

Winkworth: The Harwood Building is the Powerhouse Museum

Its demolition is reckless, wasteful, destructive, unnecessary, and an assault on Sydney's heritage

On July 4 the NSW Government announced the Powerhouse Museum (PHM) would be saved. Someone at that announcement had their fingers crossed behind their back.

Nothing has changed in the Government's plans to shred the Powerhouse Museum's status and operations as Sydney's major heritage museum, evict its collections, demolish its heritage buildings, and destroy its state-of-the-art collection facilities.

The process of packing up the collections at the PHM continues. This is because the Government plans to demolish the museum's historic Harwood building which is an integral part of the Powerhouse Museum's history, design conception and operations. The Arts Minister and senior bureaucrats told the Legislative Council Museum Inquiry that the Harwood building may be developed as a lyric theatre. This is likely to include a high rise tower above the theatre. MAAS is working on yet another business case and masterplan, which has been in train since last year. The brief would see the museum downsized and reduced to a cultural industries facility with a fashion and design showcase. Some details may have changed but the intent is the same.

The Harwood building is the long brick saw-tooth roofed building that runs along the Goods Line. It was built in 1899 as Sydney's first electric tram depot, co-located with the Ultimo power house which was built to power the tram network. It is largest and oldest of Sydney's remaining historic tram depots. Title to the building was transferred to MAAS in 1964 for use as a transport museum. In 1980 it was restored and adapted as a collections facility in the first stage in the Powerhouse Museum project. In 1981 it opened to the public as Stage 1, with a display of museum treasures offering a taste of what was planned for the Powerhouse.

It is inexplicable that the MAAS Trust would agree to the demolition of the museum's state-of-the-art collections facilities, which are central to the history and heritage of the site, and the operation of the Powerhouse as a world class museum. The Harwood building houses the museum's main collection store, conservation labs, research library, archives, large object conservation workshop, exhibition fabrication workshop, photography studio, fumigation, loading dock and staff offices. It is indispensable to the museum's operations and public access to the collections and library. If Harwood goes the museum won't even have a loading dock. No serious museum would give up co-located collection facilities of this quality and scale, for something inferior and distant that puts the collection at risk every time it is moved.

An EIS is underway for a huge new large object store at Castle Hill, on TAFE land next to the Museums Discovery Centre (MDC). This is another round of the consultants' picnic fee-fest that has marked the last five and half years of the Government's assault of the Powerhouse Museum and its heritage assets. SEARS was granted the very day the Government announced the PHM was saved. If the July 4 announcement meant anything, (it didn't) the EIS would have been withdrawn. It wasn't. This store is not needed if the PHM is going to keep Harwood and the Powerhouse Museum's priceless collection of large objects on display. It is very clear from the scale of the new store that it is designed to take the PHM's large transport and power objects which will be evicted from their

purpose designed settings at Ultimo. <https://www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/major-projects/project/35916>

The estimated cost of the new store at Castle Hill is around \$100m. This is a shocking waste of money when there is no cultural infrastructure fund for western Sydney and regional NSW. In the last nine years of the LNP government, the sum total of its regional cultural infrastructure program was just \$100m. But still the government is blowing a lazy \$100m on an unnecessary destructive folly when there is not a bean for the bush and communities are trying to recover from crushing drought, floods, bushfires and now the pandemic recession. The money spent on the Castle Hill store could build at least six new regional museums. And it would save the 337 mature eucalypts which will be felled to make way for the store. These trees, now 70 years old, were part of the museum's historic eucalypt plantation and its research program on eucalyptus oils which dates to foundation of the museum in 1880. MAAS has said these trees have no heritage value.

Former senior curators Andrew Grant and Ian Debenham gave compelling evidence at the museum inquiry about the risks to collections and the heritage value of the PHM complex, see link from p.17. <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/transcripts/2406/Transcript%20-%20Museums%20and%20cultural%20projects%20-%202021%20August%202020%20-%20UNCORRECTED.pdf> Jennifer Sanders the former deputy director told the previous inquiry there were 53,000 object movements between the Harwood building and the Powerhouse exhibition halls in 2017. The time, cost and risk in packing and trucking the equivalent number of objects between Castle Hill and Ultimo has never been considered.

The Powerhouse Museum complex is one of the most significant industrial heritage sites in Sydney. It is the major surviving landmark of what was once the industrial heartland of Sydney. The Powerhouse tells an important story about industry, transport, power and the development of the city 120 years ago. It was purpose designed to display the museum's outstanding collection of power and transport objects in a setting that is conceptually resonant and spatially appropriate for these collections. This is what makes reducing the museum to a design, fashion and cultural industries outpost exceptionally stupid. The place already has a story. And nationally significant collections to tell that story, including one of the original C class trams that were once housed in the tram depot.

Heritage places and museums underpin Sydney's \$14b per annum cultural and heritage tourism sector – and will do so again after COVID. The most popular activity for high value international cultural tourists is visiting history, heritage buildings and sites. The Committee for Sydney benchmarking report shows that Sydney ranks at the bottom of 30 global peer cities for the number of museums. The last major museum developed by the NSW Government was the Powerhouse in 1988. Since then Sydney's population has increased by more than 30%. Sydney claims to be a global city, but it has not had strategic investment in new museums and heritage attractions. Far from expanding the state's portfolio with new museums, the NSW Government is still intent on duplicating, downsizing and breaking up the Powerhouse, delivering less for an eye-watering cost of more than \$1b.

The National Trust has nominated the Harwood building for state heritage listing. The minister who might approve this nomination to protect the site is also the Arts Minister who is driving plans for its demolition and development. Helping this theatre tragic to have his way with the PHM's heritage assets is Minister Stokes through the Pyrmont Peninsula Place Strategy. Cue lyric theatre on the

PHM site, along with a community creative art centre, and leveraging the Powerhouse Museum to expand cultural uses. Most people think a museum is already a high value cultural use, especially one that had 757,000 visitors last year. But not this Government. They see the Powerhouse Museum and its heritage buildings as just an underused development site. Submissions on the Pyrmont Strategy which will help pave the way for the museum's downsizing and demolition are open until 13 September. <https://www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/Pyrmont>

To help the government build the case for demolishing half the PHM and the evicting its collections, the MAAS CEO has launched a survey asking for community views on the renewal of the 'Powerhouse Ultimo'. It has already lost its brand as a museum. 'Nothing is off the table' she said; expect perhaps keeping the place as the Powerhouse Museum. Half way through the survey we learn that 'Powerhouse Ultimo' will have a focus on 'design and innovation'. Posing narrow leading questions with limited options, the survey is another example of the fake consultations designed to give a veneer of consent to the government's asset stripping and heritage demolitions at Ultimo and Parramatta.

If you really want to save the actual Powerhouse Museum, the expansive, surprising, amazing museum loved by generations of visitors, it would be better to email your views directly. <https://maas.museum/powerhouse-renewal/>

Kylie Winkworth
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