

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/nov/17/insignificant-building-threatens-to-scuttle-800m-powerhouse-parramatta>

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'Insignificant' building threatens to scuttle \$800m Powerhouse Parramatta

The row over Willow Grove continues with two unions imposing a green ban on the heritage relocation and a protest taking place



Willow Grove stands in the way of the \$800m Powerhouse Parramatta project. Photograph: David Maurice Smith/Oculi

A “not particularly significant or unique” two-storey building in Parramatta could scuttle one of the NSW government’s most ambitious projects, the \$800m Powerhouse Parramatta.

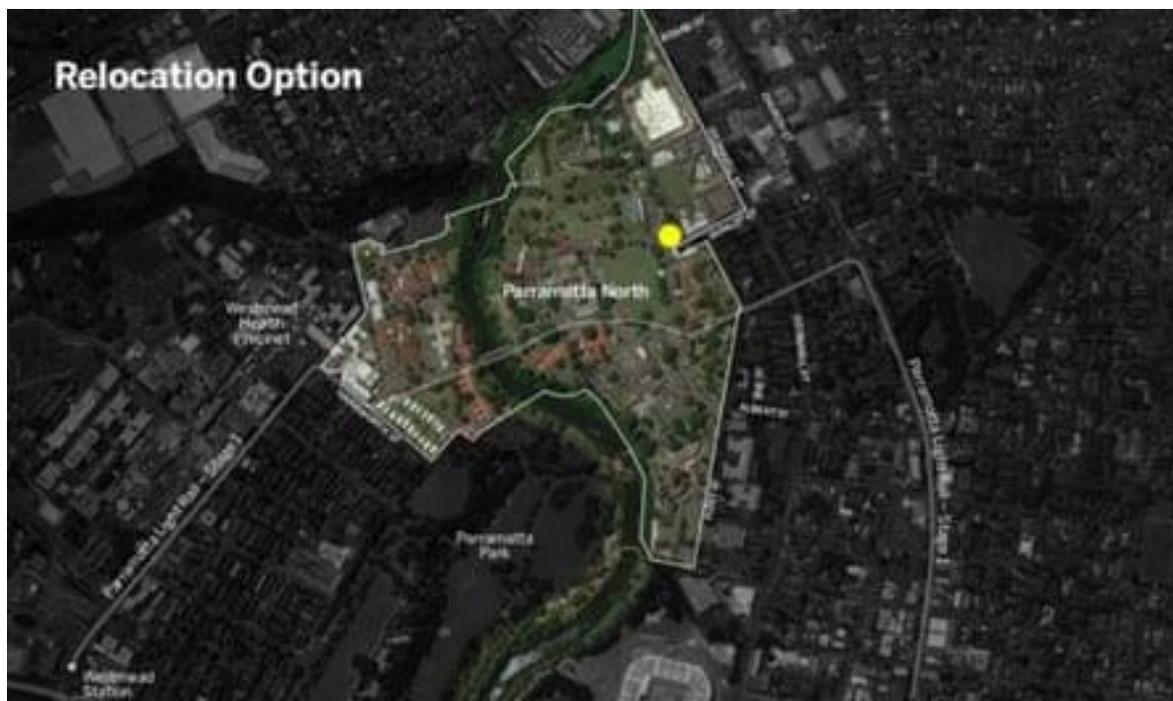
On Tuesday, Parramatta's main thoroughfare will close temporarily from midday, to make way for a protest march to save Willow Grove, an 1890s villa that sits at the centre of the site selected by the state government to house one of the country's largest museums.

Two of the state's largest unions – the NSW arm of the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) and the NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association – have placed a green ban on the house, effectively preventing its demolition.

The issue has also caused bitter division among the City of Parramatta's councillors, with last week's meeting deteriorating into a shouting match during debate over whether council should support a motion in favour of the NSW government's response to the EIS's submissions, which recommends the building's removal from its existing site. The council ultimately voted to support it.

In a report prepared by a major accountancy firm at the behest of the state government to convince the unions to lift the green ban, the relocation site for the historic building is revealed.

In the confidential report seen by Guardian Australia, it's confirmed Willow Grove will be dismantled brick by brick and rebuilt directly opposite old Parramatta Gaol.



A screen shot of the confidential report prepared for the CFMEU Photograph: BSW State Government

Representatives from the Dharug community, recognised by the state government as the traditional owners of the area, who have strong

historical ties to both the house and the land it sits upon, have also condemned the relocation site. “It’s offensive to take something that is so meaningful to the Dharug people and relocate it into a colonial setting, into a place with such a dark history of violence and Indigenous incarceration,” said Richie Howitt, a director of the Dharug Strategic Management Group, which sits on Powerhouse Parramatta’s community reference group. The report said the relocated Willow Grove would have “strong connectivity with community and cultural activity” and promised the CFMEU ten “opportunities to collaborate”, including broadening the government’s apprenticeship program to help deliver Powerhouse Parramatta and other NSW government projects.

The CFMEU told the Guardian the report has not shifted their firm stance on the green ban, industrial action the union has not taken since the heritage row over Bondi Pavilion in 2016.

The union’s NSW construction secretary, Darren Greenfield, said the proposal to demolish Willow Grove and rebuild it in a different location “was absurd and completely unacceptable to the people of Parramatta and to the CFMEU”.

Greenfield said the dismantling of the building would inevitably result in the destruction of much if not all of the original materials.

“What will be rebuilt on a completely different location will not be Willow Grove – it will be a copy ... and a poor copy at that,” he said.

“The community along with heritage experts and the CFMEU do not accept this as saving our heritage.”

Arts minister Don Harwin said Willow Grove’s relocation to a new site in North Parramatta would provide the community with better access while restoring the villa to its former glory.

“We’ve listened to the community tell us of their connection to Willow Grove,” he said in a statement in October.

“With this decision we will deliver vastly improved access to Willow Grove on a better site, and Western Sydney gets its long awaited and much deserved first cultural institution.”

In the same 8 October statement, the lord mayor of Parramatta, Bob Dwyer, said:

“Relocating Willow Grove and preserving it at a new site will provide an opportunity to breathe new life into this historic building, while still delivering a world-class cultural institution at an iconic location in Parramatta’s CBD.”

On the same day, Powerhouse trustee David Borger told a NSW parliamentary inquiry that Willow Grove was not historically important enough to make it onto the state's heritage register. "It is not a particularly significant or unique building," he told the inquiry.

"In fact, it is a pattern-book Victorian Italianate house that has had significant and substantial change."

[Dharug custodians and knowledge holders Julie Jones (left) and Michelle Locke in front of Willow Grove in October. Photograph: David Maurice Smith/Oculi]

In late October, a NSW government spokesperson told the Guardian it would "continue to consult with the Dharug Strategic Management Group as well as the many other community groups" and it was "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".

Last Monday's council meeting heard that the heritage issues surrounding Parramatta Powerhouse had become so controversial that the government had received more submissions to Infrastructure NSW's Environmental Impact Statement on the project than those combined for the similarly polarising Westconnex and Sydney Metro West.

More than 90 percent of the more than 1,300 submissions raised "loss of heritage" concerns over the demolition of St George's Terrace – a row of 1880s residences and shops – and/or the dismantling and relocation of Willow Grove a couple of kilometres north, to make way for the new museum.