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Government barges ahead with cultural destruction

Leo Schofield

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June 21, 2020 — 12.15am

We are about to witness one of the most shameful acts of cultural vandalism in the history of this country. On June 30, the NSW government will shut down to the public the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo, where it has existed as both a landmark and an attraction for 134 years, and gradually demolish it to make way for sale of the site to a preferred developer. Thus, yet more of the Sydney we love is being eradicated.

The Powerhouse has earned world renown and respect. It has assembled, through acquisitions and donations, a unique, priceless and irreplaceable collection of objects relevant to the history of Australia in general and to NSW in particular. All aspects of human creativity – in science, technology, industry and the decorative arts – are represented in the collection which is now to be dispersed. Many items will never be seen again and a good deal of the collection will probably be sold off.

[The \$38 million Powerhouse Museum taking shape in 1986. *CREDIT:ROBERT PEARCE*]

This operation has, in my opinion, been deliberately and falsely described as a "relocation". It is no such thing. To me, it is the wholesale destruction of a much loved institution and its replacement with another entity that will bear as much relation to the current museum as a Picasso does to a postcard. Only a miserable group of objects will be displayed in a smaller, uglier building in distant Parramatta.

Greeted with almost universal incredulity when it was announced six years ago, this absurd plan continues to meet with unshakeable opposition from the public and from museum professionals.

In 2016, more than 10,000 Sydneysiders signed and presented to the state government a petition to force the creation of a special, cross-party parliamentary inquiry committee to review the plan. That committee gave it a firm thumbs down.

The government barged ahead anyway. Not even a pandemic has been able to deflect the Premier from this disastrous, profligate course of action.

[The Powerhouse Museum's Locomotive No. 1. *CREDIT: DALLAS KILPONEN*]

To the current government nothing is sacred, no beautiful sandstone buildings, no open spaces, nothing that can't be swiftly monetised. Extravagant new infrastructure projects, all inevitably costing double or triple original estimates, have bloomed like flowers in spring. Tunnels have been dug, more and more roads built, historic suburbs bisected, ancient trees felled. Central Sydney has been gifted with an astronomically costly and already outmoded light rail.

All of this frenzied activity now forms part of what is one of the worst planned cities in the Western world and one of the most incoherent traffic systems.

But these failures pale into insignificance beside the Powerhouse "relocation", which is not only physically and environmentally disastrous but also culturally destructive. What we would lose in the Powerhouse as a cultural and spiritual component of Sydney life can never be replaced.

Driven either by outmoded ideology, ignorance, bloody mindedness, political opportunism or by a malign combination of all of these: the government seems to have clung to the Powerhouse Parramatta project like a passenger on the Titanic to a flimsy raft.

[An artist's impression of the new Powerhouse Museum in Parramatta. *CREDIT:*]

Deaf to argument, blind to a need for fiscal sobriety and dumbly reciting her pro forma mantra, the Premier, Gladys Berejiklian, has declared the Parramatta move to be a project of state significance without giving a single good reason why it should jump the queue in front of social housing, schools, hospitals and regional cultural centres.

We are now up to Business Case Four and have yet not sighted cogent description of the proposal or a plausible cost-benefit analysis that might justify the risible claim of 1 million visitors a year to Parramatta. Two billion dollars are to be splurged on a plan that is not even half-baked. Shall we make that four? Or more?

The chosen site in Parramatta is manifestly unsuitable. It is flood prone. There is no room for expansion as none is contemplated. When throughout the world, cultural institutions are expanding into satellite spaces, repurposing old buildings or creating new homes for expanding collections – we are shrinking them.

No thought has been given to alternative sites such as the White Bay Power Station. Just grab a bit of existing state land – carve off a slice off the Botanic Garden for the wretched Sydney Modern, which is not a gallery but a function

centre in drag; level a prime site in the heart of Chinatown for whoever puts their hand up for it.

[Gladys Berejiklian is said to have found the Powerhouse Museum boring. *CREDIT: NICK MOIR*]

According to staff, the Premier has only set foot in the Powerhouse once. She is said to have found it "boring" – which is perhaps why she left the running of the Parramatta folly to her quondam minister for the arts, Don Harwin.

Harwin actually took the job seriously. But duched by a handful of powerful figures in the cultural world and ever willing to lend an ear to any scheme that might dilute general opposition to the Ultimo eradication, he became a prime target for the self-interested vultures who descended on the site at the prospect of dismemberment.

A lyric theatre, a fashion museum, a centre of baroque excellence, these and many more claims were made for a piece of the corpse. The public still has no idea of what is imagined for Ultimo or, for that matter, for Parramatta where the current chief executive – whose expertise is confined to the world of contemporary visual arts and who has no significant experience with museums - paints only the fuzziest picture of her vision. Which is perhaps why it is shaping up to be another Carriageworks.

The inescapable fact is that apart from Berejiklian and the Mayor of Parramatta, there is little or no support for the scheme. There is however unequivocal enthusiasm for something in Parramatta that does not involve the obliteration of the Powerhouse in Ultimo.

Female elephants have long pregnancies but in the end they bring forth something beautiful and noble. The gestation period for the Parramatta scheme has also been long. In six years the government has flung millions at it – \$14 million alone in consultant fees! – in a doomed attempt to produce a plausible business case. It has laboured long to bring forth another kind of elephant. A white elephant.

Leo Schofield was a trustee of the Powerhouse for 10 years. He is a former member of the executive of the National Trust (NSW) and a former chairman of the federal government's committee on new uses for its heritage properties.