

13 February, 2021

'The Parramatta Powerhouse won't be a Museum'

Save the Powerhouse community group writes on Facebook and in email:

'Planning Minister Rob Stokes' late-Friday announcement that the contested "Parramatta Powerhouse" project has been approved <http://tiny.cc/o09jtz> surprised no-one. It was a foregone conclusion.

And even if Stokes stipulates some cosmetic planning conditions - such as "inclusion of green open space as part of the overall plans (to) benefit locals and visitors", the government's intention (SMH Feb 13 <http://tiny.cc/u19jtz>) "to dismantle the 19th-century mansion ... Willow Grove and relocate it elsewhere in Parramatta" - will go ahead, Stokes says, because "retention of Willow Grove would 'severely compromise' the development of the site".

The Government's 2015 plan to "move" Ultimo's world-famous Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta was initially greeted with hoots of derision...until the NSW community realized that the NSW Government was serious!

For the six years since then, this tortured project has muddled along, via backflips, U-turns, threatened cancellations, three MAAS directors, several business cases, a two-year (ongoing) Parliamentary Inquiry and \$ millions in consultancy.

Now, at what appears to be the final (?) stage, a "structure" - still laughably dubbed "the Parramatta Powerhouse" and resembling two upturned milk crates - will be built on a flood-prone site at the Parramatta River. But whatever the people of Parramatta have been promised, or are hoping for, IT WON'T BE A MUSEUM!

Arts critic John McDonald observed accurately "It will be nothing more than an entertainment venue stuffed with cafes and reception areas. There will be retail areas, 10 cafes and bars, but no collection storage, no conservation laboratory and only a single loading dock. The plan...reveals utterly inadequate facilities for displaying works of artistic and historical value. It will have only 25 per cent of the display area of the existing (ie Ultimo) museum, and will not meet the necessary minimum thresholds to allow for loans from overseas institutions".

Before Friday's EIS approval, Museums consultant Kylie Winkworth had closely studied the (stage 2) design brief prepared by the Government for competing architectural teams, which was based on the premise(s) that

- The (cultural) Precinct and building will host 2 million visitors in its first year (untested)
 - The development will include a cinema and digital production studio, a school dormitory, and 40 apartments
 - It will operate 24 x7 including as a night time entertainment precinct with 10 cafes and bars
 - It will host major community festivals, conferences, a cooking school and immersive digital experiences
 - Every space will be available for commercial hire and can be used for live performances
 - There may be multiple large events across the two buildings for up to 10,000 people at a time. The P1 space will be used for major concerts and the exhibition of large objects. There may be 5,000 people in the P1 space and terrace and another 5,000 on the riverbank.
- The brief further required that "the two buildings will be completely porous with multiple doors, and open terraces accessible to the river bank..."

However Winkworth also found that "There is a serious anomaly between the Stage 2 Design Brief and the EIS/RTS around the climate control requirements in the building". The Brief dictated that "presentation spaces P3, P4, and P5 are required to meet (the highest) international museum standard environmental conditions, where temperature and humidity variations are tightly controlled" but the Government has to date declined to answer questions about the proposed climate control standards for each of the presentation spaces, although the MAAS CEO continues to

state, including to the ongoing Parliamentary Museum Inquiry, that all the presentation spaces will meet international museum standards for climate control. She also continues to assert that “there will...be 18,000 square metres of exhibition and public space in Parramatta (and that) the overall museum will be 30,000 square metres...” This directly contradicts, and inflates, the Government’s own published figures.

The following table <http://tiny.cc/f29jtz> shows

- a total museum area of only 24,500m², and
- a total exhibition space of 10,800m² of which only 7,400m² is “International Standard Museum Space” (undefined climate control).

A school dormitory? 40 apartments (see Daily Telegraph dated 10 February <http://tiny.cc/i29jtz>)? A cooking school? 24 x7 night time entertainment with 10 cafes and bars?...and they dare to call it a MUSEUM? Worse than a bad joke, it is an insult to the people of Parramatta, and to all those innocent future tourists the Government hopes to lure to Parramatta with the promise of a rich new ‘cultural experience.’

NB1: don’t forget the “Valentine’s day” event outside Willow Grove, 10am-12noon, on Sunday 14 February to protest the destruction of the heritage mansion. Labor Jodi McKay and CFMEU Darren Greenfield will be speaking at 11am.

NB2: the 5th Parliament Inquiry session will be held on Monday 15 February, 9:15am-4:45pm. You are encouraged to watch online <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Pages/webcasts.aspx> because public gallery space will be limited.’