

21 August, 2018

Kylie Winkworth

'Powerhouse to Property Play; plotting the eviction of the Powerhouse Museum from Ultimo'

There is a vacancy for a chief executive at the Museum of Applied Arts Sciences (MAAS), after the previous director Dolla Merrillees resigned in the wash up of the failed Fashion Ball fundraiser, subsidised by NSW taxpayers to the tune of \$215,000. It didn't help her tenure that the Arts Minister Don Harwin claimed in Parliament that the event raised \$70,000 in donations, when it actually ran at a massive loss.

The advertisement for the chief executive should carry a career health warning. The successful applicant will be museum's fourth director in just six years, a turnover that is unheard of in the museum sector. That alone should give intending applicants pause for thought, even before they start reading the 4,500 pages of the Final Business Case on moving the Powerhouse Museum (PHM) to Parramatta.

The secret business case papers were prised out of the government thanks to the dogged work of the chair of the Legislative Council's Inquiry into Museums, Shooters and Fishers Robert Borsak, and deputy chair Greens David Shoebridge. Theirs is surely the most improbable odd couple partnership in politics. For two years they've worked together, with other committee members, to get to the bottom of the government's decision to 'move' the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta. When there is so much cynicism about politics and politicians, the Museum Inquiry is reminder of the important role of parliamentary committees, working across party lines, in defence of the public interest and good public policy.

The museum badge of courage in this saga goes to Liberal MLC Matthew Mason-Cox, who crossed the floor to vote with the Greens, Labor and Shooters and Fishers, for the release of the business papers on the move of the Powerhouse and the stadium spendathon. In spiteful retribution, he lost his committee roles and is shunned by his Liberal colleagues. Every museum lover in NSW should send this man a thank you note.

So what do we learn from the business case papers? This being Sydney, it is all about property development. More than half the business case papers are focussed on how to cram the maximum possible development onto the museum sites at both Parramatta and Ultimo. The government scoffed when museum experts said it would cost \$2b to move the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta. The first pass at confecting a business case came up with a benefit cost ratio of just 0.435, and a cost of \$1.92b, just to move the Powerhouse 23ks west for no net cultural gain.

In 2017 the consultants reconvened to 'cook the books', as Labor's arts spokesperson Walt Secord observed in Parliament last week. Arts Minister Don Harwin told the Legislative Council's Museum Inquiry last year that a new extended business case would investigate *all possible options* for a new museum in Parramatta. They even held community consultations. But behind the scenes a team of consultants had long been at work on only one option, Mike Baird's captain's pick to 'move' the Powerhouse to Parramatta.

The focus of the extended business case was on stripping the costs out of the project, and maximising development on both the Parramatta and Ultimo sites. The museum's Harwood building, which houses 240,000 objects in world's best practice collection storage, will be demolished to make

way for a 68 storey super tower. Millions have been stripped out of the costs of moving the collection to get the benefit cost ratio to a wafer 1.02. The replacement storage facilities at Castle Hill will be at least 3,000sqm smaller than Ultimo. The cost of storing the museum's 32 very large objects once they've been evicted from the Powerhouse Museum has simply been left out of the project budget. No one knows where these museum treasures will go. Few of them will fit in the Parramatta museum, which is half the size of the Powerhouse Museum.

The government's consultants have done little to advance the concept of the New Museum in Western Sydney (NMWS), beyond vacuous clichés about an iconic world-leading museum. Visitors had best not look up. Parramatta's promised world class museum will sit at the bottom of a seventy storey super tower looming over the riverbank and the public domain. The museum still has no name or compelling rationale, let alone a relationship with the history and cultures of Parramatta. Indeed the business case papers explain that there is no *unmet demand* for the NMWS, like similar large scale infrastructure projects!

The demolition and downsizing of the Powerhouse was always a nakedly political decision by a government that sees every project through the lens of property development. Even so, it is shocking to read on page two of the business case that there is no actual unmet need to justify the government's world first museum demolition plan. It would be cheaper to keep the Powerhouse and build a new museum in Parramatta, but this option was never considered or tested.

Harwin's sop to cultural sensibilities outraged by the demolition of major state museum is a remnant 'Ultimo Presence', a lyric theatre shoehorned into the shell of the historic power house, and a fashion and design showcase, under the shadow of a 68 storey super tower. This bizarre scheme takes the power out of the Powerhouse, evicting the museum's priceless power, transport and engineering collections, which are uniquely appropriate the history and great spaces of the Powerhouse, while leaving a small display of designer frocks.

It is no surprise to read that the new chief executive of MAAS, in charge of implementing the government's museum demolition plan, will not need to have any actual museum experience. Nor is it surprising, after so many outrages, that the chief executive will report directly to the minister, bypassing the trustees and public service, and breaching all norms of museum governance, in which museums operate at arm's length from the government of the day. The minister will effectively be running the museum through his chief executive. This is how the NSW government will execute the museum demolition and asset stripping of the PHM's land and property, held in trust for current future generations.

In the last four years the NSW government has waged a cultural vendetta against the Powerhouse Museum, cutting its budget, depriving it of maintenance funding, and undermining public confidence in the museum and the custodianship of the collection. It is heartbreaking for the museum's staff, volunteers and supporters. Thirteen volumes of a confected business case, an army of consultants and high level public servants have tried to justify the inexcusable destruction of major state museum. It is difficult to comprehend the government's determination to ruin a great public museum and put its priceless collection at risk, while it is sitting on a \$3.8b surplus, with annual \$1.6b surpluses projected for the next four years. But then this is NSW. It's all about property development.

Kylie Winkworth
21 August 2018