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OPINION

Erasing our women of history in Parramatta, stone by stone, brick by brick

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The seven stone sisters of Parramatta: Willow Grove, the Female Factory, the Female Orphan School, Experiment Farm, the Dairy Cottage, Hambledon and the Parramatta Girls Industrial School. These seven rare and heritage-listed buildings, exemplars of a remarkable female-driven narrative in early colonial Parramatta, form a veritable female phalanx. Yet two of the seven are currently under threat – not from ratbag developers but from our own supposedly conservative, supposedly heritage-conscious, supposedly female-led government.

Women don't figure much in Australian history. Not because we weren't there. Not even because we didn't do bold and interesting stuff. Rather, it's because female stories are not considered important.

[Stone sister ... Suzette Meade, president of the North Parramatta Residents' Action Group, at Willow Grove. *CREDIT: STEVEN SIEWERT*]

I resist post-modern revisionism, retelling history to premiate the great man's wife or daughter. Nor do I like the term "women's history". History belongs to us all. But by that same token, when women do significant things, those things should be remembered. Yet even now, women's stories do not figure in heritage criteria and most of the heritage we keep is by, and about, men.

Our disdain of heritage is itself a form of misogyny. Not only because so many of its defenders are women but because heritage is seen as the "girl" of contemporary politics. Inherently weak and, however lovable, unable to fight its corner or pay its way, heritage is a soft target in the bovver-boy world of neoliberalism, ripe for trampling.

The government's current proposal to squeeze a tech hub into the Parramatta Female Factory is one example. Its underhand determination to demolish the pretty

Italianate villa Willow Grove, or shove it from its glorious garden for the Powerhouse, is another. With a mite of common sense, both could be avoided.

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The Female Factory dates from 1821. Designed by Francis Greenway after strenuous lobbying from Samuel Marsden, for whom female convicts were “objects of vice and woe”, it was hostel, prison, workhouse, marriage agency and maternity hospital (since the only other women’s ward was at Sydney Hospital). Although designed for 172 women, by 1828 it held more than three times that number.

And factory it was – of fabrics, babies and women. Imprisoned behind high stone walls, the women were let out only for church and lined up for inspection by prospective employers or husbands, insofar as there was a difference. Once selected, in either capacity, they’d be monitored for performance and returned if unsatisfactory.

The obedient women, known as “first class”, received small wages. The “third class” women – including those [pregnant from rape](#) – were outright prisoners, required to break rocks and endure punishments including solitary confinement on bread and water for up to three weeks. In a system open to corruption and abuse, the distinction from slavery was negligible.

Yet the building itself is beautiful. A long honey-coloured institution in dignified Georgian sandstone, it centres a seven-hectare campus which, set within the 30ha Fleet Street Heritage Precinct, has finally made it onto the National Heritage List. Now – being older and more intact than Hobart’s Female Factory and every bit as important as [Greenway’s Hyde Park Barracks](#), both of which have World Heritage listing – the entire Parramatta Female Factory precinct stands a good chance of being listed on UNESCO’s World Heritage Register. Or would, without the government’s help.

Five years ago, our government enlisted the Prince of Wales in proposing [3000 apartments in a glittering tower](#) up to 24 storeys high right across the fragile and beautiful Fleet Street precinct. When that fell apart, Sydney University was tipped to take over, which might actually have been worse. Right now, though the precinct’s future is unclear, the Parramatta light rail is being heedlessly hacked through the middle of it, destroying immense trees, stomping on evident archaeological remains (including visible stone stairs and cellars) and excavating within metres of the Female Factory’s sandstone wall.

Into the factory buildings, the government wants to shove 1500 square metres of start-up hub. The architecture, by Tanner Kibble Denton, is respectful. Yet there’s no respect in ignoring the stories of the 5000-odd women who passed through this

place. And to cram the building instead with 270 geeks, then moat the lot with car parking, is downright crude. Try getting World Heritage listing for that, especially with co-working spaces everywhere going belly-up.

In any case there's a more rational, less invasive alternative: keep the Powerhouse in Ultimo, customise a genuine Parramatta museum within these old and lovely Fleet Street buildings and retain Willow Grove in its lofty garden as a tribute to the women who, for decades, created and ran it.

Willow Grove was built in 1891 by draper and milliner Annie Gallagher. Even this wasn't known until the [North Parramatta Residents' Action Group](#) commissioned an accurate history. Since then, it has housed women's businesses and women giving birth. It is now protected by a CFMEU green ban and treasured by the local Dharug people as a rare place of "genuine peace ... of healing, birthing and belonging".

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Heritage, as a soft, embedded value, is entwined with place. Like women, it is networked. The government wants to shift this building out of the way and reconstruct it next to the old jail. With all respect, that's so male. It's expensive, object-driven problem-solving behaviour. Dharug elder Aunty Julie Jones calls it "profoundly disrespectful".

When the resident action group's president, Suzette Meade, appeared at Willow Grove's window the other day, behind mask and barbed wire, as the NSW government locked the press out of the media conference she was holding, she titled her tweet "The ghost of Annie Gallagher".

But I heard echoes of [Barbara Frietchie](#), the 90-year-old who, in Whittier's old poem, climbs the stair, leans out and shakes the Union flag at Stonewall Jackson. "*Shoot if you must this old grey head,/But spare your country's flag,*" she said. Not that there's anything grey or old about Suzette, an exuberant and indefatigable redhead. But there's same sense of strong women fighting for what really matters.

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