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CITY HUB

Breaking up the Powerhouse Museum: 10 Years of the LNP at Work

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The same spot Perrottet and Harwin smiled for the cameras for the announcement the Powerhouse in Ultimo would stay (Photo: SMH), is today a construction site (Photo:Tom Lockley)

Opinion by KYLIE WINKWORH

The NSW Government has hacked away at the Powerhouse Museum for the last ten years, relentlessly cutting its budget, gutting the museum of expertise, competent leadership and good governance, undermining public trust, and making museum policy on impulse round the campfire.

In 2011 when the LNP came to power MAAS had 284 staff, 20 conservators and 49 in the curatorial team. It ran an award winning Migration Heritage Centre and a highly regarded regional program, both since abolished.

As at the last annual report in 2019-20, and not counting the team packing up the collection, the museum has just 178 staff, a decrease of 37 percent. There are just 18 people in the curatorial team, and only 7 conservators, but 10 SES level directors. There are more artists occupying the Powerhouse than curators and conservators.

That is the scale of their axe attack to dismember the Powerhouse.

Philanthropist Gene Sherman has proposed splitting the museum's collections and turning the Powerhouse into a fashion and design hub. Does the Government want crowd pleasing fashion exhibitions? We had a museum

that did record-breaking fashion exhibitions, and design and decorative arts. They were shown at the once great Powerhouse Museum, before this Government started their hack attack.

No one should be surprised at the latest idea for breaking up the Powerhouse because in Sydney this Government doesn't do museum policy and planning, doesn't do proper process, or genuine consultation. Instead, the city's culture is carved up behind closed doors in secret meetings with lobbyists, insiders and influencers. That is how decisions are made in Sydney about how our taxes are spent on cultural projects, museums and public culture.

This explains why we will soon have two contemporary art museums in the city, but no major public gallery between the city and Penrith, no museum of NSW, no Indigenous cultural centre, no museum of migration history, a bloated commercial Carriageworks West development at Parramatta, built on the rubble of Willow Grove, a vast collection store at Castle Hill, and no Powerhouse Museum.

It will cost taxpayers close to \$2b when it's all over to downsize the real Powerhouse and reallocate its budget and resources to running events and accommodation at Parramatta.

Behind the photo-op

In ten years this Government has relentlessly swung the axe at the Powerhouse, even as Perrottet and Harwin smiled for the cameras last July and said the museum would be staying in Ultimo.



The view from the members lounge into the gallery shows a number of exhibits at risk. Photo: Tom Lockley

This photo shows where they stood to make that media announcement in what was one of the world's great transport exhibitions, worthy of state heritage listing. You can see what saving the Powerhouse looks like in the wreckage of this exhibition, half demolished, the carpet ripped up, and not even a dust cover on the remaining objects of national significance.

This was done after we had asked the CEO in meetings and in writing not to do any major work in this exhibition until the conservation management plan (CMP) was well advanced and the significance of the installation had been assessed.

The demolition of this exhibition speaks to the profound disrespect this Government has for the culture and collections of the Powerhouse Museum, its deep connections to the history of Sydney and NSW, and themes of transport, trade, industry and working life.

No longer will the Powerhouse be known as the people's museum. They are rubbing out the authentic industrial history of the city so the influencers have another place to party. The excuse for this demolition was that the large steel framed showcases did not meet fire regs. No one believes this. Intentional or not, this demolition clears a path so the rest of the transport and power objects can be moved out of the museum.

After the announcement last July, museum experts at the Minister's invitation offered the CEO and Create NSW their advice to support renewal of the PHM's exhibitions and buildings.

This process began with a demand to sign confidentiality agreements. It generated no minutes or final papers. No sign of a master plan or a renewed vision for the Powerhouse. No CMP based on consultation with the Powerhouse Museum's architect Lionel Glendenning.

It was a charade to buy time while they kept working at the downsizing and demolition plans, and eviction of the collections.

Not one element of the original Powerhouse demolition scheme was reconsidered after the Harwin Perrottet media appearance at the PHM last July.

The heritage-wrecking 'Powerhouse Parramatta' development was approved in February, in the face of more than 1,600 objections. The work to empty the museum went on, packing up the collections to facilitate the amputation of the Harwood building for development.



The Berejiklian government did a U-turn on its unpopular policy to close and 'relocate' the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta, which would have seen the historic site demolished and converted to high-rise apartments. Photo: Alec Smart

This is the former tram depot owned by the museum, with state of the art purpose-designed collection facilities. The secret master plan work kept going. The NSW Heritage Council did their bit with the debauched heritage listing of the brick shell of the Ultimo Power House, over dozens of objections. The Heritage Council later refused to consider the nomination to list the whole museum site.

Sydney's largest and oldest tram depot has no heritage protection, not even on the City of Sydney's LEP. The collection eviction work didn't miss a beat. The Powerhouse is largely empty and exhibition galleries are now stacked with boxes of objects awaiting transport to Castle Hill.

The plans for the unnecessary vast J Store development at Castle Hill were approved a few weeks ago, [with reassurances from the 'Applicant', Premier and Cabinet](#), that the project "does not seek to replace existing operational and functional components of the Powerhouse."

Does anyone believe this when [the Planning Minister declared in the media release announcing the project's approval](#): "this means the entire 500,000 piece Powerhouse collection will be housed and cared for on one site"..?

Taking the "power" out of the Powerhouse

Gene Sherman's pitch for a fashion and design centre risks undermining the mission and integrity of the Powerhouse, and the central place of the power and transport collections in the museum, which was purpose designed to exhibit them.

The concept resembles the 'Ultimo presence creative industries precinct' from the 2018 business case. After ten years of relentless cuts, undermining and incompetence, it is no surprise the Government has entertained an unsolicited bid for a fashion and design hub in the Powerhouse, with the offer of philanthropic support from the Sherman family.

No matter that the Premier promised last July that the Powerhouse would continue to display technology, science, engineering and design. Of course philanthropy is important in supporting cultural institutions. But philanthropists are not picking up the tab for their ideas, it is the taxpayers of NSW, now funding two contemporary art museums, and a wickedly expensive museum demolition and downsizing project.

If the fashion and design scheme goes ahead we will likely end up with a white box fashion showcase and party place at Ultimo, more taxpayer-subsidised fashion balls, no museum at Parramatta, and the PHM's internationally significant power and transport collections exiled to a cluster of big sheds at Castle Hill.

The Ultimo plans will be badged as a 'cultural industries precinct'. This is not industry or culture. It is a euphemism for cultural erasure and amnesia, fronting a shameless scheme to evict and erase Sydney's transport and industrial history, just as they have at Carriageworks and the ATP.

And if any families want to see rail history after the Powerhouse is gutted of its defining collections, they will have to try and get to the rail museum at Thirlmere, perhaps the only railway museum in the world that you can't get to by rail.

The saga of Powerhouse demolition disaster started in 2014 with Liz Ann Macgregor, the director of the MCA, musing about how the Powerhouse should move to Parramatta because it needed investment and had to be rethought.

The AGNSW got its funding for expansion and renewal. The people of Parramatta got another heritage demolition and no say in the faux museum that will be dumped on the riverbank. And the Powerhouse got an eviction notice. With the collections shunted off to Castle Hill, the Powerhouse 'potpourri' is up for grabs, a blank slate for the movers and shakers of Sydney.

Sydney's unprecedented and globally embarrassing museum debacle is still hostage to that first ignorant decision to 'move' the Powerhouse to Parramatta. Everyone knows the museum is not moving. That's why they need the monster 8,000sqm J Store development at Castle Hill. They have to have somewhere to stash the big transport and power collections which are in the way.

It's a classic bait and switch manoeuvre to cover collection eviction and museum demolition. Even Create NSW calls the 'Parramatta Powerhouse' development Carriageworks 2.

Last week the Art Gallery of NSW celebrated its 150th birthday. It doesn't look like the Powerhouse Museum will see its 150th in 2030 unless more people speak out.

