

Taking out the Trash while NSW Burns

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<http://cityhubsydney.com.au/2020/01/trashing-the-powerhouse-museum/>

Something shifted this summer as communities faced unprecedented bushfires. Quiet coastal villages, once an oasis for sleepy summers, were suddenly on the verge of the apocalypse. Inland from the fiery crisis the relentless drought rolls on, sucking the life out of the rivers, land and spirit. For many people these catastrophic events marked a loss of complacency about the future of this country. We could see, smell and taste the impacts of global warming. Premier Berejiklian looked concerned as she stood nodding beside the RFS Fire Commissioner.

Repairing the impacts of the fires and drought will take years, even decades. Regional communities and the environment will need sustained investment to recover. The government's spending priorities need to change; or so one would think. But while people were distracted by the bushfire crisis, the hazardous air quality, and the seeming death of nature itself, the government got to work, taking out the trash for its most extravagant and toxic project. In mid-January it pressed on with the next stage of the demolition of the Powerhouse Museum, setting in motion the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Parramatta museum.

This followed the Arts Minister's pre-Christmas announcement of the winning design for the mis-named 'new Powerhouse', the alleged replacement for the real Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo. What was badged as the biggest cultural investment since the Opera House was met with jokes and underwhelmed disbelief. The competition jury selected a design that it seems only a few architects will love. Even David Borger, director of the Western Sydney Business Chamber and the project's No 1 spruiker, likened the museum design to a milk crate.

It was left to community activist Suzette Meade to winkle out of the government that the new museum will be built on the rubble of St George's Terrace and Willow Grove. Only last February the Premier promised to retain these listed heritage buildings, at least for the duration of the election campaign. If the government had any qualms about the contradiction of building a museum on a heritage crime scene it wasn't letting on. There was no mention of these heritage losses in the media releases. It seems that Parramatta's big new cultural landmark requires the sacrifice of its authentic places, culture and heritage.

From the announcement of the government's 'bait and switch' museum scam in late 2014, Parramatta's heritage, culture and stories have been ignored. There was no consultation with museums and heritage places in western Sydney, and no recognition of its World Heritage sites, stories and landscape. Community voices and preferences were ignored. Parramatta was seen a blank cultural slate, its new museum only requiring the decanting of enough of the Powerhouse Museum's big objects to justify its demolition.

All this is in stark contrast to the way museums are developed elsewhere in the civilised world. Museums are built on foundations of community consent and trust. Community consultation comes first, and it drives decisions on the museum's concept, location and design. When the Museum of London was planning to move to new premises in the Smithfield markets it put the shortlisted

competition designs on exhibition and made the case for the move. They asked visitors which design they liked. They asked what they wanted to see in the new museum. And they listened. Conserving the heritage buildings of the Smithfield market was non-negotiable for all the design competition entries. After all, the conservation of cultural heritage is central to the purpose of museums. Unlike Sydney, London understands that museums are connected to place, and to communities, through their buildings, collections and storytelling in the museum.

The contrast with the NSW government's secretive planning for the Parramatta museum is striking. The public had no say in the site selection assessment. That is secret. The public was given no say on the Parramatta museum's themes and content. The government declared they would get a science museum. The public was not allowed to see the shortlisted competition designs, or voice a preference. However we will get to pay around \$1.5b for a smaller museum half the size of the PHM. All this is more redolent of a command and control Stalinist economy than a modern democracy.

It is no wonder the winning design has certain a neo-fascist character. The initial sketches show vast, near empty spaces, akin to one of those unsettling de Chirico paintings of an empty arcade or plaza. Given the logistics of managing these spaces 24x7, they may be even creepier in real life. This is not so much a museum for the people but a statement of Architecture. The content is not important. The government intends to build its architectural statement and vacate the scene. Infrastructure delivered to grateful populace. Tick.

The EIS letter includes a few cross sections to add to the scant detail on the museum. They show a few planes and helicopters in a trophy hall but otherwise it is a museum in name only, with no vision, no compelling concept or rationale and nothing to suggest content or purpose. It is a brutal, overbearing set of buildings. The larger building is set so far forward on the site it leaves just a few metres for a cramped river walk. One artist rendering from the north shows a bridge across the river connecting to what is called Civic Link, a walkway running through the site of the demolished Willow Grove. (Irony missing in action here) It will be a massive wind tunnel. The bridge will not actually be built as part of the project, although it was mooted in the original brief. The cost of this, if it is feasible, will be pushed onto Parramatta City Council.

And as for the fate of the real Powerhouse Museum, it is already being written out of history and barely rates a mention in the EIS letter. Even so, the hidden purpose of the faux museum Architecture project at Parramatta is to provide cover for the demolition of the PHM, and the appropriation of its land and assets for property development. The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences Act is not listed in the section covering the statutory framework. The Act is already ignored by the current management. If it has the numbers, the government will change the museum's Act, as foreshadowed in the business case papers. The Trustees are not mentioned as agents or stakeholders in the project, they are already disempowered and irrelevant. Nor are the museum's donors, members, volunteers, former trustees and Life Fellows identified as stakeholders. The people who have done most to create the Powerhouse Museum and its collections are written off, like the museum itself.

We know little of the design detail of the Parramatta museum. That too is a secret. We do know that it is smaller, less accessible and will have inferior facilities to what the museum already owns at

Ultimo. In effect the real Powerhouse is being stolen and downsized into a regional arts centre. Only the name will survive as 'New Powerhouse Parramatta', a sad bizarre memory of what NSW has lost.

All this a double cultural tragedy for NSW and Parramatta. There is the missed opportunity for a new museum about Parramatta's remarkable history and contemporary cultures. And there's the demolition of the real Powerhouse Museum, Australia's only museum of applied arts and sciences which has been in Ultimo since 1893. Just 32 years after its triumphant opening as the Powerhouse Museum in 1988, the government will evict the museum's collections and demolish the Sulman award winning buildings, along with its state of the art infrastructure, built for a working life of more than 100 years.

Half the real Powerhouse will be closed by June so people should visit to take stock of the government's slow motion cultural crime. Make time to see the majestic transport hall and power displays as these objects will never be seen together again. When it comes to the secretive demolition of the Powerhouse Museum, taking out the trash is getting a whole new meaning.

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