

## Ticking the Consultation Box for the PHM's 'move' to Parramatta

The Powerhouse Museum Alliance rejects the faux consultations on the Parramatta museum, now underway by Infrastructure NSW, in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis.<sup>1</sup>

It is **not** community engagement when you are only consulting on decisions that have already been made. That is called 'ticking the box'. The government has made all the decisions on the Powerhouse Museum (PHM) and the Parramatta development, without regard to community opinion. Now it needs to show it has consulted.

From Premier Mike Baird's thought bubble in November 2014, the NSW Government has never considered any other options for a new museum in Parramatta, nor listened to community or expert views. The base case has always been that the Powerhouse Museum will be sold and demolished.<sup>2</sup> This is what has driven the government's plans from day 1. And this is why the people of Parramatta will never be allowed a genuine say on a new museum, where it goes, and what it is about.<sup>3</sup>

Great museums are not planned by ministerial diktat; especially in a democracy. Museums grow from genuine community passion, a strong sense of place and story, and an identified unmet need.<sup>4</sup> **Community engagement comes first and shapes every aspect of the museum's plans.** Consultation comes **before** decisions on the museum's location, and its themes, content and facilities. Open and transparent consultation always precedes the building design. But not when it comes to the NSW Government's property play for the assets of the Powerhouse Museum.

No museum has ever been **imposed on a community**, without passionate grassroots advocacy driving the project. But the NSW Government has refused listen to the Parramatta community and their preference for a museum in the Fleet St heritage precinct. It lied about the demolition of Willow Grove and St George's Terrace.<sup>5</sup> The government staged managed consultations in 2017, even holding rehearsals.<sup>6</sup> Written feedback was edited to disguise a clear preference for keeping the Powerhouse Museum and building a new museum in Parramatta's Fleet St Heritage precinct.<sup>7</sup>

Now Infrastructure NSW (INSW) has announced **community engagement – long after all the decisions have been locked in.** A set of limited questions and they can tick the consultation box.

INSW's statement that this is to **ensure the museum benefits and enhances the local community** is evidence that a great state museum, endowed, owned and built by the people of NSW, has been hijacked. The PHM is destined for eviction from its central city location, where it is accessible to everyone, and downgraded to the status of a regional cultural facility. Access and benefits to the rest of Sydney and NSW count for nothing.

This is a kick in the teeth for people living in regional NSW, and in other parts of Sydney. **All the citizens of NSW paid for the Powerhouse Museum** and endowed its collections over generations. Now it is being downsized and redefined as a museum for Parramatta. The government has shown no concern about access to the museum by residents from other parts of Sydney and regional NSW.

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The National Party has gone into hiding on the issue. The Parramatta museum is likely to lose 75% of the PHM's current audience. People from regional NSW and other parts of Sydney are unlikely to visit the relocated museum, but they will be paying for it. Taxpayers from across NSW are being hit an eye-watering \$1.5b to 'move' the PHM 23kms west to Parramatta, making it smaller, and less accessible.

Regional NSW is struggling to recover from years of drought, fire, flood and now a pandemic. The regions need cultural investment now. If NSW taxpayers are funding a \$1.5b museum for Parramatta, why not a network of PHM branch museums across regional NSW? Just 10% of the cost of moving the PHM to Parramatta would build 15 new regional museums. But the government has no plan for museums in NSW. And there is **no funding for regional cultural infrastructure; it is all being spent in the city and Parramatta**. What has the Deputy Premier and newly minted Minister for Regional NSW said about this grotesque funding inequality? Absolutely nothing.

The 'move' of the Powerhouse is a front for a monstrous property play at the expense of NSW taxpayers and generations of donors to the Powerhouse Museum. Communities have never been asked about keeping the PHM in Ultimo. **The NSW Government does not have community consent for the closure and demolition of the Powerhouse Museum**, and the eviction of its collections from their purpose designed buildings and state of the art facilities at Ultimo.

Another round of faux consultations will not give this toxic project legitimacy.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.infrastructure.nsw.gov.au/projects-nsw/new-powerhouse-museum-in-parramatta/>

<sup>2</sup> Johnstaff, The New Museum in Western Sydney Final Business Case, 8 January 2018, v4.0, p. 4, 42, 52, 56, 64 <https://powerhousemuseumalliancedotcom.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/new-western-sydney-museum-1-final-business-case-0801181.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> See for example Suzette Meade for North Parramatta Resident Action Group submission 44 to the Legislative Council's Inquiry into Museums and Galleries, and transcript of evidence <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/inquiries/Pages/inquiry-details.aspx?pk=2403#tab-submissions> and transcript of evidence, p. 52 <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/transcripts/53/Transcript%20-%205%20September%202016%20-%20Corrected.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> There is **no unmet need** for moving the Powerhouse to Parramatta, as the business case papers admit. *Although not defined at its inception by unmet demand like similar large scale infrastructure projects, the Project through the act of relocation ultimately begins to address the cultural demands of Western Sydney.* This is dangerous nonsense. Final Business Case (Supplement) Johnstaff, The New Museum in Western Sydney, 24 April 2018, p.2. <https://powerhousemuseumalliancedotcom.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/new-western-sydney-museum-2-final-business-case-supplement-240418.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Contrary the assertions of the Premier and Minister for the Arts, the demolition of Willow Grove and St George's Terrace was assumed in all the design options in the business case. Johnstaff, The New Western Sydney Museum, Final Business case, 8 January 2018, v.4, p.38 [New Western Sydney Museum 1 Final Business Case 080118](#)

<sup>6</sup> Johnstaff, MAAS Stakeholder Consultation Register B, Attachment C, rehearsals before public consultations 24 July 2017, 28 July 2017; [The MAAS Project 10 Stakeholder Consultation Register B](#)

<sup>7</sup> Information contrasting the Johnstaff Communications and Engagement Strategy, Elton Consulting, attachment Q/T 21 November 2017 <https://powerhousemuseumalliancedotcom.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/the-maas-project-8-communications-engagement-strategy.pdf>, versus the raw data sheets obtained under FOI. In the Extended Final Business Case process in 2017, the government consulted in bad faith, saying all options were on the table, when the secret business case papers released in June 2018 revealed that no other museum options were ever considered.

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