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OPINION

Powerhouse Museum will run out of puff in Parramatta

[Elizabeth Farrelly](#)

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Steam. Twenty-five years ago, when the Powerhouse was at its height – which is to say, properly funded and energised – you could bowl in off Harris Street and watch something astonishing. Standing centimetres from the immense, hissing and chugging 1785 Boulton and Watt steam engine, you could watch its great piston slide, its beam-arm pivot and its levers swing, forcing the massive flywheel into 20 smooth and relentless revolutions a minute.

Watching it, you'd marvel that something as soft as steam could energise an inert mass twice human height and a thousand times the weight. But, of course, it was steam infused with genius.

[Former Powerhouse Museum director Peter Denham in front of the Boulton and Watt steam engine in 2017. *CREDIT: BEN RUSHTON*]

Machines, now ubiquitous in our lives, are no longer marvellous to us. With their physics closeted inside a computerised black box we no longer see their workings nor intuit their logic. Ironically, this has robbed us of our sense of mystery. Which may be why, although this is the machine that gave Sydney life, we're about to disrespect it utterly.

The Geneva Museum has a small brass model of Boulton and Watt's astounding engine. It runs not on steam but on compressed air, yet the museum is sufficiently proud to make a video explaining its genius. Britain, similarly, has both this engine and its Scottish genius-inventor James Watt engraved onto its £50 note.

But we in Sydney, entrusted with the real thing, can muster neither pride nor gratitude. Our machine, built in 1785, is older than we are and the oldest working steam engine in the world. Yet we propose to move it without expert metallurgical advice, shove it in indefinite storage and display it in some flood-prone foyer-cum-event space with no possibility of the motion that is its whole point and purpose. What is wrong with us?

[Architect Lionel Glendenning adapted the old Ultimo Tramway Power House to turn it into the Powerhouse Museum for Australia's Bicentenary celebrations. *CREDIT: BROOK MITCHELL*]

The Boulton and Watt steam engine embodied several separate patents. Together, they powered the industrial revolution that, for better or worse, brought Sydney into being. So there's poetic justice in the fact that the third such engine ever made landed here, in Ultimo, our original industrial heartland.

There's a further level of poetry in the fact that the 1988 adaptive re-use of the old Ultimo Tramway Power House, designed by government architect Lionel Glendenning for the Bicentenary, specially installed a reticulated steam system, run from the old boiler house, to drive the dozen or so steam machines in its collection.

After 30 years of neo-Liberal penny-pinching, such government investment in just making the city a more vivid and interesting place looks just as astonishing as the machine itself. Like, governments do that?

Not anymore, apparently. Now, after decades of funding starvation and curatorial reductions, the Powerhouse is scheduled to close at month's end, just as everything else reopens and years before any kind of replacement.

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

It's called a "move", this project to reinstate the Powerhouse on the flood-prone south bank of the Parramatta River. But that's not really accurate. The only thing that will relocate intact is the name. Everything else – building, site and priceless collection – will be broken up, separated, decontextualised, diminished, disrespected and mothballed.

Part of the collection will go to Parramatta, but since every space in the new building is designed to double as an event space, the chance for any permanent display is slim. Meanwhile, the Ultimo site, excepting space for a small fashion museum, will be sold. The Powerhouse itself will be a thing of the past. A memory.

This isn't something you do with museums. In the history of international museology – excepting the deliberate destruction of totalitarian regimes – institutional destruction of this kind is virtually unheard of. Yet here we are in this bizarre glass bead game that consistently values appearance over fact and form over content.

The Catalina Flying Boat is anchored to the roof of the Powerhouse Museum. Glendenning's Bicentennial building on the Ultimo site is a Mary Poppins bag of a thing. It looks modest on the outside but miraculously accommodates a 10-metre high turbine hall as well as galleries for locomotives, planes, trains, trams, horse-drawn buses and what was a working trainline.

There's No. 1 Locomotive, that hauled the first passenger train in NSW in 1855. There's Sydney's last Hansom cab, from Banjo Paterson days, a horse-drawn bus, and the Catalina flying boat that brought prisoners of war home from Singapore in 1945, suspended mid-air and inspectable from the balcony.

There's the fabulous hand-operated 22-platform Central Station Departures Board, one of those tickety-tick things like some magical organism out of Harry Potter. Having been replaced by TV screens in 1982, this lovely board was saved by then-railways honcho David Hill. Now, experts fear this priceless artefact will end up in landfill.

As to the working train line? Twenty years ago, the Powerhouse also stabled the 3801 steam train. Every Sunday, from Redfern, you'd hear its cheery toot as, billowing steam, it chuffed off under Broadway and out to the zig-zag railway at Lithgow. Passengers would return all bright-eyed and sooty-cheeked before the train nestled back into the Powerhouse courtyard. Until the Goods Line was pedestrianised in the early 2000s, a train could steam all the way from Perth to the Powerhouse. For a moment it was almost like Sydney had a rich imaginative life.

Despite ongoing public opposition and against the findings of at least one parliamentary inquiry, the Premier has reaffirmed her determination to proceed with the billion-dollar Powerhouse project. For that money, she could build Parramatta a proper museum on the Cumberland Hospital site, reinstate the demolished Moore Park stadium as parkland and revivify the Powerhouse.

She heads a government whose only pride, it seems, is economic management. Why, then, waste taxpayer money downgrading priceless public assets? Oh for a little less hot air, a little more steam. [The Powerhouse Environmental Impact Statement](#) is open for public submissions until July 7.

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