

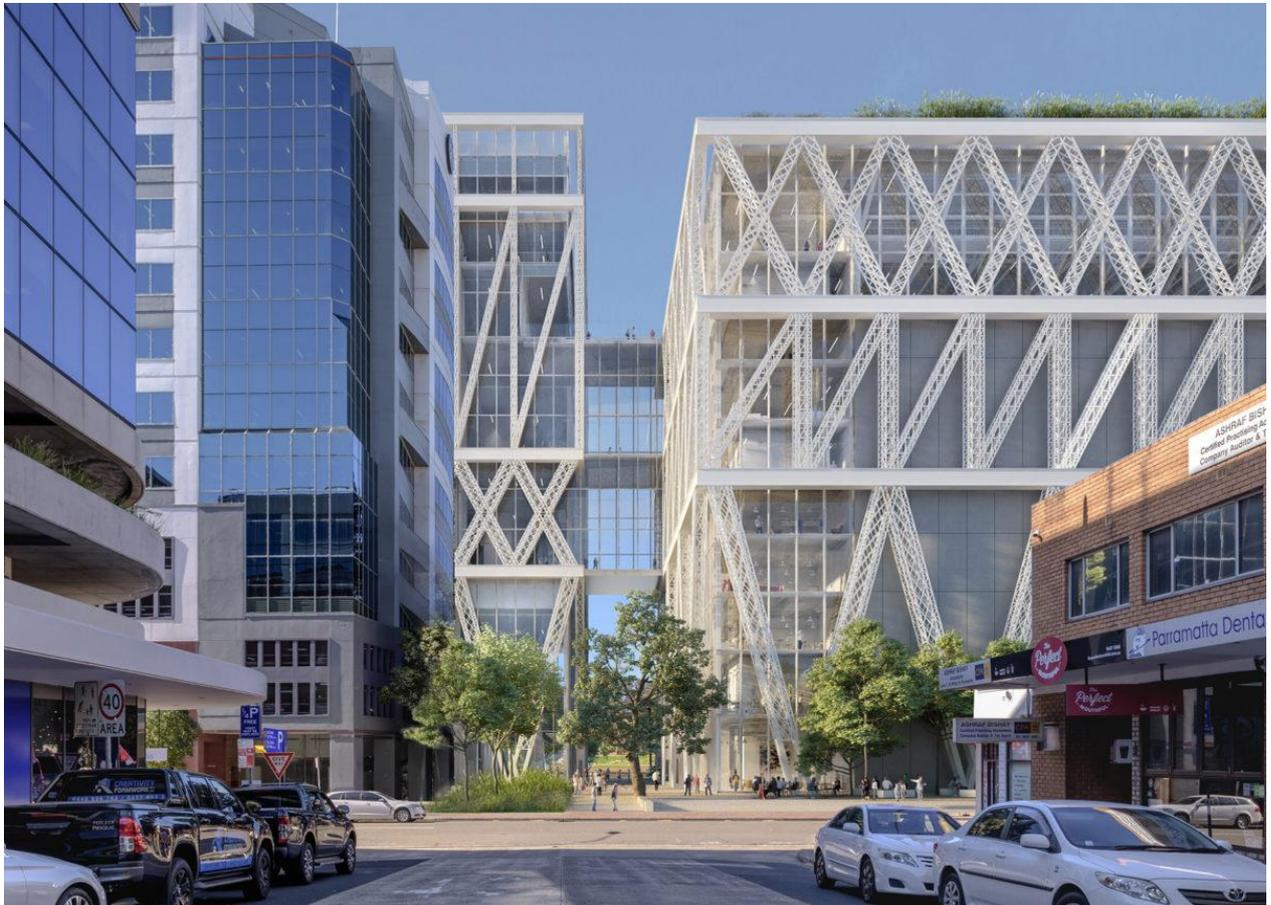
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BY MIKE BROWN / 18 FEBRUARY 2021

Is this house losing power? Someone somewhere is going to ask “why have we got two Powerhouses?”



The newly approved Powerhouse Museum, Parramatta. Image: Moreau Kusunoki and Genton

Here's a cynical take on recent announcements concerning the Parramatta Powerhouse.

It's getting sillier...

Just as advertising has become the product – rather than the thing promoted – we recently learned that the newly approved Powerhouse is set to become Australia's very own Smithsonian, as though this potential equates to its delivery.

This is magical thinking; plain political conceit.

The obvious riposte is, why didn't we make it so at Ultimo some time back?

Breathtaking cluelessness

No one objects to the idea of building a new nationally significant museum in Parramatta.

Originally, objections were against its relocation from Ultimo in what looked like a sleazy property play to free up some inner-city land for developers.

Now that the Ultimo Powerhouse has been “saved” (refer following discussion) objections are against the destruction of existing cultural heritage – Willow Grove and St George Terraces – to build the competition winning scheme.

What is so head-bangingly absurd is that both a new nationally significant museum could readily be built in Parramatta and that Willow Grove and St George Terraces could be so easily incorporated into and further enrich a modified cultural complex.

What about this Smithsonian idea?

The triteness of the “Smithsonian” idea can be grasped from a simple 10-second search here; “the Smithsonian Institution is the world's largest museum, education and research complex” comprising 19 world class museums, galleries and a zoo.

Twenty seconds later the breadth of its educational resources is displayed. Its research activity, for which the institution is so well-known, is summarised a further 20 seconds after that.

Other examples

At the Smithsonian Institution's core are its world-famous displays of American technological and cultural achievement.

The Russian Cosmonaut Museum shares this attribute. Located next to VDNKh, a large recently refurbished park laced with leaden Soviet-era symbolism, it is full of

stunning artefacts of Russian – and even American – endeavours in space. It requires at least a day to give it just a cursory overview.

Manchester has a remarkable collection of industrial revolution technology. It's Science and Industry Museum includes many working steam engines of the time, similar to that held in the Ultimo Powerhouse. The exhibition is all the more powerful for being located within the city at the epicentre of the industrial revolution.

In Adelaide?? You've got to be kidding!!

To understand how silly the Smithsonian analogy to the Powerhouse really is, let's compare it to another recent museum announcement.

Contradicting its notoriously crushing post-Dunstan mediocrity (recall the beer ad), Adelaide has announced Diller Scofidio + Renfro and former local-now-global firm, Woods Bagot, as winners of its competition to build a new Aboriginal Art and Cultural Centre on Adelaide's North Terrace, right next door to the city's botanical gardens.

Diller Scofidio + Renfro are well known as the designers (and promoters) of New York's Highline, Zaryadye Park in Moscow and The Broad Museum in Los Angeles are other examples of their remarkable high-profile work.

Unusually for Adelaide, the announcement makes good national sense.

Though all are on the coast, Adelaide is the most central state capital on the continent, an appropriate locational symbolism for the AACC.

The South Australian Museum website announces that it "is responsible for the largest and most comprehensive collection of Australian Aboriginal cultural material in the world"; items which the new AACC can draw upon.

Within the city, the new facility would sit amidst the educational, cultural and administrative string-of-beads along North Terrace.

Its location next to the Botanic Gardens and close to Adelaide's parklands permits the telling of a larger story than might be from within a new wholly enclosed facility.

Being so close to two of Adelaide's tertiary institutions would also encourage the serious broadening of study and cultural celebration that the Smithsonian is known for in North America.

The symbolic significance of a new first-nation cultural centre along the same axis as the state parliament cannot be overstated.

Most importantly, it will be animated by a living first nation culture, the persistence and depth of which is only now becoming widely understood and appreciated.

If executed well it has the potential to become an internationally significant institution, genuinely comparable to the Smithsonian.

But what could be done?

In contrast, though, the Powerhouse certainly contains world class material, its persistent under-funding and ongoing treatment hitherto as a Monopoly board token completely undermines any announcement of greater museological ambition.

This would only be plausible if accompanied by an announcement of substantial tie-ups with tertiary institutions, federal government participation, and a large ongoing funding allocation to support it all.

So, if the Smithsonian comparison is treated as a feeble attempt at marketing misdirection, what alternatives might be considered?

Full retention of Willow Grove and the St George terraces would please Parramatta locals and enrich its cultural offer, but would require significant redesign of the facility. However, this is perfectly feasible as both the winners and finalist designers possess both talent and impressive track records.

For example, the runners up included Amanda Levette Architects, whose Museum of Art Architecture and Technology is a striking addition to Lisbon's Tejo riverfront.

Likewise, Australia's CHROFI was recently awarded for its Maitland Riverlink; a development that resembled in smaller scale the public design task for Parramatta.

What it might then accommodate has already been canvassed here.

Inexcusable obduracy

If there is nothing to prevent the re-casting of the project to require retention of existing valued buildings and house alternative collections, why not do it?

Is the refusal to retain existing valued buildings nothing more than obduracy; a sharklike insistence on always moving forward?

It would appear to be nothing other than administrative obduracy; a sharklike insistence on always moving forward.

Yet, the need to adapt the project has already been imposed by at least one of the 188 planning conditions attached to its recent planning consent.

Though part of a feature originally admired by the jury – “an exceptional open space for Parramatta, incorporating a clear continuation of the civic link and connecting the city and the river” – all public access has been banned to the screened under-croft facing the river in order ensure public safety in the event of inevitable flooding.

So, what's the game then?

This author's take on this trajectory (backed by no more than a cynical hunch) is that the original strategy to decant the Powerhouse from Ultimo still informs the current scheme.

Long after this government has gone, as community memory fades, and as the attendances of two Powerhouses inevitably decline – let's face it, attendances are not going to double when the new facility opens – someone somewhere will ask “why have we got two Powerhouses?”

This will prompt an earnest beard-stroking review by a select committee of toadies and hacks, which will reluctantly conclude that, yes, we are over-endowed with Powerhouses. And that as the most recent investment was located in Parramatta and now resembles the Smithsonian (if one squints hard in the gift shop), it now makes good sense to recover taxpayers' funds by a total or partial sale of the Ultimo site.

Bidders anyone?

BUT... this can only occur if the Powerhouse is reproduced at Parramatta, rather than housing an alternative collection.

This author bets this will unfold over the next 10 or so years. He will provide a free subscription to TheFifthEstate to anyone who bets against him (Ed. access to TheFifthEstate is already free but donations are welcome).

Bidders anyone?

Mike Brown has worked FAR TOO LONG in NSW local and state government in planning, urban design, and strategic roles. He is also a graduate of the Masters of Urban Policy and Strategy program at the University of NSW.

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