

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/new-powerhouse-not-a-museum-but-global-embarrassment-20200625-p5566q.html>

(See also: longer version in McDonald's blog: [https://www.johnmcdonald.net.au/2020/the-murder-of-the-powerhouse-museum/?utm\\_source=Website+Subscriptions&utm\\_campaign=f43959dbb6-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2017\\_04\\_18\\_COPY\\_66&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_b7a71c8b42-f43959dbb6-228361215](https://www.johnmcdonald.net.au/2020/the-murder-of-the-powerhouse-museum/?utm_source=Website+Subscriptions&utm_campaign=f43959dbb6-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_04_18_COPY_66&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b7a71c8b42-f43959dbb6-228361215) )

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OPINION

## *New Powerhouse not a museum but global 'embarrassment'*

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Art critic

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It's not a museum. This is not a matter of opinion, it's not a slander being spread by critics of the project. The proposed building in Parramatta the NSW government would like us to see as the home of a "relocated" Powerhouse Museum will be nothing more than an entertainment venue stuffed with cafes and reception areas.

The simplest on-line definition of a museum is: "a building in which objects of historical, scientific, artistic or cultural interest are stored and exhibited". There is no on-site storage facility in the plans for the new building, and no thought given to a permanent collection which is the very heart of the institution.

["Overgrown double milk crate": an artist's impression of the new Powerhouse Museum in Parramatta. *CREDIT: SUPPLIED*]

The plan for the 'New Powerhouse' reveals utterly inadequate facilities for displaying works of artistic and historical value. It will have only 25 per cent of the display area of the existing museum, and will not meet the necessary minimum thresholds to allow for loans from overseas institutions. There will be retail areas, 10 cafes and bars, but no collection storage, no conservation laboratory and only a single loading dock. The idea of "flexible" exhibition spaces means display areas will have to double up as party venues, severely limiting the kind of items that may be shown.

The Powerhouse's permanent collection is to be exiled to existing storage facilities in Castle Hill, along with curators and other exhibition staff. Whenever displays are to be changed, items will have to be trucked over, incurring needless expense, wear and tear, and the risk of accident.

The new Powerhouse in Parramatta is set to be an embarrassing example of worst practice by international museum standards. Ironically the current Powerhouse would not loan valuable pieces from their collection to any institution so poorly equipped.

[On February 10, the inundated former David Jones car park on which the new Powerhouse Museum will stand.]

It's been well documented that the new building is to be situated in a flood plain, which makes it unsafe for the display of objects, and perhaps for human occupation. According to hydrologist, John Macintosh, to put a public building on such a site is a "crazy proposal". He has warned that if a major flood came along "people could die".

None of this has struck a chord with Premier, Gladys Berejiklian, who has declared the "move" of the Powerhouse Museum "non-negotiable". Unphased by a COVID-19 lockdown that will cost the state tens of billions of dollars she is determined to proceed with a frivolous, destructive scheme ludicrously under-priced at \$1.1 billion. If the government's other projects, such as the light rail and WestConnex are any indication, we may expect the final bill to push closer to \$3 billion. Meanwhile, public servants are being asked to accept pay freezes to save \$2-3 billion.

The entire project has been veiled in a cloak of secrecy. Volumes of expert reports have been ignored. The findings of comprehensive inquiries have been treated with disdain. The government has either refused to disclose business plans or produced figures so hopelessly fudged that no-one with the slightest knowledge of museums would take them seriously. The most laughable claims tell us the new Powerhouse will attract 2 million visitors per year. As the Art Gallery of NSW claimed a record 1.61 million visitors in 2018, it seems wildly optimistic to imagine Parramatta will out-draw any venue in central Sydney.

The Premier is also falling back on that old chestnut - job creation. She tells us that 1100 temporary construction jobs will be created by this project, but is unconcerned that up to 95 jobs will be instantly lost if she makes good on her plan to close the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo. The heritage halls of the Powerhouse Museum are to shut on June 30, the museum's purpose-built galleries will close 12 months later.

[Then Deputy Premier and Minister for the Arts Troy Grant with then Premier Mike Baird at the newly announced location of the new Powerhouse Museum in Parramatta in 2016. *CREDIT: LOUISE KENNERLEY*]

As the new building is not due to open until 2024 or 2025, there's only one way to account for the sudden decision to close the Powerhouse. It is a cynical manoeuvre intended to capitalise on the remnant of the lockdown, a ploy to forestall a swelling tide of protest. Remember the fig trees chainsawed to make way for the light rail immediately after the government had given assurances they wouldn't be touched "for months"? Remember the instant demolition job launched on Sydney Football Stadium, just in case the Labor Party won the election? The raft of broken promises associated with the \$17 billion WestConnex development?

By now we know the form. Get in fast and do the dirty deed. When the damage is done you can tell your critics the only option is to push on to avoid a cost blow-out. The government knows that when something is irretrievably lost, such as the historic fig tree known as the Tree of Knowledge, there's nothing left to fuel protests. They are applying the same logic to the Powerhouse.

The Powerhouse Museum was opened in March 1988, but the core collection belongs to the old Technological, Industrial and Sanitary Museum founded in 1879. Unlike the Parramatta development the building in Ultimo, constructed on the site of a tram power station, was intended to provide adequate storage and display facilities for a collection that numbered more than 400,000 items (now more than 500,000). Architect Lionel Glendenning won the Sulman Award for his design, which was a precursor of high-profile international museum developments such as Tate Modern in the former Battersea Power Station.

The Powerhouse is unique in being a museum devoted to applied arts, science and technology. Its nearest counterparts are the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, whose brief is "art and design", and the Smithsonian Institution in America, which divides its operations between 19 separate museums.

The sheer diversity of collections is staggering, assembling material from all over the world in fields that range from ceramics, glass, jewellery, costume and furniture to industrial design, folk art and large-scale pieces of machinery. This includes the Boulton and Watt engine, the oldest built locomotive in NSW; the Catalina flying boat, and other items for which there will be no room in Parramatta. To even consider moving these things the government would be obliged to buy a crane for \$400,000. Then there is the small problem that none of them would fit into new building's goods lift.

[Locomotive No. 1243, built in Sydney in 1882, is rolled out at Ultimo's Powerhouse Museum in 1987. "The beautifully-restored locomotive had a 100-year working life, puffing throughout

NSW with passengers, stock and mail — and even a role in the 1970 film, *Ned Kelly*, starring Mick Jagger. *CREDIT:ARCHIVE]*

The lack of adequate planning and arrogant disregard of expert warnings means that most of the Powerhouse's large objects will be dumped in warehouses – or sold-off as a way of recouping spiralling costs. Expect unique pieces such as Kändler's 1739 ceramic bust of Baron Schmiedel or the Smith's Strasburg clock (1887-89), to be propped up in corners as part of a perpetual display of highlights, devoid of meaning or context.

The government's treatment of the Powerhouse Museum has astonished the international museum community. In 2018, *The Art Newspaper* noted this would be the most expensive museum relocation in history, while an editorial in the *Burlington Magazine* denounced the idea that the museum could be “so pointlessly and wastefully uprooted”. It's hard to think of another instance in which a government has wilfully destroyed a major public asset to pursue a scheme that has Buckley's chance of success. It would be akin to the British government relocating the Victoria and Albert Museum to Essex.

I've no room to recount the full, inglorious history of this project that was raised by Mike Baird's government in 2014. The then-premier's "arts ambassador", Liz Ann Macgregor, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, called the relocation a "game changer" for Western Sydney.

The move to Parramatta was seen as a way of answering pleas for an arts complex in a densely populated, culturally neglected region. But once it was made clear such a proposal would cost possibly billions it should have been obvious that it would be much cheaper and more effective to build an entirely new arts venue there and leave the Powerhouse alone. Instead, this most hair-brained of schemes was adopted with no reality check. At every stage the process has been secretive and confusing.

[Lionel Glendenning's award-winning Wran building at Ultimo. *CREDIT:LOUISE KENNERLEY]*

Parramatta wanted an arts complex but the government, until recently, was committed to giving them a science museum. Now even that idea has been watered down into something closer to a recreation centre. The price Parramatta will pay for an unwanted, overgrown double milk crate, will be the destruction of the Victorian heritage buildings of Willow Grove and St George's Terrace. Instead of a building that enriches the cultural life of the city, residents will see the last remaining fragments of local heritage trashed.

Infrastructure NSW has prepared an Environmental Impact Statement that admits Willow Grove is “one of its kind” but justifies its destruction because of the alleged economic benefits of the new project. Somewhere along the line the

cultural issues which lay at the heart of the "relocation" have been forgotten. As for the award-winning Powerhouse building in Ultimo, scheduled to be demolished after only 32 years, the only rationale anyone has been able to offer is that deals have been done with friendly developers eager to get their hands on prime real estate.

What can be done? Nothing, if we listen to Gladys, in her best totalitarian tones. Yet it's rumoured that only a few people in Parliament are wholeheartedly behind the plan. It is, in brief, an appalling act of vandalism against our cultural heritage, being enacted at the whim of a small lobby group. The project will leave Parramatta residents with a gigantic white elephant and still lacking a credible museum. The attendances of the Powerhouse, which allegedly drew over 900,000 people in 2018-19 will be decimated. The collection will be hidden away or sold off. And the multi-billion bill for this private extravagance will be met by taxpayers struggling because of the bushfires or COVID-19.

There are two groups of people who urgently need to stand up and be counted – firstly, those Liberal voters who consider themselves genuine conservatives, not entrepreneurs looking to do themselves a good turn at public expense. Any true conservative would and should be horrified at the wholesale destruction of an important museum and its replacement by an entertainment centre.

Secondly, members of the Australian arts community need to get behind the campaign to save the Powerhouse. This includes directors of other leading cultural institutions in Sydney including Liz Ann Macgregor.

We are on the verge of the greatest cultural crime in Australian history and figures of influence who sit on the sidelines should be held accountable for their silence.

### **John McDonald**

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