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SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

OPINION

## *I had my first pash at Parramatta's Roxy: The fight to save the memory-making buildings of Sydney's second city*

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Journalist

February 20, 2021 — 8.26pm

I had my first pash at Parramatta's picture palace, the Roxy Cinema. I can't remember the film but I do remember the frisson of excitement I felt every time I walked up the elegant stairs of this Spanish Mission-style theatre and beneath its ornate archway. It was like being transported to another magical place even before we got to see whatever celluloid offering was playing on the big screen.

As child I lost almost half a tooth there chewing on a Pascal milkshake lolly, which is now a huge filling in my mouth so you could say the place scarred me for life ... but mostly in a good way.

[Filmmaker Bruce Beresford and Roxy Theatre Action Group's Robert Fox say the Roxy could serve as Parramatta's new live theatre and music venue. *CREDIT: BROOK MITCHELL*]

Generations of suburban Sydneysiders feel the same about this heritage-listed cinema. Chief among them are film director Bruce Beresford, [who is adding his voice to the push to revive the Roxy](#), to turn it into a theatre/night time venue. To fulfil its potential as the Opera House of the west.

Actor Barry Humphries is on board for the cause, and I can only assume a host of event starved Sydney performers and audiences thanks to COVID-19 would join him. I would applaud loudly too, if this were to be the sort of encore the once flamboyant, now faded old Roxy got.

[The Roxy cinema in 2005. *CREDIT: JON REID*]

Built in 1929, the same year as central Sydney's opulent State Theatre, also scene of one of the great conservation battles/victories for 1970s Sydneysiders, this

George Street glory was flagged to be on the Parramatta civic walk from the train station down to the Parramatta River. A tourist attraction, like nearby Willow Grove, a short distance away on Phillip Street.

On Friday, February 12, at 5.45pm, Planning Minister Rob Stokes announced, without much fanfare, this Victorian Italianate two-storey villa, was now slated to be dismantled and relocated to make way for the “New Parramatta Powerhouse project.” Like the experts I refuse to call it a [museum](#). If you didn’t already know it from the NSW Parliamentary upper house inquiry, there’s a lot of love for Willow Grove in this community.

It was on display last Sunday, Valentine’s Day, when hearts with messages of hope and stern words for the NSW government were draped on the gates and the cyclone fence it swiftly constructed outside this local landmark.

In much the way some of the finest fabrics in Australia were fashioned into drapes here by the building’s original owner, Annie Gallagher, a haberdasher who prospered thanks to her passion for her craft.

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

This early female entrepreneur, and the building’s links with local women were honoured by another Parramatta woman, Suzette Meade and the North Parramatta residents’ action group she heads, last Sunday.

“The passion and resolve to save Willow Grove was palpable,” Meade said. Among the messages of support were reminders of generations of locals born here when the building was a maternity hospital set up by matron and midwife E. E. Davidson, and continued into the 1940s by Matron Frances Amy Thompson. The local Dharug people of the Burrumatta clan, added to the cri-de-couer to stop the crazy concept.

The NSW government calls the \$840 million planned Powerhouse project “the city’s largest ‘cultural investment’ since the building of the Opera House”. It may have been well intentioned, but it is ill-conceived. As residents say - it will cost \$25 million to take down and rebuild Willow Grove at an as yet undisclosed location, but only \$ 1 million, according to heritage architects, to retain the 140-year-old building in any redevelopment.

Even Robert Borsak, from the Shooters, Fishers, and Farmers Party, who chaired the committee of inquiry into the Parramatta Powerhouse, thinks demolishing Willow Grove is “completely stupid”.

[The campaign to keep Willow Grove. *CREDIT: RHETT WYMAN*]

It's time Gladys Berejiklian's government took a leaf out of Sydney lord mayor Clover Moore's book, in relation to another Parramatta hero, Sir James Martin. After much lobbying from both Treasurer Dominic Perrottet, and Planning Minister Rob Stokes, [the lord mayor reversed her opposition to erect a statue in Martin Place last year](#), to honour the son of a Parramatta stablehand, who became [three-times NSW premier](#).

It's not too late to change your mind Premier Berejiklian.

The CFMEU and other related construction working unions - have placed a green ban on Willow Grove, after early consultation with Green bans hero Jack Munday, who tragically died last year.

Given COVID-19 cancelled plans for Munday's state funeral, wouldn't it be great if we could have a public service in both his honour - and all the women who played a part in Willow Grove's past. At the site on Phillip Street, where this stately home took its name from the grove of willow trees once planted on the prone to flooding land.

The people of Parramatta - past and present - have spoken - loudly in both the case of the Roxy and Willow Grove. They want their heritage buildings respected, retained and revived. They will chain themselves to the buildings to stop the vandals if necessary, just as Jack did.

Now is the time to shout it from the old red-tiled rooftop of the white-stuccoed hacienda-style Roxy, just like the immortal refrain by anchorman Howard Beale in the 1976 film *Network*: "[I am as mad as hell and I am not going to take it any more.](#)"