

## Sydney's World First Museum Demolition Plan

Longer version of article in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 May 2018:

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/powerhouse-museum-demolition-parramatta-trust-winkworth20180501-p4zcmp.html>

Museum demolition; these are two words that don't belong together. And it's happening not in the Middle East, or Afghanistan, but here in Sydney. The Berejiklian government is closing the Powerhouse Museum (PHM) next year, in what will be a world first museum eviction and demolition. Yes the shells of the Ultimo Power House may be left standing. But it is the end of the Powerhouse Museum (PHM) as we know it, a museum that has brought joy and wonder to millions of visitors.

There is no masterplan for the Powerhouse Museum site, although one can expect another mediocre block of units, or two. The scant PR papers released on by the Premier at the Parramatta launch promise to 'retain a cultural space at Ultimo'. A theatre for Broadway musicals is mooted for the exhibition halls that now hold the treasures of NSW. A few pages of blurb trumpet an Ultimo 'creative industries presence' with fashion and design displays. The government's spin doctors must have forgotten that this is what we already have in Powerhouse Museum - and much more.

No government anywhere in the world has ever closed a major state museum to move it out of the city to a less accessible location. And no government has ever forced a major museum to give up its historic site, with purpose designed infrastructure and state of the art facilities. You don't need to be a real estate genius to see the rip-off in swapping an expansive, accessible 2.6 hectare city site, fully owned by the museum, for a smaller museum on a flood prone riverbank at the base of a 50 story apartment block. This is shameless asset stripping of cultural infrastructure, land and buildings that belong to the people of NSW, held in trust for current and future generations. And at a cost of \$1.179b, it is not even replacing like for like. Only in Sydney could the property of a major state museum be seen as a development opportunity.

Most of the case for the demolition of the PHM has been framed around cultural equity for western Sydney. Everyone supports the claims for an iconic state museum in Parramatta. But the government can't explain why a new museum in Parramatta must entail closing the Powerhouse at Ultimo. It is even less credible after the \$2.4b cash splash on three stadiums between the city and Parramatta. Alternatives to the wasteful and reckless demolition of the PHM's high quality, purpose designed museum infrastructure were never considered in the business case. Proposals for a Smithsonian style satellite in Parramatta were rejected out of hand as second best. This is absurd. None of the Smithsonian's unique museums are second best. And the Smithsonian has never closed one of its museums in the guise of meeting contemporary cultural aspirations; nor should NSW. Would the UK government close the V&A to open a new museum at Olympic Park? Is Tate Modern a lesser museum than its parent Tate Britain?

The Legislative Council's Inquiry into museums and galleries has heard damning evidence of the underfunding of museums in NSW. In the face of this evidence the government still has no plan for museums in regional NSW, or western Sydney. Cultural equity is an important principle, for western Sydney **and** regional NSW. Is it equitable to spend \$344m on Sydney Modern, making a third public gallery in the city centre, while Parramatta remains the only city in western Sydney or regional NSW without a gallery? Where is the cultural equity in spending \$1.2b on a new museum in Parramatta, just 23ks from the city, for no net cultural gain, without a plan for museums in the rest of western Sydney and NSW? Is the government going to make an equivalent cultural investment in the much hyped 'Western City' proposed by the Greater Sydney Commission? Its plans have nothing concrete to say about cultural infrastructure for this region.

More than a dozen major towns and cities across Sydney and regional NSW do not have fit for purpose museums with paid staff that can take travelling exhibitions, collect and exhibit their own heritage, or borrow significant objects from NSW state institutions. This includes Penrith, Campbelltown, Bankstown, Sutherland, Gosford, Wollongong, Port Macquarie, Coffs Harbour, Tweed Heads, Lithgow, Bega, Goulburn and Maitland. Just 10% of the cost of moving the Powerhouse would build 12 new regional museums at a cost of \$10m each.

NSW has had decades of under-investment in museums so one might have hoped that a government awash with money from asset sales would expand the state's museum portfolio. There are major gaps in the profile of NSW museums which the Parramatta scheme does nothing to address. NSW has no state museum responsible for NSW history, no museum about migration and settlement in NSW, and no museum about Aboriginal culture and history, all of which are central to Parramatta's history, identity and contemporary culture.

The last major museum to open in Sydney was the Powerhouse. It still has Sydney's largest exhibition spaces, which makes the waste of cultural infrastructure at Ultimo even more shocking. Just six years ago NSW taxpayers spent more than \$25m enlarging the PHM's temporary exhibition space to 1,800sqm. That will be trashed when the PHM is closed next year.

The Powerhouse Museum is not redundant or surplus to the cultural needs of Sydney and NSW. It is Australia's only museum of applied arts and sciences, based in Ultimo since 1893. The museum was ten years in planning, design and construction, opening in 1988 as the cultural centrepiece of the bicentenary of European settlement. The Sulman award winning museum was built with the highest quality materials, technology and engineering, designed for a working life of at least 100 years. The majestic turbine and boiler halls are uniquely appropriate for the museum's power, transport and engineering collections. The museum's great spaces are purpose designed to show historic engines working under live steam, the No 1 locomotive and carriages, and the irreplaceable 1785 Boulton and Watt beam engine. These resonant industrial spaces, historically connected to the objects on display, will never be replicated in a new museum at Parramatta.

The museum infrastructure on the PHM's site at Ultimo is equal to the best in comparable museums anywhere in the world. In addition to 20,000sqm of exhibition space in architecturally distinguished fit for purpose buildings, the museum's site includes the Harwood building with environmentally zoned storage for 240,000 objects, conservation labs, large engineering and fabrication workshops and a specialist library that is used not just by curators, but by students and museum volunteers from around NSW.

None of the visitors to the museum in 1988 could have imagined that just thirty years later the NSW government would be closing the museum and evicting its collections. The Powerhouse Museum was the ambitious vision of Neville Wran and Jack Ferguson, who wanted a people's museum for the people of NSW. Inspired by this vision, thousands of people across NSW donated money and family treasures to the museum. These collections are held in trust for the people of NSW. They are not the assets or political pawns of the government of the day. Museums are built on foundations of public trust and permanence. The minimum expectation is that governments will conserve and build on the cultural legacy of previous generations. In trashing a great public museum, the Berejiklian government betrays the trust of donors and the investment of generations of NSW taxpayers.

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