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OPINION

Heritage is meaningless in NSW if we let Willow Grove go

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What's your plan B? Seriously, Mr Collins? When Powerhouse Trust chairman Peter Collins summoned North Parramatta Residents' Action Group president Suzette Meade to his office this week to ask for her Plan B, he should have had his own up his sleeve.

At one level, Meade v Collins was a tiny skirmish in a five-year battle. In one corner was Collins, charged with removing the sweet Italianate villa [Willow Grove](#) from the billion-dollar path of the Powerhouse juggernaut, aka the milk crate. Facing him was Meade, tireless defender of Parramatta's rapidly dwindling heritage, including Willow Grove.

[Parramatta's Willow Grove decorated with love hearts for Valentine's Day this month. *CREDIT: JACKY GHOSSEIN*]

Behind that, though, lies the whole question of why heritage matters. We need to decide. Is it OK for governments to duck and weave like the shoddiest of developers? Or should they show best practice and moral leadership?

Meade told Collins she had no Plan B. He regrouped. What was her preferred site for Willow Grove's knock-down rebuild? As if this was a favour – you choose: the two axe-heads or the three glass beads. Meade stood firm. Leave it where it is: Phillip Street.

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Willow Grove is heritage-listed, the last of its kind and much loved. Late the preceding Friday, the state had approved its own indefensible Powerhouse project. On Sunday, Valentine's Day, Meade was out with her three littlies and scores of others, channelling floods of community love into a thicket of blood-red hearts strung along Willow Grove's pretty cast-iron fence.

By 7am Monday the grotesquely misnamed Create NSW had removed the hearts, as it had countless times before. Dangerous displays of public affection. Can't have that. Then it erected an even bigger fence to prevent any recurrence.

The early history of Willow Grove is one of female energies: mothers and babies, female entrepreneurs, creativity and liberation. The recent history, at both council and state levels, is one of repeated bastardry. For four years they've connived to obliterate the house, its glorious garden and every story it represents.

Back in 2017, Willow Grove was owned by the council. In a mechanism designed to protect heritage, its air rights had been sold to a neighbouring development and a covenant placed on its title. Willow Grove had been fully restored. Then the state offered to buy it for \$140 million – on one condition. The covenant had to go.

Council, far from standing firm, quietly applied to the Registrar General – a state employee – to remove the restriction. Unsurprisingly, the covenant vanished. It's that easy.

That was 2019. Simultaneously, the state launched its international Powerhouse design competition. The brief noted Willow Grove and the nearby St George's Terrace as heritage items but did not require their retention. Indeed, it required so much floorspace (including that which will remain empty due to flood potential) that keeping the heritage buildings struck some competitors as impossible. Still, one or two managed it. Now, with the required floorspace reduced, it's clear that any architect with a skerrick of imagination could accommodate those heritage buildings with flair.

Not the winning scheme, however. The winners, Paris-based Moreau Kusunoki and Australia's Genton, simply pretended Willow Grove didn't exist. The street view of its L-shaped milk crate shows a few sad-looking trees, masses of white cross-gartering and a building that otherwise resembles some suburban bank, avec French designer-label.

This, in December 2019, caused huge public outcry. Earlier that year, an upper house inquiry had already found the government's business case for the Powerhouse relocation "did not comply" with Treasury's own guidelines. It recommended the project "not proceed".

It was just common sense. Governments don't demolish museums. They build them. Erasing one museum to build another is as crazy as removing heavy rail to build metro, or destroying 15 bus routes to build light rail. If there's no net gain, why bother? The inquiry recommended restoring the existing Powerhouse and giving Parramatta its own, grown-up museum, not some hand-me-down entertainment space. It was ignored.

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Six months later, in response to public grief over Willow Grove, the CFMEU issued its first green ban of the century. The Premier, it said, "should be under no illusion ... people will be prepared to put their bodies in front of machinery".

This was a serious blow. Then, via KPMG, the solution. Relocate – not only the Powerhouse, but poor little Willow Grove. Easy peasy. KPMG presented its idea to the CFMEU. The union remained defiant, but KPMG got a partner, Mark Hassell, on the Powerhouse board. Nice.

Except for Willow Grove. Relocating heritage is an act of deepest disrespect. It contravenes the Burra Charter, Australia's heritage bible – which says “[a building should remain ... in its historical location](#)” – and breaches every tenet of best practice. In the case of a friable brick building like Willow Grove, it amounts to demolition. The bricks will not survive.

The KPMG report shows the new, sanitised Willow Grove in a cheery Pleasantville of bikes and picnickers, beside old Parramatta Gaol. This building (by Mortimer Lewis, 1842) is now owned by the Deerubbin Local Aboriginal Land Council which, already partnered with the Powerhouse, wants to turn it into a wedding venue, knocking holes through the sandstone to Willow Grove. But the Darug community, with strong ties to Willow Grove, says this false linkage to the cruel history of our correctional system is “offensive”.

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For all Australians, heritage connects us to our stories, our land, and our sense of the sacred. You can't just shove it around.

If Willow Grove goes – if government not only allows but connives at the demolition of a listed, title-restricted public building – heritage is meaningless in NSW. Nothing is safe. So the fight for Willow Grove could get very big indeed.