

Article submitted for the SMH 'Opinion' section re Ultimo Powerhouse Museum 19 April 2020

## 1. Introduction and background

My name is Tom Lockley. I am a retired teacher, and have been a volunteer at the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo for the past twelve years. Since May 1 2015 I have convened an email group, now with over 100 members, which shares information. It includes volunteers, present and past Powerhouse Museum employees at all levels, and a very wide range of other people including many from Parramatta and surrounds. As well as luminaries from the arts and cultural fields, there are many 'ordinary' people, all with relevant skills and experiences. I have devoted at least two days per week over the past five years to this endeavour.

I can back up every statement with copious references to Inquiry evidence, Government statements and similar information, and will be happy to do so as requested. As an indication of the manner in which this can be done, section 3 is a fact sheet which has repeatedly been submitted to Government instrumentalities and personnel, and no-one has been able to produce any refutation.

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## 2. 600-word draft article

On 26 November 2014 the then Premier of NSW stood on the banks of the Parramatta River and announced on television that the Powerhouse Museum would be moved from Ultimo to Paramatta as a means of improving the cultural facilities of Western Sydney.

The outcry was immediate and widespread. A who's who of the arts world ran a full page protest advertisement in the major newspapers. A huge 'Save the Powerhouse' Facebook group organised a major petition and eventually a Legislative Council Inquiry was held, lasting three years, with 14 hearing days, and 68 witness appearances. 133 relevant submissions – 94 % of the total received, completely opposed the idea: these included submissions from the National Trust and many other distinguished groups and individuals. No non-Government organisations recommended the 'move' and only a few gave it any support at all.

The reasons for this are clear.

For example, of all the possible means of improving the cultural facilities of Western Sydney this would be the most expensive and wasteful even if only because of the horrendous costs of moving the core exhibits. The existing building was designed to hang aircraft from the ceiling and to support locomotives on the floor. It has a comprehensive steam reticulation network to support its world class collection of steam engines. All this would be wasted at Ultimo and would have to be replicated at huge cost at Parramatta. The Powerhouse complex is an award-winning conversion of magnificently constructed heritage buildings as a museum, a fitting marker for the Bicentennial celebrations of 1988. It was designed as a permanent building, resembling the Louvre and the British Museum in this regard, and no-one at the time believed that a heritage listing could ever be necessary.

The Inquiry and other investigations have clearly demonstrated that there has been no research into alternatives for the laudable aim of improving the cultural facilities of Western Sydney. There was so little prior consultation that the Parramatta Council and the trustees of the museum learnt about it from the media. The report of the Inquiry, with only Government members dissenting, made a Finding, not just a recommendation, that the process did not meet statutory requirements. Despite

the evidence, the Arts Minister's 131-word response relied on unsubstantiated assertions to the contrary, including the completely false statement that highly qualified consultants in cultural infrastructure, museum logistics, urban planning, construction and operations had contributed throughout via peer review processes.

Cost of the project is a minimum of around a billion dollars, an unnecessary waste of scarce resources, particularly now.

The museum is closed to the public during the Coronavirus crisis, but work continues towards the 'move'. An EIS, and also the proposed design of the Parramatta building, are the subjects of mandatory consultation processes, and we are assured that this will be genuine, yet the Infrastructure NSW questionnaire on the subject takes as its basis the assumption that the museum will be relocated. Constituents approaching their local MPs to voice objections are being told that the move is a done deal, but any business agreements regarding the 'move' at this stage would be illegal until 'determination' of the project when the statutory requirements are complete.

One Tom Kennedy has been ~~is~~ recently appointed by INSW to the project. A recent achievement was involvement in the demolition of the Sydney Football Stadium, still a wasteland after eighteen months. We have repeatedly asked that no irrevocable action be taken to destroy the Powerhouse until the virus crisis is over, the statutory consultations are finished, and a renewed Legislative Council Inquiry is completed, but no such undertaking has been received. In fact, Mr Kennedy sees the process as an ideal 'snapback' program, to be ready for major works as soon as possible.

We need to be alert, very afraid, and very active to prevent this inevitable disaster.

### 3. Fact sheet.

We have many problems with recent developments, but the following lists only those facts that have repeatedly been submitted to the Government and for which they have not been able to provide any refutation.

These FACTS have been consistently asserted over the past four years, not just from the enormous Inquiry into Museums and Galleries, and no contradictory material has emerged. On Monday 21 January 2019 and on several occasions before and since, the Premier, the Arts Minister and other politicians, as well as relevant public servants, have received, by mail, registered mail, and by email, a listing of these facts, with a covering letter formally requesting comment or refutation, but there has never been a valid response. The material comes from an email group which consists of a very wide range of people, many very highly qualified, also many employees and volunteers. Full references supporting each fact are available: check <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/> or [email tomlockley@gmail.com](mailto:tomlockley@gmail.com).

It is beyond belief that the Government is persisting with this project.

1. The idea of moving the Powerhouse Museum was not researched. It was an announced political decision in late 2014. CIPMO, Create Australia and MAAS museum authorities have clearly stated that their actions have resulted from this announced decision, and there was no pre-announcement research into alternative strategies for the laudable objective of improving the cultural facilities of Western Sydney.
2. There was no consultation with stakeholders. Even the trustees of the museum and Parramatta Council learnt of the idea from reading about it in the newspapers.
3. This state of affairs has continued: There has never been any later consultation or research into alternatives to moving the Powerhouse Museum to the site chosen by the Government in Parramatta. A sham consultation effort in mid-2017 consisted of asking

people what they wanted to see in the new museums and asking for suggestions about the use of the Ultimo site.

4. 'Moving' the Powerhouse is a very bad idea. Of all possible projects for enhancing the cultural facilities of Western Sydney, it is hard to find one that is more expensive, more destructive and more inefficient: The largest objects have to be the last out of Ultimo and the first into any new building at Parramatta, with consequent massive costs for storage and transit. There will be a considerable resultant time delay, unnecessary with almost any other project. The specially strengthened floors (for supporting heavy exhibits) and ceiling (for suspending aircraft), as well as the extensive steam reticulation network, will be wasted at Ultimo and have to be replicated at considerable cost at Parramatta.

This process wastes, at the very least, some hundreds of millions of dollars above what would be required for any other cultural / educational project.

5. The magnificent soaring galleries of the existing building cannot be replicated in Parramatta within the proposed new building. The proposed site is smaller than the Ultimo site, and is further compromised by the unanimously expressed desire of Parramatta Council for the retention of heritage buildings on the site.

6. The currently planned process involves a massive degradation of the Ultimo site, again for the purpose of building commercial / residential towers to assist budgeting. There is a calculable value of heritage in institutions such as the Powerhouse Museum, and this has been totally ignored by the Government.

7. The proposal has been the subject of almost universal criticism. The Government was forced to hold a Legislative Council Inquiry which attracted over 150 relevant submissions. Apart from the Government submission, all organisational submissions, including those of the National Trust, only two gave qualified support for the move, and all others completely opposed it. Of the over 100 individual submissions, some from very highly qualified people, none supported the 'move'. Non-Government witnesses have been universally condemnatory of the idea. The *Save the Powerhouse* Facebook page exemplifies the views of the general public with over 20,000 people involved in active support. Mr Baird, asked at the Inquiry to name one arts group in favour of the move, did not do so even when given three weeks to research the topic.

8. The site chosen by the Government had been specifically rejected by the elected council prior to its dissolution to enable forced council amalgamation. The land deal was finalised by the unelected administrator, and has not been approved by the re-elected Parramatta Council.

This is Australia's only museum dedicated to the important interface between the applied arts and sciences and it is an act of cultural vandalism to move it from its present magnificent building on its present site, site, most accessible to the state, the country and the world.

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