

## THE “STEM” ORTHODOXY AND THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM

The following is the main content of a letter sent last month to the Minister for Education, Hon. Rob Stokes, by a former Powerhouse Museum curator. It addresses the potential loss of the Powerhouse Museum, the ideal cultural institution to address in its exhibitions and programs *and in its current location at Ultimo* – themes relating to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

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I was prompted to write to you after hearing your most interesting lecture at Queenwood school on Wednesday 21 March, “Challenging the STEM orthodoxy”. The central premise of your talk – the symbiotic relationship between the arts and the sciences – strongly resonates with my training and career. I wish to draw your attention to an almost lost opportunity to rescue one of the most effective educational facilities to champion this cause – the Powerhouse Museum.

During the development of Powerhouse Museum in the 1980s, the breadth and depth of the Museum’s magnificent collections was a stimulus for the generation of engaging exhibitions and public programs that demonstrated the integral nature of the applied arts, sciences, technology, industry, engineering and mathematics.

The earliest form of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences was founded in Sydney in 1880 as a unique blend of London’s “South Kensington” model of fine arts (the Victoria and Albert Museum) and science and technology (the Science and Industry Museum). When it opened in 1988, the Powerhouse Museum continued this highly successful confluence of disciplines, adding social history to the mix, a kind of mortar between the bricks of the other major themes.

Until recent years, the Museum had been a leading institution internationally in all these fields, but its reputation has been steadily decreasing, initially with funding cuts and the insidious “efficiency dividends”, then the loss without replacement of a significant number of specialist curators, then the abandonment of social history and more recently with the appointment of senior managers who lack the combination of knowledge and skills, notably in STEM fields, that engenders the cross-disciplinary approach. A rare exception to this trend was the *Out of Hand* exhibition (2016), which explored the increasingly important role of digital manufacture in contemporary art, science, fashion, design and architecture in the light of ever-evolving technologies.

With the Government’s ill-advised decision in 2015 to “relocate” the Powerhouse Museum, what could have been a visionary project to build a new museum at Parramatta has turned into an unaffordable and unachievable folly. Surely the logical and intuitive way forward was to build a new museum appropriate to the assessed needs and desires of the people of Western Sydney and to its distinctive history and culture.

In a weakened state, the Museum has been vulnerable. Its problems were rationalised by Infrastructure NSW in 2014 as being largely caused by its “constrained” site and location, including a baffling assertion that its Ultimo home of 120 years was now “remote” from the CBD.

Over its long history in Ultimo, the Museum has formed and nurtured deep and mutually productive relationships with kindred institutions in the precinct. It has become an integral part of its urban landscape.

If one understands the nature of established museums, their sense of place alone ensures that they cannot be successfully transplanted. Moreover, the former Ultimo Power House buildings are an ideal complement to the historical engineering and technology exhibits that provide the gravitas for their display environment.

The current momentum of the government's program has been checked by unsurprising and strident opposition from the museum industry, the news media and the community at large. What in simple terms is a lack of process has effectively destroyed the chance of the Powerhouse Museum regaining its position as a world-leading institution. There will be no compensation at Parramatta, where the illogically renamed "Powerhouse Museum" project will be compromised by a flood prone site, soaring cost estimates and the unwelcome but apparently imperative intrusion of commercial and residential occupants *in the same building*. In the context of an integrated approach to the promotion of STEM, the government's policy direction has had the (perhaps) unintended effect of speeding the process of decay of the Museum's capability as a leading player in inter-disciplinary education in NSW.

But all is not lost. There is still time to redress the situation so that the Museum can regain its unique position, for sound educational reasons alone. I urge you to reconsider your support for the government's current policy to relocate the Powerhouse Museum away from its established home in Ultimo. This fine institution's reputation for excellence in research, collections and exhibitions is underpinned by its unique combination of collecting fields. Restored to its rightful place as a leading international museum, few, if any, institutions would be better placed than the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences to address one of the prime concerns of your paper, namely, "to challenge the STEM orthodoxy in Australian education".

Thank you for your attention to this matter.