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Indigenous group ‘sickened’ by Powerhouse Museum expansion: ‘It treats our land as terra nullius’



‘Our ancestors could be buried there’: Dharug custodians Julie Jones and Michelle Locke in front of historic homestead Willow Grove, which is to be relocated to make way for the new Powerhouse Museum. Photograph: David Maurice Smith/Oculi

A group representing the Dharug people say they were cut out of consultation over the museum’s Parramatta site, amid a dispute with the land council

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An Indigenous group has been left “sickened” and feels “utter dismay” over the controversial proposed Powerhouse Parramatta museum in Sydney, saying it was effectively cut out of consultation.

The organisation that represents Dharug people in Western Sydney said it felt it was only included in planning talks about the multimillion dollar development in order to “tick boxes”.

And the group said part of the plan – which involves demolishing and relocating a 130-year-old homestead, Willow Grove – may unearth ancient Indigenous artefacts and the bodies of their ancestors, in a move which “reaffirms the colonial reality that we did not – and still don’t – matter”.

The museum project was initially intended to replace the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo. But on 4 July, after sustained pushback, arts minister Don Harwin announced the government would retain the Ultimo museum site while continuing to pursue the expansion to the Parramatta site, which was purchased from Parramatta council for \$140m.

On 8 October, Powerhouse trustee David Borger told an ongoing parliamentary inquiry into NSW museums that the Parramatta project – including the removal of Willow Grove – had the full support of the “traditional Aboriginal owners”.

But Borger was referring to the statutory body the Deerubbin Local Aboriginal Land Council, not the Dharug people, who are recognised by the NSW government as traditional owners of the land but have been refused entry to the land council [in a decades-long and bitter dispute](#).

The Dharug Strategic Management Group (DSMG) is a local non-profit organisation that represents Dharug people in the area, and which is acting as one of the consultants to the Powerhouse Parramatta project.

DSMG chair and Dharug woman Julie Jones told Guardian Australia that by rejecting their membership applications, Deerubbin – one of the wealthiest land councils in the state, and the native title claimant for the area – have been effectively denying Dharug people a voice on how their traditional lands are used. “Deerubbin are not the custodians of the land; they sell Dharug land,” Jones said.

Australian government knows 'very little' about whether money spent on Aboriginal programs works. [Read more](#)

Steven Wright, the land council’s non-Indigenous chief operating officer, did not answer questions regarding why DSMG had been refused membership, but Jones says the land council does not believe that Dharug traditional owners of the area still exist.

DSMG has also accused the Powerhouse Museum of reneging on a Statement of Recognition and Understanding the two parties signed in May, which acknowledged the Dharug people as traditional owners.

A Powerhouse spokesperson told Guardian Australia the museum had an “enduring” and “unwavering commitment to celebrating and paying respect to the Dharug *yura* [people].”

‘What about heritage? What about culture?’

The Dharug group had initially supported the Parramatta museum’s construction, but their role in the government’s promised consultative committee appeared to be nothing more than “tick the boxes”, Jones told the inquiry.

“Everything had already been decided, so there was no discussion and we were left thinking, what are we actually consulting about?” Jones said.

In July, the NSW government released the [Powerhouse Parramatta’s Environmental Impact Statement \(EIS\)](#), which the Dharug group have described as “offensive”, alleging it effectively “treats our *nura* [place] as *terra nullius*”.

[The DSMG’s response](#) to the EIS was one of [1,268 public submissions](#), the overwhelming majority of which objected to the project and raised the issue of loss of heritage. In their submission, the DSMG said the Dharug people of Parramatta were “sickened” and “dismayed at the complete lack of respect” and the “unacceptable” and “ignorant” implications that the proposed site was “empty of anything of value prior to its occupation by the Powerhouse”. “This erasure parallels the colonial insistence that our *nura* was empty and that we did not exist. It reaffirms the colonial reality that we did not – and still don’t – matter,” the submission said.

An Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Assessment report, commissioned by Infrastructure NSW and delivered in April 2020, stated that “the Aboriginal community consultation process [had been] undertaken in accordance with statutory guidelines”.

But Jones told Guardian Australia the consultation process with the museum and government had been “profoundly disrespectful”. “They came in with their plans and it was all about money, money, money – how good would this be for the [local economy],” she said. “We said, ‘What about country? What about heritage? What about culture?’ ... It was like the only value Aboriginal culture had was the sell-on value of the land. “They made it look like we were being given a voice, so they could just say yeah, we’ve ticked that box,” she said.

Responding on behalf of the Powerhouse Museum and Infrastructure NSW, a NSW government spokesperson told the Guardian that the government was committed to community engagement. “[The government] will continue to consult with the Dharug Strategic Management Group, as well as the many other community groups and organisations that have a role to play in the future of Powerhouse Parramatta,” they said in a statement. “The NSW government is focused on delivering a heritage interpretation strategy that will honour the strong connection Indigenous communities have to Parramatta and Greater Sydney, and honour heritage buildings.”

‘Our ancestors could be buried there. They are our bones’

The DSMG’s opposition to the project was cemented earlier this month when the Dharug group learned of the state government’s proposal to dismantle and move Willow Grove in an effort to “preserve” its heritage – a proposal which the Deerubbin land council have described as “[a win for the West](#)”.

The 1890s two-storey Victorian mansion sits smack bang in the middle of the proposed museum's two buildings. The inquiry heard it had no architectural or major historical significance and was consequently not heritage protected.



Willow Grove is 'possibly the only [historical] building in Parramatta that doesn't have a history of colonial violence'. It is slated for relocation to make way for Powerhouse Parramatta. Photograph: Suzette McCrae/Supplied

But DSMG's finance officer Richie Howitt told Guardian Australia that the fact that the site isn't known for its historical significance is precisely what makes Willow Grove valuable: "It's possibly the only [historical] building in Parramatta that doesn't have a history of colonial violence."

The original female owner of the Victorian mansion, local businesswoman Annie Gallagher, did not block the local Indigenous population from access to the riverbank, as did most of the other grand homes built along the Parramatta River in the 19th century; and when it was converted to a maternity hospital in the early 20th century, Indigenous women were not excluded.

"To think that heritage can be preserved by dismantling [Willow Grove] and rebuilding it somewhere between the old Parramatta Gaol and the Female Factory – both sites that contain terrible stories for the Dharug people – is a fundamental misunderstanding of what heritage is," Howitt said. "It's not just adding insult to injury ... it's quite simply offensive." There is also the issue of what may lie beneath Willow Grove: the inquiry heard it could be sitting on a treasure trove of ancient Indigenous artefacts.

But because the project has been classified as a "state significant" development, the curation of what may be excavated could be outside of the Dharug people's control, and instead pass into the hands of either the museum or the Deerubbin land council.

"Our ancestors could be buried there, our babies could be buried there [from the building's time as a maternity hospital], they are our bones," Jones told Guardian Australia.

In the government's own EIS, the area is marked red to signify "high archeological sensitivity". The Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Assessment report has recommended an "unexpected finds protocol" be developed prior to any construction, and that the project be conducted under the supervision of heritage specialists.

"There's this superior colonial expectation that they have the right to take our ancestors out of the ground and put them in a box somewhere," Jones said. "How would they feel if we went to Rookwood and started digging up their ancestors?"

"If bones are dug up and handed over to Deerubbin, you're going to have a fight on your hands."