

TRUST ACTION

Save the Powerhouse Museum!

► BY ANGELA LE SUEUR, EDITOR

The NSW National Trust is dismayed by the recent total blackflip from what seemed for a short while to be a rethink of the proposal to move Sydney's Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo to Western Sydney. Don Harwin, Minister for the Arts, announced in May that he was reconsidering the move, but would not be drawn on the specifics. In an announcement on 6 June, he fronted a parliamentary committee and reiterated the government's commitment to a 'new, world-class museum at Parramatta'. He declined to comment on which museum items would move or stay, or to reveal any plans for the Ultimo site.

The National Trust encourages the creation of a new museum at Parramatta, but one which reflects that city's own unique indigenous, colonial and multi-cultural heritage and which is not at the expense of the Powerhouse and all it means for Sydney.



18432 Steam engine, double-acting beam type, cast iron / wrought iron, made by Boulton and Watt, Birmingham, England, 1785, used at Whitbread's Brewery, London, England, 1785-1887. Collection: Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences. Photo: Peter Garrett.

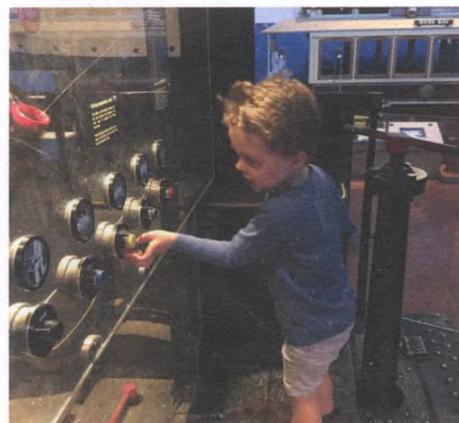
Backed by a huge and growing groundswell of support from heritage professionals, curators and the community at large, the Trust is determined to do everything in its power to prevent the further decimation of the Powerhouse collection (it is believed that a considerable number of items – enough to stock a new Parramatta museum – are already housed at the Discovery Centre in Castle Hill) and the inevitable consequences for the significant Ultimo buildings and their central Sydney site.

The proposal

The Powerhouse Museum is part of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS) group, established in 1879, which currently includes the Powerhouse Museum, Discovery Centre and Sydney Observatory. Carefully conserved, maintained and curated, the trilogy provides a resource which goes way beyond the traditional concept of 'museum', to provide exhilarating and inspiring 'hands on' experiences of the technological and artistic innovations that spearheaded the growth of Australian industry and lifestyles enjoyed today.

The decision to move most of the Powerhouse Museum collection to Parramatta was announced in February 2015 by then NSW Premier, Mike Baird, as part of a \$30m package to redefine Parramatta as an 'arts and cultural' centre and boost tourism. It includes a boost to artists and organisations across Western Sydney.

The site chosen for the new museum, to be called the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, is the former David Jones carpark on the banks of the Parramatta River. Light rail connections are to be built as part of a new transport plan for Parramatta to make the museum easily accessible. The site is flood prone, but engineers are confident that this can be overcome – albeit at a cost! Construction is proposed to start in 2018 and end in 2022, creating up to 3200 new jobs.



Learning is fun. The Powerhouse is Harry Gjessing's favourite place. Photo: Anna le Sueur

The Devil in the detail!

While the concept of creating a museum along the lines of the Powerhouse in the Western Sydney city has been generally welcomed, the proposal to move the existing museum from Ultimo is not.

The cost factor alone! Detailed costings reveal an alarming blow-out over initial estimates. A Parliamentary enquiry in February 2017 was told that the construction of a new museum would cost up to \$800m on top of the site cost of \$150m. Subsequent findings (reported by Andrew Taylor, SMH Feb 2017) indicated that the cost of relocation could blow out to almost \$2 billion. This is ten times more than the estimated sale price of Ultimo site currently occupied by the Powerhouse.

The collections. Then there are the costs of moving more than 500,000 items in the collection, amassed over 135 years. They include the priceless 1785 Boulton and Watt steam engine, and locomotive no 1, the foundation object for public transport in NSW. To move these and their like would be a logistical and financial nightmare with a high likelihood of irreversible damage. Historians and curators are concerned about the secrecy surrounding

decisions about the collection and what is to be moved – possibly because decision makers are beginning to realise the full scope of the implications.

The impressive spaces of the former turbine and boiler halls are perfect spaces to allow full appreciation of the sheer size, engineering and imaginative scope of the engines, suspended planes and other similar items in the collection. Then there are the spaces created for delicate displays of artistic and cultural innovation, alongside changing exhibitions and exciting full-on experiences which invite experimentation, pushing the boundaries, flights of imagination.

Highly significant buildings. There are three major buildings on the Ultimo site: the Harwood Building, or stage 1 in the former Ultimo Tram Depot, the restored 1899 Ultimo Power House, built to power Sydney's tram network – and the new Wran building fronting Harris Street, the design for which won architect Lionel Glendinning the 1988 Sulman Award for architectural excellence. Standing on a valuable CBD site, all will be under threat of demolition should the collections be dispersed.

Highly valued by the public. Rather than being a museum in decline, figures from 2015–6 show that visitation increased by 33% over the previous year with almost 570,000 people visiting the Powerhouse alone. Visitors today include school tours from far and wide, Sydney-siders who visit over and over again to view the ever-changing collections and unique



Bird II', VH-ASA, metal / fabric / glass / bakelite, made by Boeing Aircraft of Canada Limited, Vancouver, Canada, 1944, flown on pioneering flight Australia-Chile, by P G Taylor, 1951 in situ, Stage 2, Transport gallery
Collection: Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences. Photo: Ryan Hernandez

permanent exhibits, and tourists who want to absorb this aspect of our national culture. To date, over 11,000 members of the public have signed a petition against the move and numbers are increasing.

History of the Powerhouse

The origins of the Powerhouse Museum date from 1879 when the Sydney International Museum was held in the Garden Palace, a purpose-built exhibition building located in the grounds of the Royal Botanic Gardens. At the conclusion of the exhibition, it was intended to select the best exhibits showcasing the latest industrial, construction and design innovations for permanent exhibition in a new museum, within the Garden Palace.

Fire swept through the building in September 1882 before the museum could be opened. The buildings and collections were gone except for one carved, graphite Ceylonese elephant. Undaunted, curator Joseph Henry Maiden took the elephant and set about rebuilding the collection.

During its first decade it was housed in a large tin shed in Sydney's Domain, a facility it shared with the Sydney Hospital Morgue. Ambiance was not ideal, and in 1893 the museum was moved to Harris Street, adjacent to the Sydney Technical College whose students benefited from the technical and scientific expertise on display.

The next and final move was to the then decrepit Ultimo Power Station which was opened in 1900. It had been built to supply

electricity for the first major tramway in Australia and for the conversion of other tramways to electric traction, an advancement which was a significant factor in the growth of suburban Sydney. It operated as such for some 60 years.

From the late 19th to the mid 20th century, the Power Station housed the most important innovations in steam-electric generation and, following its first expansion phase, was the largest and most powerful electricity generating unit in the southern hemisphere. When installed, the overhead travelling cranes were the most modern of their type in the world, and are now rare. The Ultimo Power Station engine hall (1905) is incorporated into the Powerhouse Museum as the *Steaming* exhibition.

The Powerhouse Museum as it is today was opened in 1988, Australia's Bicentenary, a celebration of Australia's advancement as a nation. It evolved and grew from a site and an ethos which played a leading role in the growth of modern Sydney and beyond. It encapsulates the raw energy and sophisticated innovation of Australia now, while also looking forward in ways that catch and inspire the imagination of people of all ages. It cannot be allowed to fade.

RESOURCES

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www.cityofParramatta.com.au



7949 Locomotive, steam, No. 1, full size, 0–4–2, hauled the first passenger train in New South Wales in 1855, designed by James McConnell, made by Robert Stephenson and Company, Newcastle-on-Tyne, England, 1854, used by New South Wales Government Railways. Collection: Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences. Photo: Jean-Francois Lanzarone