

<https://sydney sentinel.com.au/2021/03/campaign-to-save-parramattas-willow-grove-intensifies/>



Campaign to save Parramatta's Willow Grove intensifies

[March 8, 2021](#) [Alec Smart Features](#), [News 0](#)



Heritage-listed Willow Grove, Parramatta, which the NSW Government want to dismantle and rebuild elsewhere. Photo: Alec Smart.

By ALEC SMART

Campaigners lobbying to keep the heritage-listed Willow Grove villa in Parramatta have increased their efforts to oppose its 'relocation' to another site by Infrastructure NSW, the NSW Government's public works agency.

Willow Grove was previously scheduled for demolition in June 2020, along with the adjacent multi-storey Riverbank Car Park, the St George's Terrace row of seven two-storey Victorian terrace houses alongside, and, in central Sydney, the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo.

Despite the announcement in 2015 by then-NSW Premier Mike Baird that the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo was to be demolished and a significantly smaller ‘replacement’ built in Parramatta, it wasn’t until June 2018 that the public was made aware that the heritage-listed Willow Grove and historic 1881-built St George’s Terrace were also earmarked for destruction.

The information was only shared by the NSW Government after an executive order from the NSW Upper House demanded they release their business plan for the Powerhouse Museum relocation – NSW although the subsequent documents were severely redacted.

On 1 July, 2020, the NSW Government rescinded the destruction order on the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo. However, the ‘new’ Powerhouse construction in Parramatta, projected to cost \$840million, is still proceeding and will involve removal of Willow Grove.

Willow Grove, an 1851-built Victorian Italianate two-storey villa, was effectively saved from destruction after it was issued with a ‘Green Ban’ by the NSW Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) in June 2020.

CFMEU, one of Australia’s most powerful construction unions, hosted a press conference on 30 June, 2020 outside Willow Grove to announce their decision, joined by representatives of the North Parramatta Residents’ Action Group (NPRAG) and the National Trust.

CFMEU’s Green Ban effectively discouraged the NSW Government from rushing ahead with their destruction scheme – saving Willow Grove from the same fate as the iconic 1813-built Royal Oak pub in Parramatta, which was knocked down at night on 19 May, 2020, under cover of the Covid-19 lockdown, to make way for the new light rail project.

‘Relocation’

In October 2020, responding to the Green Ban and increased community pressure to preserve Willow Grove, NSW Minister for the Arts, Don Harwin, announced the NSW Government’s ‘compromise’ proposal: Willow Grove would be dismantled and transported to an unspecified location, where it would be re-assembled, brick by brick.

Speculation suggested this might be on the campus of Cumberland Hospital psychiatric institution in Westmead, north of Parramatta River, amidst the historic ‘Female Factory’ buildings, which, until 1848, housed unmarried female convicts and their children.

However, a report by Anglo-Dutch auditing giant KPMG proposed that Willow Grove be reassembled beside the old Parramatta Correctional Centre. The Victorian gaol, in operation between 1798 and 2011, is now run by the Deerubbin Local Aboriginal Land Council, which suggested Willow Grove be converted to a wedding venue and linked to the old gaol by knocking down a section of the original sandstone wall.

On Thursday, 11 February, 2021, final Planning Approval was granted by Planning Minister Rob Stokes for Infrastructure NSW to construct the \$840 million new Powerhouse Museum in Parramatta, still scheduled to open in 2024. Stokes cited 188 conditions of consent for the project.

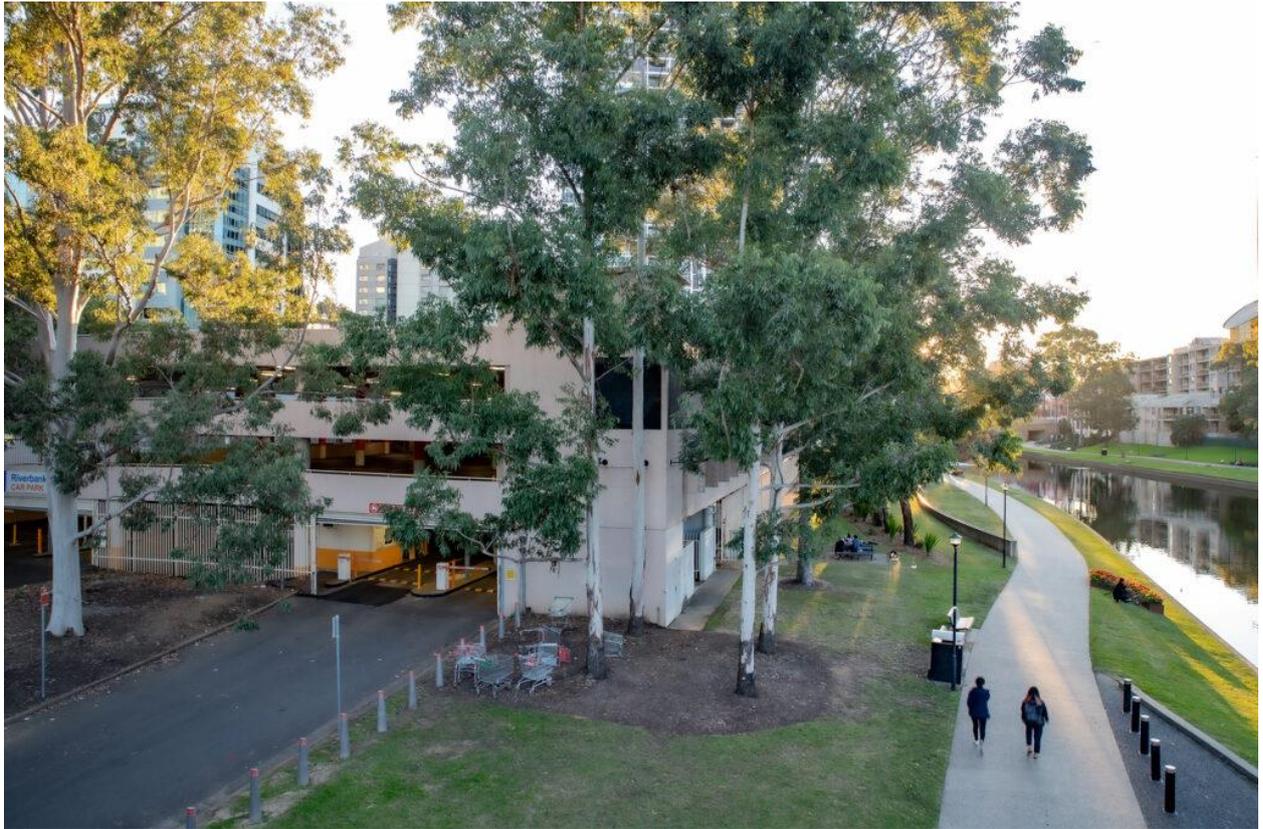
A NSW Department of Planning report concluded the flood-prone location chosen was “the only appropriate site for the development”, adding that leaving Willow Grove in place “severely compromises the development of the site and delivery of public benefits”.

The week after the announcement, Powerhouse Trust chairman Peter Collins invited North Parramatta Residents’ Action Group (NPRAG) president Suzette Meade to a cafe meeting to enquire what was her preferred selection for relocation of Willow Grove, to which she replied there was “no Plan B – leave it where it is”.

Ms Meade said Mr Stokes had made “a flawed decision on a flawed (environmental impact statement)”. NPRAG believe that Willow Grove will not survive the dismantling process because the old sandstone bricks will deteriorate and crumble to the point where they are unable to be reassembled and relocation is effectively an excuse to destroy it – which amounts to deliberate destruction.

“By approving the unnecessary demolition of historic Willow Grove, he has called war on the people of Parramatta,” Ms Meade told Australian Associated Press in February. “The community are ready to fight and will chain ourselves to the fence with the CFMEU to protect Willow Grove.”

However, a request by NPRAG to NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian for assurances that historic Willow Grove would not be destroyed or dismantled by a “bulldozer in the dead of night” failed to yield an official response.



The flood-prone Riverbank Parking site beside Parramatta River. Photo: Alec Smart.

History

Willow Grove House was initially a private estate before serving as a maternity hospital named *Estella* between 1919 and 1953, then decommissioned and returned to private ownership. It was eventually purchased by Parramatta City Council in 2015 as part of their plans for an open foreshore reserve and entertainment precinct, although it came with restrictions to protect the heritage building and garden forecourt that council itself invoked in 1988.

In 2017, Parramatta Council, responding to a request from the NSW Government, released the riverside site for \$140 million to enable the proposed new Powerhouse Museum construction. According to an unnamed source who spoke anonymously to Fairfax Media, the deal came with “considerable pressure on council officers who had feared losing the Powerhouse project to a rival council”.

Then, in January 2019, Parramatta City Council quietly requested the Office of the Registrar General to remove the historic covenant protecting Willow Grove and its grounds, specified in the land sale pre-conditions ordered by the NSW Government.

This left the heritage-listed site unprotected from destruction, and thus facilitated the NSW Government’s plan to demolish the historic building to make way for the proposed new Powerhouse Museum.

When the evidence came to light in April 2019, former Sydney Lord Mayor Jeremy Bingham, a lawyer and specialist in local government law, was moved to fume that it was an act of “sheer bastardry” and “immoral”.

A NSW Government spokesperson declared afterwards, “Removal of all encumbrances and restrictions prior to settlement is usual practice with the sale of property” – which implies that state and federal heritage protections are worthless and easily swept aside.

In February 2020, Ms Berejiklian told NSW Parliament, “We asked every single person who bid for the project to put forward a proposal that protected that heritage house. Unfortunately, that was not able to occur.”

Despite accepting the clause to remove the heritage protection, a Parramatta City Council spokesperson later insisted, “Council has continually supported, and advocated to the NSW Government for, the retention of heritage buildings Willow Grove and St George’s Terrace.”



Historic 1881-built St George’s Terrace, Phillip Street, Parramatta. Photo: Alec Smart.

Burra Charter

Campaigners lobbying to retain Willow Grove at its present site also claim that relocating the historic property contravenes [the Burra Charter](#), the charter that enforces standards for the protection of historic and heritage-listed sites and buildings.

The Burra Charter states: “The Charter can be applied to all types of places of cultural significance including natural, Indigenous and historic places with cultural values.

“These places of cultural significance must be conserved for present and future generations in accordance with the principle of inter-generational equity..”

Furthermore, “a building should remain ... in its historical location”.

The Burra Charter, first adopted in 1979 at the historic South Australian mining town of Burra, is maintained by the Australia International Council on Monuments and Sites (Australia ICOMOS), a non-governmental professional organisation that, according to its objective, “acts as a national and international link between public authorities, institutions and individuals involved in the study and conservation of all places of cultural significance.”

Australia ICOMOS is closely linked to UNESCO as a principal adviser on cultural matters related to the World Heritage Committee.

Preservation

NPRAG and community groups insist the most practical solution is to redesign the ‘new’ Powerhouse Museum to allow for the retention of Willow Grove in its grounds.

Although it may cost Infrastructure NSW an additional \$1 million to employ architects Moreau Kusunoki and Genton to modify their winning latticework design – which critics have derided as ‘two white milk crates’ or ‘a monstrosity on stilts’ – it will be considerably cheaper than the estimated \$20 million to dismantle, transport and reassemble Willow Grove elsewhere.

The NSW Leader of the Opposition, Jodi McKay, recently addressed a rally at Willow Grove calling for its preservation.

Ms McKay has long been vocal in her opposition to the destruction or relocation of Willow Grove. In a Twitter statement she posted on 18 December, 2019, she criticised NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian: “I deplore the destruction of gracious, beautiful Willow Grove in the Powerhouse design. @GladysB promised she would

protect it. Parramatta is precious, the cradle of modern Australia, it requires a sensitivity to old and new, dynamism and heritage. Premier, please reconsider.”

On 23 January, 2020, Ms McKay visited the site and declared that the NSW state government “has no thought, no care, for heritage here in Parramatta ...

“Willow Grove here is such an important part of the history of Parramatta. It dates back to 1870 and it’s been much-loved. Willow Grove was a maternity hospital and it has played an integral part of this city over the decades.”

Parramatta resident Matthew Black, whose folk band The Bottlers played at the February 2021 rally addressed by Ms McKay, told the *Sydney Sentinel*, “On Valentine’s Day, 500 red hearts with messages of support written on them were attached to the Willow Grove perimeter fence.

“However, they were all ripped down overnight and black hoarding erected that obscures the view of the beautiful old building. Obviously, the developers don’t care about local residents’ feelings. So many old buildings of Parramatta have fallen under the wrecking balls, it’s pretty disconcerting.”

Darren Greenfield, CFMEU NSW Construction Secretary, strongly urges the retention of Willow Grove in its historical site.

In October 2020, whilst reiterating his union’s retention of their 30 June green ban, he added, “The ‘plan’ to move Willow Grove is nonsensical and will result in the loss of the building’s heritage value.

“Willow Grove is over 150 years old, made of 150-year-old bricks and 150-year-old timbers. The dismantling of the building will inevitably result in the destruction of much if not all of the original materials.

“What will be rebuilt in a completely different location will not be Willow Grove – it will be a copy. And given the low-ball figures we’ve heard bandied about on the cost of the project, it will be a poor copy at that.

“The government has alternatives before it. It has already responded to the green ban and community pressure by committing to preserve St George’s Terrace and incorporating the building into the design of the new museum.

“There is no sensible reason why Willow Grove cannot also be preserved in its current location and incorporated into the new Powerhouse Museum, which would add to the museum’s cultural significance and connection to the local area. There are many spectacular examples from the world where modern museums retain and celebrate cultural heritage.

“The people of Parramatta and Western Sydney deserve a museum that celebrates their heritage, rather than destroy an irreplaceable historic building to make way for the museum gift shop.”



Heritage-listed Willow Grove, Parramatta, Sydney, Australia. Photo: Alec Smart.

