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**Green Left**

## The battle to save Willow Grove

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Suzette Meade outside the historic Willow Grove in Parramatta. Photo: Katrina James

Despite widespread opposition, the NSW government is pushing ahead with its controversial Powerhouse Museum proposal next to the Parramatta River.

While its October 8 response to submissions indicates it will revise some design aspects, it still plans to “deconstruct and relocate” the historic Willow Grove heritage building. St George’s Terrace, which was also under threat, will be retained and refurbished, including the brick facade.

The Save the Powerhouse group said that of the 1299 submissions received by the inquiry, 1232 objected to the museum plan. **See also:** [Powerhouse Museum backflip 'a victory for cultural life'](#)

The plan has been condemned by heritage groups and, in April, the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) placed a green ban on the demolition of Willow Grove. The union also opposes relocating the historic house.

Suzette Meade, from the North Parramatta Residents Action Group, spoke to *Green Left* about the campaign to save heritage sites and for an alternative location and design for a new museum in

Parramatta. When Meade found out at the end of last year “through an insider at government that [Willow Grove] would be pulled down” she quickly “made sure to let the media know”. The decision was made despite NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian and Special Minister of State Don Harwin pledging before the election to save it.

Meade, who is a construction project manager, built a relationship with the CFMEU five years ago before the union announced a green ban on the entire historic Cumberland Hospital site, now known as the Fleet Street heritage precinct. Meade said Jack Munday, the late Builders Labourers Federation leader “was beside me”. “That was the largest — I’m pretty sure — green ban in physical size. The ban is still active on the site.”

She said the discussion about another green ban came down to forging relationships and “a lot of waiting for the right time” and “showing that you’ve got the support from multiple organisations”. Meade spoke to the CFMEU Committee of Management in February. “I went in with letters of support from the National Trust ... and gave a brief presentation on why these buildings should be saved and why we think it is the wrong site for a museum.” She received support almost immediately. “Twenty minutes [later] ...I had a phone call saying, the ‘Interim green ban [is on]. We’ve just decided.’ They said it was unanimous.”

While the ban announcement was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, soon after it went public, the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association came onboard, pledging to “stand in front of the machines with us”. The union was “outraged” that Willow Grove could be demolished, Meade said. There is a “great connection” between midwifery at Willow Grove and Cumberland Hospital. There is a “strong female history in Parramatta – where women built this colony, strong women, entrepreneurial women, rebellious women, opinionated women”. Willow Grove was built and commissioned by Annie Gallagher, a “strong, entrepreneurial” woman, Meade said, who had a haberdashery store “around the corner”. “Right up until the 1950s, when the Post Master General bought it, it was always owned by women.”

The latest plan to move Willow Grove not only effectively demolishes and rebuilds it, it also disturbs the gardens, trees and people’s connections to the historic place that are significant. The site is located on the land of the Burramattagal people of the Darug nation — from where the name Parramatta is derived. The Darug Strategic Management Group strongly objected to the new museum. Meade said in its submission to the Legislative Council inquiry that it was not consulted and identified a significant tree on the site. “The landscape at the back of that property is very special, as is the architectural building. It’s a beautiful oasis.”

Meade said opposition to the development is broad and extends beyond Parramatta. “The CFMEU were inundated with calls the week after its [green ban] announcement. It said it had not had such a reaction for decades. “I had a young fellow call me [from] seven hours west of here and he said: ‘Look, I know I’m far away; here’s my mobile number; I heard it on Ray Hadley; I’m a builder, and me and my mates will fill up our Utes and we’ll come down; just tell me and we’ll stand with you.’

“This is bigger than Parramatta,” said Meade. “It’s about the cumulative loss of heritage: two buildings — St Georges Terrace and Willow Grove — are the only buildings along the river that represent our past. “Parramatta is losing its soul at an expeditious rate,” Meade said. The groups is constantly “fighting spot fires” — everywhere. “It’s a submission for this, a submission for that.”

Meade said it was very concerning that the government was fast-tracking developments during COVID-19. She is also worried about local governments’ powers being undermined due to “state-significant developments” such as the Powerhouse Museum. “The planning legislation actually cuts [councils] out, [but] that shouldn’t stop them from being loud.” Unelected committees stacked with industry representatives, such as the Greater Sydney Commission, the Western Sydney Leadership

Dialogue group and the Placemaking NSW Advisory Committee, are also undermining council and residents' say.

The City of Parramatta Council adopted two unanimous motions to try and save Willow Grove and St Georges Terrace “but that was it”. Two professionally-made banners placed on the fence outside Willow Grove and on St Georges Terrace were recently removed by council, Meade thinks, because they had “CFMEU Green Ban” on them. “They got taken down within three days [due to] an anonymous complaint about regulations on advertising or election material on public property.”

Meade said the alternative would be to locate a Museum of NSW at the Cumberland Hospital heritage precinct “with low-level intertwined serpentine buildings between landscape” and “set within a botanical estate”. “It would cost less, deliver more culturally and would bring so much tourism to Parramatta”. She said the government largely ignored the group’s proposal, which would incorporate “more open ‘in-out’ spaces, where we can have larger crowds” in a safer setting, in favour of “a 10-storey Taj Mahal on a milk crate”.

The Parramatta light rail project, which will run through the hospital site once it is complete, is “a selling point to it being a very accessible arts and culture precinct, and a tourism destination”. “Historic places like the Cumberland Hospital and Willow Grove are vital, because we can’t retro fit them later on.”

Meade said the government’s July announcement that the [Powerhouse Museum site at Ultimo had been saved](#) was “a clever rebranding” exercise, because the plan to sell the site remains — two years later than originally planned. “But there is still a fight,” Meade said. “We might get knocked down but we get up again and we’re not giving up.”

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