

CITY HUB

New Powerhouse fizzles

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[Photo: The winning design for the new Powerhouse Museum in Parramatta, described as a “monstrosity on stilts” Photo supplied.]

by ALEC SMART

On 17 Dec the winning architectural design was revealed for the new Powerhouse Museum building in Parramatta. French-Japanese firm Moreau Kusunoki and Australian company Genton were chosen following an international design competition that received more than 74 submissions from 20 countries.

Making the announcement, Minister for the Arts Don Harwin said: “We are thrilled to be appointing Moreau Kusunoki and Genton to design the new Powerhouse Museum. Their design is a bold visualisation of how contemporary cultural institutions can provide the inspiration, education and enjoyment that today’s audiences need and expect.

“The relocated Powerhouse Museum represents the largest investment in arts and culture infrastructure since the Sydney Opera House. Once this museum is built – there simply will not be another building like it in Australia – it will be a leading cultural institution in the South Pacific.”

The winners responded: “We envisage the new Powerhouse Museum as a hyper-platform, a building with many functions and limitless potential. The building will tread lightly on the site, with the architecture opening up towards the river....”

Rumpled stilts skin

As well as display rooms and a 20 metre high exhibition gallery, the building will also incorporate 60 studio residences available to scientists, researchers and students for short-term accommodation. However, the site chosen to relocate the museum from Ultimo will necessitate bulldozing two heritage-listed buildings: St George’s Terraces and Willow Grove, the latter an 1870s-built former maternity hospital.

Walt Secord, Labor’s arts spokesperson, claimed Premier Gladys Berejiklian had committed to protecting the heritage buildings earlier this year. He also took offence to the latticework aesthetics of the winning design, describing it as a “monstrosity on stilts”.

The use of stilts is a grim irony: the new site is vulnerable to flooding from the adjacent Parramatta River. Expert hydrologist John Macintosh, who advised the 2015 Grantham Floods Commission of Inquiry into the Queensland catastrophe in which 12 people drowned, cautioned in April 2018 that flood vulnerability on the new site could result in deaths and irreparably damaged exhibits.

“My primary concern is for public safety,” he warned. “They’re locating a building, which is of interest to the public, a tourist attraction, in a floodplain. The intention is to attract people there, which, when it floods, is a hazardous location to such an extent that people could die.”

The entire museum site, close to the Parramatta Wharf where the Charles Street Weir provides a concrete barrier between incoming tidal waters and fresh water flowing downstream, is vulnerable to flooding. Combinations of high tide and intensive rain often swamp the region with several metres of surging floodwaters that submerge the weir and inundate surrounding buildings.

In April 2018, Anne Schofield AM, jewellery dealer and historian and one of Australia’s best-known experts on vintage clothing and antique jewels, voiced her concerns about the Parramatta site. Schofield, who has donated hundreds of jewels and costumes to the Powerhouse collection, was reportedly so worried about the risk of floods and damp at the new location she announced her intent to request the return of her donations.

Schofield told ABC News: “I don’t want them to go to Parramatta frankly. I’d like to be able to ask for them back if the plan goes ahead, because I didn’t donate them to a museum in Parramatta, I donated them to a museum in Harris Street, Ultimo and that’s where I’d want them to stay.”

Power and the glory

The Powerhouse Museum, originally known as the Technological Museum, is the primary showcase of the Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences (MAAS). It has been in existence for over 125 years, much of those in purpose-built premises in Harris Street, Ultimo, from August 1893.

On 10 March 1988 the museum reopened in a disused former electric tram power station – from whence it derived its new name – at 500 Harris Street, which was adapted and upgraded to house the museum’s estimated 400,000 artefacts. Many of these remain in storage in the adjacent Harwood Building, former garages to 108 trams.

The conversion of the power station, empty and increasingly decrepit since it ceased operation in 1953, won the principle architect, Lionel Glendenning, the prestigious Sulman Award, the highest award in Australia for architectural innovation and quality.

In June 2016, the NSW Legislative Council announced an inquiry into the NSW Govt plan to move the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta. The resulting parliamentary upper house committee, which received cross-bench support from Labor, Shooters & Fishers Party and The Greens, recommended the relocation project be abandoned, with an injection of investment into the existing museum in Ultimo so that it is ‘restored to its former glory’.

Yet the committee didn’t reject the need for a complimentary museum in Parramatta. A February 2019 report declared: “Parramatta deserves a world-class museum that all of Sydney, in fact all of NSW and Australia, can get behind and support. Tragically, through political manoeuvring and sheer bloody-mindedness, the current proposal fails to achieve this.”

The committee also heard from numerous witnesses that the Powerhouse had been neglected since its relocation was announced by the Mike Baird government in 2015. They alleged the NSW Govt then used the subsequent decline to justify their argument that the museum needed to move west, although their final business case did not comply with the NSW Treasury’s own guide to cost-benefit analysis. This business analysis was initially withheld by the Berejiklian government until they were compelled to release it by the NSW Legislative Council.

The committee was also highly critical of a Feb 2018 MAAS-organised inaugural fashion ball, hyped as Sydney's answer to New York's Met Gala, the fashion world equivalent of the Oscars. The \$1000-a-seat/\$11,000 a table black tie fundraiser ball received \$70,000 in cash donations for the Australian Fashion Fund to enlarge the Powerhouse Museum's collection of fashion-related items.

However, after costs – The Guardian reported \$388,391 – were deducted, it was later revealed the event – which was marred by allegations of excessive alcohol consumption and prominent museum staff “in the presence of a white powder” – made less than \$300. The director of the museum, Dolla Merrillees, left the employ of MAAS not long afterwards.

In Aug 2018 The Council of Australian Museum Directors reported the fundraiser resulted in a deficit of over \$137,000.

Museum move justification a 'furphy'

World-renowned museum expert Dr. Lindsay Sharp, the founding director of the Powerhouse Museum who oversaw the move of the Technological Museum to its current former tram powerhouse site, is highly critical of the relocation plans.

“The Powerhouse Museum buildings are wonderfully robust and they can be upgraded, as they have been continuously,” he told City Hub in Sept 2017. “It's a complete furphy that the Powerhouse Museum is not fit for purpose, can't be upgraded, hasn't been upgraded and they need to move it.

“It's a very complicated issue moving the large objects, and indeed any kind of object that's delicate and sensitive. People think because objects are large, they are inherently robust and strong. In the case of the Bolton Watt steam engine, which is the Mona Lisa of the Industrial Revolution, it's old cast iron and it's very fragile. Taking it to pieces is very risky. Transporting it is very risky. If it's dropped or hit inadvertently by something hard in the wrong spot it could shatter. It would be one of the great heritage demolition tragedies in the world.

“If they do get the old steam engines out, they have to be set 20-30 metres above the current river level to take into account potential flooding. How do you put a locomotive 30 metres up a building? That engineering would be heroic and very costly.”

Dr Sharp continued: “It would be exceptionally time-consuming and expensive to move the exhibits. They have to be completely studied, recorded, and any damage that exists has to be fully recorded. They have to be specially handled and packed, which in some cases is incredibly complicated.

For example, a significant piece of Roman glass from the 1st Century CE to record and pack that would probably take someone at least a day, and there's no guarantee that it will make it intact to the next destination – they have a habit of breaking even if you pack and handle them carefully.

“It is arguable that there aren't enough conservators [specialists who manage the storage and handling of museum artefacts] in Australia to handle all this work. We'll have to bring dozens of them in from overseas...

“If the government decides to build units on the Powerhouse site, particularly the Harwood storage building, they'll have to remove all of those collections from a beautiful purpose-built, safe environment. It will cost tens, if not hundreds of millions.”

The NSW Govt. countered, “The collections at the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences will continue to be expertly protected during any relocation by the skilled staff at the museum. The museum regularly sends objects from the collection regionally, nationally and internationally.”

Greens MP David Shoebridge MLC said, “The closer you look at this the more you realise it's far more about getting development on prime land at Ultimo, rather than building a world class museum at Parramatta.”