

Bulletin 13: 15 November 2016



Kathy Wilcox has nailed it – as long as it remains a

laughing matter!

What we have done since the last bulletin:

Under the letterhead of the Pyrmont History Group in August all state MPS received copies of the second booklet ([Heritage of the Powerhouse Museum](#)) with personalised letters. Greens responses were positive, Government / National 11 replies forwarded the material to Arts Minister or gave the standard reply from the arts ministry praising the move. Labour were invited to condemn the move at this stage but there have been no replies from ALP people. Donald Denoon of Pyrmont History Group sent copies to the members of the Greater Sydney Commission and we have [a reply from the CEO](#).

The Upper House Inquiry

The Upper House Inquiry has held four sittings. The inquiry deals with general matters of museum policy as well as the proposed move, on which this report concentrates. The 'anti-move' case is not covered in detail as it is self-evident. Several submissions were neutral in their view, typically seeking more information and proof of proper research and they are not detailed in these notes.

There were 204 submissions, some individuals making more than one submission. Of the 39 addressed other issues related to the terms of reference. Of the remainder, 126 were individual submissions opposing the move, (from 98 people), and 28 were group submissions opposing the move. These included the National Trust and other major heritage groups and the North Parramatta Regional Action Group. Four specific groups have been formed specifically to voice opposition, notably the Powerhouse Action Group (hundreds of supporters including a 'who's who' of Sydney society), Facebook groups Save the Powerhouse (3,500+ supporters) and Save the Powerhouse Museum (1000+ supporters) and our little group (105 on mailing list). There is a list of the submissions [here](#) as well as on the government website.

The 6 pro-move submissions included two (nos 48 and 110) that are 'out of town' support for government policy, and three 'establishment' submissions: NSW government, Museums and Galleries Australia, and MAAS executive. None give a convincing rationale for the move in terms of refuting any of the arguments against it.

The remaining submission was from the **Western Sydney Arts and Cultural Lobby**. This group consists of individuals and 13 organisations, almost all of which are art and theatre groups. There are no museums or historical groups. Two groups are based on UWS. Their major press release is seen on <http://www.medianet.com.au/releases/release-details/?id=816088>, (Medianet is a professional organisation also used by UWS).

They seek increased funding for the arts, notably in their area, and demonstrate a lack of equity in the present situation. In their submission they do not want the Government funds only to be 'used for the relocation costs of the MAAS to Parramatta'. A [SMH newspaper story](#) quotes David Capra, the famous artist who is spokesperson for the group, as saying that the group wants 'two major tertiary institutions – the Australian Film, Television & Radio School and National Arts School' to 'relocate to western Sydney. It also backs the already-mooted move of Powerhouse Museum from its present site in inner-city Ultimo'. Hardly a ringing endorsement.

The presentation from [Suzette Mead and Jon Hillman of Parramatta](#) was very forceful and illustrated the way that Parramatta citizens wanted their own project, not just a relocated Powerhouse. They have common cause with PHM.

First sitting days....5/6 October

The first two days were general coverage. Professor Barney Glover (President, Board of Trustees, MAAS) and MS Merrillees (Director, MAAS) concentrated on the qualities and plans of the existing site, and gave support for the move to Parramatta in general terms – 'a once in a generation opportunity..... to design and deliver a world-class, iconic museum'. When quizzed at the inquiry, there were several important questions that they could not immediately answer, eg consultation with the stakeholders, budgeting, the value of the present site etc and they were recalled to another sitting on October 19.

Ms Samantha Torres, Deputy Secretary, Justice Services, Arts and Culture, Arts NSW, who since April 1 has had 'overall responsibility' for 'designing a fit for purpose museum in a new location that is the cornerstone of the cultural precinct for Parramatta'. Her role is 'to implement Government decisions once they are made' and she could not give details of finances (a matter for those developing the final business case). She said that Property NSW is valuing the Ultimo site, no decision has been made as to its future use, she believes 'the Premier has publicly committed that the Ultimo site will be retained for public use' and that 'a number of different groups' have made 'a wide variety of suggestions' ranging 'from parks to reusing the building for different community purposes'. These suggestions have not been tabled.

Next: Liz-Ann Macgregor, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art is also the Cultural Ambassador for Western Sydney appointed by the government. 5% of arts funding goes to Western Sydney, an inequitable situation. Met with regularly with one group—the Western Sydney lobby group. 'The idea came up that one way to do that would be for Western Sydney to have a State institution in Western Sydney. That was how it began'.

A PWC report on the Powerhouse museum had asked for \$200 million to improve PHM. 'It became, I think, almost an inexorable logic the idea to relocate the Powerhouse would be made by the Western Sydney lobby group and me.because [it] has incredible collections [but] is facing challenges'. It needs to adapt to meet modern demands and therefore it could best be reinvented on the new site.

(It is notable that Parramatta council complained from an early stage of lack of consultation (*Parramatta Advertiser*, 16 October 2016, page 2) and I cannot find reports of major consultation with the Parramatta Council since that time. There has been [very little community consultation](#), none through the council. [There is no council member on either of the current steering committees](#)).

The remainder of the time was taken up with arguments against the move, or discussion of other terms of reference.

Hearing day 3

The 20 September half-day hearing at Lithgow did not mention Parramatta or the Powerhouse move. It seems to be inconsequential for the thriving grass-roots cultural scene of the Blue Mountains.

Day 4: 19 October

A one-hour session, PHM personnel (director and the president of trustees), to clarify matters that were not clear in the first hearing. These included the degree to which the move had been imposed, without consultation with the trustees and other stakeholders, Some basic points:

- Land has not been purchased at Parramatta.
- Director said that the area of the proposed site was similar to that of the Ultimo site. (For this to be so some adjoining buildings need to be subsumed, otherwise [see this web page](#))
- Key point: Professor Glover stressed that the trustees would only agree to the move if 'a comparable museum can be placed on that site', that this museum would be 'a world-class iconic museum of international standing' and that the 'integrity of the collection' would be maintained 'both in the way it is stored and the way it is presented to the public'. (letter from Professor Glover, 1 September)
- It is clear that the government, not the trustees, have originated the project and it also seems that consultation has been minimal, and that communication has been rather one-sided and haphazard).

Day 5: 14 November

Pro-move witnesses: Ms Torres, reprise: 'It is uncontested that government accepted a recommendation from Infrastructure NSW to relocate the museum from the current site in Ultimo to a site in Parramatta'. (I am seeking details of this from Infrastructure NSW- there is no mention of the museum on their website). She complained about perceived attacks on Ms Merillees etc. No decision had been made on the use of the PHM site: 'The options range from the highest and best use, in terms of government property procedures, right down to retaining current restrictions on the site being used entirely as a museum, and everything in between'. (I do not understand what she means, maybe the reader can!) Professor Shine, former President of MAAS trustees gave evidence by telephone. Points he made include the enthusiasm of PHM employees and leaders for the move. which was greeted with laughter from the audience. The trustees became aware of the move when it was published in public documents, not before; 'secretary of the Department of Trade and Investment, Mr Mark Paterson, and the chief executive of Infrastructure NSW, Mr Jim Betts' met with Professor Shine and assured him that adequate funds would be made available.

Other witnesses: Impressive regional representatives gave evidence, the basic point was that at Wagga and Port Macquarie etc great work was being done with very limited resources. When asked their opinion of cost / benefits of the \$1 billion PHM project they were polite but scathing. There was a very strong submission from the Save Bondi Pavilion group, another victim of absurd planning. Kylie Winkworth (who has a world-wide reputation as a museum expert

and is a former PHM trustee) pressed the usual points and forcefully made the point that there would be no surplus from the destruction of PHM and sale of the land after the costs of removing exhibits was taken into account.

Presentation by Museum officers at PHM, 11 October.

The comments from **the director** were largely of the great plans for the present site, and the induction of a 'whole new management team' (predominately a director, Curatorial, Collections & Exhibitions and a Director of Programs and Engagement). Very little about the museum move, "Building a new museum will have its challenges but we must accept it with excitement"

Michael Parry. (SES employee charged with planning the move) basically, he outlined plans for a magnificent museum, one and a third times the area of the present one, with grand display spaces: he had pictures from various other museums re this. Purpose built for day and night use; architecturally showed as inspiration [Oslo Opera House](#) and [Perez museum in Miami](#).

Showed a Venn diagram with arts, sciences and an intersection, basically innovation, creativity, ingenuity. An innovation lab, *thinkspace* taken to extremes, the library to be brought into the public space and modernised are proposed. Lots of benefits will accrue – tourism, part of the Parramatta smart city, showplace for localised projects, etc. There would be a sample display and information centre in Parramatta for the Christmas / New Year period.

He moved so quickly in his presentation that I could not keep up. He put up a timeline for about 30 seconds preliminary business plan done already, more expansive plans for the 2017 budget, no change to PHM till 2020, open 2022 (this as much as I could scribble down, not 100% guaranteed). All present findings and the business plans are 'Cabinet in Confidence'. The rationale for this ruling puzzles me. I can understand the need for confidentiality of cabinet discussions, and the idea of cabinet solidarity in regard to decisions, but the preliminary business plan was paid for by public money and should be in the public domain.

A last word:

I have information that on Monday evening a firm called 'Instinct And Reason', 420 Elizabeth street Surry Hills, conducted a focus group research activity into the move to Parramatta. The participants were told that the museum was moving to Parramatta and then asked what they would like to see at that site.

The battle is not lost, but we have a long fight ahead of us. It should be made easier by the incompetence of our adversaries, but in the Trump era people can say the most ridiculous things and get away with it. So we must continue efforts to ensure that the facts are heard.

Thanks for reading all this!

Tom Lockley 16 Nov 2016