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Dead fish and shonky salesmen



Willow Grove, a heritage-listed building to be demolished for the new Powerhouse Museum, and what its replacement looks like. Photo: Kylie Winkworth

At this time of year government staffers are preparing the dead fish announcements for release during the festive season when no one is paying attention. In political parlance this is called taking out the trash. So Monday saw news of the approval of the three high rise towers at Waterloo, part of the Rob Stokes fast-planning effort to “clear the decks” of stalled developments, which to ordinary people are toxic projects loathed by the community. Then there was news of the whopping \$100m blowout on the Sydney Football Stadium, now costing taxpayers an extravagant \$828m.

And the next biggest toxic project loathed by the community is the move of the Powerhouse Museum (PHM) to Parramatta. With no fanfare the news of the winning competition design for the Parramatta museum was dropped to The Australian, followed by a low key media event at Parramatta. Premier Berejiklian was nowhere to be seen, perhaps mindful of the rolling crisis in regional NSW, battling devastating fires, drought and towns running out of water. How could she explain the extravagant \$1.5b cost of moving the Powerhouse Museum 23kms west, especially when the more than 300 volunteer museums in regional NSW share a miserable \$68,706 in grant funds? That works out at about \$229 per museum. If the National Party MPs have any reservations about this grotesque cultural inequality none of them have spoken out.

Milk crate on stilts

In other circumstances the long awaited design for a new museum would be big news. Arts Minister

Don Harwin tried to make a virtue of the project's outrageous cost, trumpeting the news as the largest cultural investment since the Sydney Opera House. Several thoughts occurred in this dangerous comparison. The cost blowout has already started, with the building rumoured to be \$150m over budget and it's still just a sketch design. All the armchair architecture critics can see the winning design by Moreau Kusunoki and Genton is no Opera House. Community response to the design has been almost entirely negative; a milk crate on stilts, an unfinished IKEA flat pack, or a scissor lift – an excellent idea for getting the collection above the flood waters. Others suggested the design was entirely in keeping with site's previous use as car park.

There is no sign this is a museum, let alone anything approximating the real Powerhouse at Ultimo. The sketch designs show empty, neo-fascist spaces, curiously devoid of objects, exhibitions or anything suggestive of an actual museum. But this project was never about a real museum. It was entirely focussed on the delivery of an iconic trophy building that would define Parramatta's character and cultural coming of age. Oh dear.

The only positive point in the announcement was the 60 studio residencies for scientists and researchers, and the opportunity for regional students to stay overnight. This is something that could be easily accommodated on the Parramatta community's preferred museum site in the Fleet St precinct at north Parramatta.

However the government has never listened to the community at any stage in this disastrous project, and it is unlikely to start now. As the news sunk in that the government was breaking an election promise to keep the heritage listed St Georges Terrace and Willow Grove, a much loved former maternity hospital with links to families all over western Sydney, the tweet by Councillor Donna Davis summed up the situation: Sit down & shut up. You will get what you are given, speak when you are spoken to & remember you don't have a choice. You cannot #SaveWillowGrove because it does not fit with our agenda. We will build what we want with no input from you.

In selecting the winning design, the competition jury appears to have given no weight to the practical use of the building as a museum. There are vast facades of north facing glass that will trap heat and be an environmental and conservation nightmare. The long vertiginous escalators will be a safety risk for moving people and objects in the building. The empty caverns at the base of the buildings, a necessity because the site floods, are spruiked as an exciting 24 hour open precinct. Did anyone on the jury go to Parramatta at 3.00am? The cost and practicality of providing 24/7 security for these vast spaces must be keeping the Powerhouse CEO awake at night.

A bait and switch exercise

While everyone is pouring over the puzzling selection of a 'hyper-platform' building for the evicted collections from the Powerhouse Museum, the real prize is the museum's site at Ultimo. This must pay big time for the Parramatta museum. Planning Minister Rob Stokes is busy finessing the up-zoning of Pyrmont Ultimo to deliver the biggest possible development opportunity for the site. Expect to see towers of perhaps 70-100 stories on the PHM site, including where Lionel Glendenning's Sulman award winning Wran building now stands on Harris Street.

The government's move on the assets of the Powerhouse Museum is a scandalous bait and switch exercise. We'll take your 2.6 hectare city site, and you move the museum 23kms to a constrained flood prone riverbank less than half the size of the PHM, with the collections shunted up the road to Castle Hill, or farmed out to volunteer museums. It's a shame the museum will lose more 50% of its audiences and income but we won't be compensating you for that. At a cost of more than \$1.5b the deal is such poor value for the NSW taxpayers it is worthy of a complaint to Fair Trading. But in this case the shonky salesman is the government.