



ORIENTAL RUG SOCIETY OF NSW

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SUBMISSION TO THE UPPER HOUSE STANDING COMMITTEE ON MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES REGARDING, IN PARTICULAR, SECTION 1 E. OF THE INQUIRY'S TERMS OF REFERENCE: THE SALE OF THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM (PHM) SITE IN ULTIMO AND ITS PROPOSED MOVE TO PARRAMATTA

FROM: The Executive and Committee of the Oriental Rug Society of NSW Inc (ORS) on behalf of the Society.

12 August 2016

Executive Summary

1. It is vital for residents of greater Sydney that the Powerhouse Museum be centrally located.
2. The Parramatta proposal lacks transparency and consultation and the business case is questionable.
3. Western Sydney can be given its own museum/gallery without relocating the Powerhouse Museum.
4. Contrary to the State Government's view, the Museum's attendance has been increasing despite funding cutbacks.

Dear Chair,

On behalf of the Oriental Rug Society of NSW Inc (ORS), the Society's Executive and Committee welcome the opportunity to lodge this submission to the Standing Committee on Museums and Galleries regarding, in particular, Section 1 e. of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference: **the sale of the Powerhouse Museum (PHM) site in Ultimo and its proposed move to Parramatta.**

This is of special interest to the ORS which, since 1980, has been one of several Affiliated Societies of the PHM. The ORS has donated many items to, and co-purchased others for, the PHM's permanent collection. We have also staged major exhibitions and an international conference with the museum. As a long-standing associate and supporter of the PHM, the ORS wishes to make the following points:

1. Importance of a central location

- A museum housing collections of the size and cultural importance of the PHM's should be centrally located to make it easily accessible by walkways and public transport for the maximum number of Sydney residents, school children and increasing number of tourists. Its present location in the centre of Australia's largest city is therefore ideal: it sits at the convergence of transport links from suburbs north, south, east and west of the CBD.
- To relocate the entire museum to Parramatta, some 36 km from the CBD, would deter visitors from much of greater Sydney, let alone visitors from interstate and overseas, the bulk of whom choose accommodation around the CBD. Thus attendance would fall, possibly dramatically – the opposite result of that intended by relocating the Museum.

- The PHM is likely to lose valuable staff, including curators, organisers and volunteers, many with knowledge and skills accumulated over decades: Parramatta is too distant or difficult to reach and many staff cannot afford to move house.
- The city's museums and galleries provide a balanced and complementary cultural scene: applied arts, sciences and technology (PHM), natural history and anthropology (Australian Museum), fine, traditional and Asian art (Art Gallery of NSW) and contemporary and avant-garde art (Museum of Contemporary Art). Removing the PHM would leave the city's cultural environment seriously skewed and impoverished and well below international standard.

2. The proposal lacks transparency and consultation; business case questionable

- The Parramatta proposal lacks transparency and the business case is unsound. The ORS and many Sydneysiders fully support the establishment of a cultural institution in western Sydney. But this in no way justifies emptying and demolishing the PHM building, now listed on the National Trust Register and a City of Sydney Heritage Item. The people of NSW deserve to be told what consultation or research, if any, have shown that the residents of Parramatta and surrounds want the PHM, rather than some other type of cultural institution.
- The proponents of this project have not disclosed the costs involved, but claim it will be covered by the sale of the Ultimo site. Yet, the media have estimated the cost of replicating the existing PHM facilities in Parramatta at about \$600 million or more, plus the expense of relocating its large industrial installations and creating sufficient storage. They also estimate the sale of the Ultimo site will yield less than half the estimated relocation cost, with taxpayers contributing the considerable difference. The State Government has clarified none these issues publicly.

3. Western Sydney deserves its own museum/gallery

- We wholeheartedly support the creation of a top-quality cultural institution to serve the people of Parramatta and surrounding areas. But why relocate the **entire** PHM there? Its collections, exhibitions and special events do not mirror the history, social or cultural development of the Parramatta area, but those of our nation, neighbouring cultures, science, technology and the decorative arts.
- If there *is* a demand (for which no evidence has been provided) for a PHM type of museum in Parramatta, it makes more cultural and economic sense to build a PHM annex or branch there. Several international museums and galleries have successfully created such separately-located annexes. It could feature some of the exhibits currently at the Ultimo site, and cost-effectively draw on the vast amount of PHM material in storage at Ultimo and Castle Hill for which exhibition space is lacking. This could be augmented with digital access to objects and exhibitions at the Ultimo site, and vice-versa. A Parramatta annex could feature its own exhibitions, and stimulate demand for contemporary, traditional and Asian art by borrowing selectively from the MCA and the AGNSW for temporary exhibits.

- The State Government might fund this smaller but no less interesting museum from its large cultural infrastructure fund and its annual windfalls from property stamp duties. The estimates (above) show the Government would need to spend some \$300-\$400 million anyway on the proposed relocation, in addition to whatever proceeds from sale of the Ultimo site. Therefore, it should spend this money on a new Parramatta institution tailored to the interests of western Sydney residents, instead of depriving the rest of Sydney of easy access to the centrally-located PHM. We note media reports that the Government's cultural infrastructure fund holds about \$600 million that could be drawn on. Another possible source of funding is to redevelop the PHM's Harwood building (currently housing PHM offices, archives, storage etc) into a tower containing rental office space and apartments.

4. PHM attendance is increasing despite funding cutbacks

- The State Government justifies the PHM sale in part by claiming PHM visitor numbers are dropping. While attendances at any museum may wax and wane from year to year, the Government's claim is refuted by figures for 2015 showing PHM attendance rose by 12 per cent, outstripping that of the Australian Museum (we refer you to: <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/children-flock-to-powerhouse-ahead-of-baird-government-sell-off-20151120-gl4atz.html>) This increase is remarkable, considering the Museum has suffered government funding cuts and relatively frequent changes of management, leading to redundancies and departures by dozens of experienced staff. A move to Parramatta would likely cause a further decline of staff, which it can ill-afford. We applaud the museum's leadership in the face of these cuts, and urge the Government to support its marketing strategies and programs in order to boost attendance at the Ultimo site and thus reduce the Museum's reliance on public funding.

In summary, we believe that while the residents of the Western suburbs deserve a 'Powerhouse West', NSW taxpayers are best served by leaving the PHM in Ultimo for the enjoyment of greater Sydney residents and the increasing flow of visitors from interstate and overseas.

We are happy to approve publication of this submission.

Sincerely


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