Gallery and the Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre).

For the last eight and half years the Powerhouse Museum has been the focus of an unprecedented, organised cultural vendetta to erase and demolish an historic state museum housed in purpose designed facilities that are just 35 years old. The LNP government and business lobbyists colluded on secret plans for the PHM's eviction and demolition, the removal of the collections to distant and inferior facilities at Castle Hill, and the appropriation of the museum's property for purposes unrelated to the museum's Act. From July 2020 the community and museum experts were shamefully gas lighted by politicians and public servants when they announced the PHM was saved and would be renewed. The museum was never saved. Fake consultations were held on the museum's 'renewal' while consultants and public servants worked in secret on plans to erase all trace of the Powerhouse Museum under the guise of the \$500m 'Ultimo Renewal' scheme. It's the same plan from the 2018 business case with a bigger price tag. **It is time Labor put a definitive end to this appalling cultural fiasco.**

The community will not accept any version of the discredited 'Powerhouse Ultimo Renewal' SSD, based on secret design briefs and business cases. The Alan Croker/ Design 5 CMP should be completed, in consultation with the PHM's architect Lionel Glendenning. This should form the basis for a staged program of maintenance, conservation and restoration, in tandem with renewal of the museum's exhibitions. A site masterplan should include improved wayfinding and entry from the Goods Line, as well as plans to animate the museum's three public domains. The whole PHM site must be protected by state heritage listing. The secret deal to hand the Harwood building to UTS must be scrapped. The Harwood building must be reinstated as the museum's collection storage, research and workshop facilities, enhancing access to the collections, education and trades training opportunities. The PHM's expert curatorial and education staff must be rebuilt under competent museum leadership, and museum jobs retained at Ultimo. Happy to discuss and develop a plan for your consideration.

Yours sincerely,



Kylie Winkworth, Jennifer Sanders

* The Australian Clay Target Association's shooting facility cum conference centre at Wagga raised red flags for public servants with a **negative Benefit Cost Ratio of 0.88**. The first Parramatta Powerhouse business case had a **negative BCR of 0.435**, A second business case was commissioned to push the **BCR up to a wafer thin 1.02**. The Minns government should be sceptical of the assumptions and numbers in the one billion dollar Parramatta Powerhouse development + \$500m for the misnamed Ultimo Renewal.

About the Powerhouse Museum Alliance (PMA)

The PMA represents eminent museum, collection and heritage experts, former trustees, Life Fellows and donors to the Powerhouse Museum. **The PMA has always supported a new museum for Parramatta, based on transparent consultation and community cultural aspirations.** Since 2014 the PMA has called for a museum strategy for NSW to guide policy and investment in museums in Western Sydney, regional NSW and central Sydney. <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/>