

Campaign to Save the Powerhouse

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Bulletin 63: dialogue with Ms Havilah

I had intended that this bulletin would be more comprehensive and detailed, and with a lot of help from good friends, worked hard on it over Easter. But when I circulated the draft for comment the consensus was that even the museum tragics would get lost in the minutiae.

So this is a more broad-brush approach. It concentrates on the developments within the Ultimo museum itself. Parramatta events are not mentioned, and matters of the overall direction of the project are left for another time. Ms Havilah is not responsible for the autocratic, undemocratic decision making and the secrecy that has characterised the Government's handling of the 'move' idea from its outset over six years ago. Her 'open door' administrative policy is greatly appreciated.

Bulletin 62 circulated her response to comments made in bulletin 60. This was really appreciated as being one of the very few times that specific issues raised in the debate have been addressed.

Her final statement, 'We are only successful in our renewal if we value and carry forward the legacy of the work of those who went before us' clearly encapsulates the near-unanimous feelings of all concerned. Volunteers, and the general public, were enormously heartened by the announcement of July 4 and there is great enthusiasm for becoming involved in the museum's rehabilitation as soon as pandemic conditions permit. Wider involvement has been a stated aim of Ms Havilah since her appointment.

There was some really positive news in Ms Havilah's response to bulletin 60. For example, I had been aware that there had been some meetings involving people with museum expertise and experience that had no idea that these were properly structured, and actually seeking input to the process. Participants had agreed to keep the discussions confidential, and this undertaking has certainly been kept!

Ms Havilah gave some information about this in bulletin 62. The Masterplanning dialogue is a great initiative. It addresses the vital need of 'ensuring that the special features of this great building and its relationship with its surrounds' are considered in its rehabilitation. The Curatorial Dialogue certainly involves people with museum expertise and experience, input which has been sadly lacking during the overall process to date. We hear that his group has met three times between early October and late November 2020, not exactly 'throughout 2020' as is mentioned in Ms Havilah's statement, but still a good start.

Consultations such as these should have been begun by mid-2014 at the latest, but under present circumstances these developments are very pleasing.

However, we need assurance that these processes will be genuine attempts to obtain expert input. Over the years, there have been many ‘consultations’. Typically our input on basic matters has been downplayed in the consultation reports, for which the Government-contracted PR firm emphasises the responses that suit the Government’s needs.

The unmitigated good news is Ms Havilah’s statement that the steam revolution exhibition will be retained basically as is. Following the works in the transport hall, there had been fears that major demolition might occur in the steam revolution area also. The wooden plinths of some of the heavier displays need replacing, but our experts tell us that this can be done without removing them from the area, which would be a massive task and could have been seen as the start of the dissolution of the collection, Incidentally, I have noticed in recent visits to the museum that the area still attracts a large proportion of the visitors the museum. Its heritage value, resulting from the careful restoration of the original steam-powered power station that now holds one of the world's great collection of steam engines, does not need to be stressed.

I did promise to go through bulletin 60 and minutely check for errors. Hence, here are three minor points that I would like to make clear:

1. I may have given the impression that the demolition in the transport hall was not forecast, but my volunteer colleagues reminded me that the replacement of the display cabinets had been mentioned twice in briefing meetings. However, the extent and nature of the demolition was far beyond what was expected.
2. I accept that UNSW did not routinely use the Mars Yard for an MSc robotics course. I was wrong in this matter, but it did have a good deal of research use until recently. I have commented below, in a different context, on its value in research and in general public education.
3. I was surprised that the ‘new’ ecologic display was built more than ten years ago. Time flies! We are all looking forward to the new display – it is great that it will be inaugurated on June 7. Despite its alleged shortcomings, the demolished display did have a lot of use, particularly by junior secondary school groups. Certainly, education in this field has never been more important.

These are the only factual errors that have been found in bulletin 60.

It is fair to say that people have been surprised, even shocked. at the work being done in the transport hall. The picture on the next page encapsulates the stimulus for this. Ms Havilah responded to these concerns by saying ‘Sometimes people lament not being able to see a much-loved object but very many people also long to see something new. We always balance both of these needs’.

The transport hall, basically as developed at the opening of the museum, was a powerful expression of the euphoria of the bicentennial celebrations, and has become a museum icon. Even Mr Harwin, announcing the reprieve of the museum last July, chose this background. But possibly it is time for new development. We old fossils must look forward

to seeing the twenty-first century advances in display techniques and educational processes that are in train. Indeed, I hope that we can be proven wrong and that the new overall plan for the area is more effective and relevant than what it replaced.

It is great to hear of the curatorial research that has been undertaken before the developmental process was begun, and it would be very reassuring if this could be released. Similarly, the release of the fire regulations that required the destruction of the display cabinets could be easily achieved and would be appreciated.



The greatest remaining concern is the manner in which the destruction was carried out, particularly in regard to the amount and types of dust etc that was spread by the process. The picture is relevant. Ms Havilah stated that 'All work undertaken across the museum is led by our professional conservators and curators to ensure the care and safety of our Collection at all times', but this remains a matter of very great concern to many people. When the 'new' ecology area was being installed over ten

years ago, the works were not as extensive and the work area was sealed by heavy plastic curtains, with other major dust suppression measures in place.

There is also a strong body of feeling that it might have assisted the recovery process if the functioning areas of the museum had been retained until the denuded areas had been restored. The Mars Yard, for example, may have had reduced use from outside researchers, but volunteers had been trained in robot driving and in the search for evidence of life on Mars, and perhaps its temporary retention may have assisted the museum's rehabilitation.

Thanks to everyone for their involvement and interest,

Tom Lockley

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