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OPINION

Sunless and soulless or the Paris of the west: Three events will determine Parramatta's future

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The judge peered over his spectacles. “I think the applicant is saying, you can’t build a house on sand.” The wording is approximate. The transcript is pending. But you get the gist. Justice Tim Moore, former environment minister and now a Land and Environment Court judge, was addressing the respondent – the NSW government – on day one of the Willow Grove court case this week.

The comment followed an hour or so of the government’s flustered attempts to sandbag the non-compliant documentation that could yet render the Powerhouse museum approval null and void. Embarrassing.

[Parramatta has potential but will it be realised?*CREDIT:DEAN SEWELL*]

It was an apt metaphor. As the audience recognised, “building on sand” also suggested the whole attempt to “relocate” the Powerhouse from Ultimo to a flood-prone alluvial sandbank and former Dharug fishing spot on the Parramatta River. It could equally suggest the current, whole-of-Parramatta struggle to escape its daggy old cocoon and become a proper city.

To be clear, this is a struggle I applaud. I like cities. The more the merrier. What I cannot applaud is the assumption that grown-up cityhood necessitates the jettisoning of all heritage, beauty and character in favour of one thing: money. This is primitive. And it’s here, in government attitudes, state and local, that growing up is required.

Monday was huge for Parramatta, though most locals were no doubt unaware. At breakfast time, the Planning and Public Spaces Minister, Rob Stokes, released the [Greater Sydney Parklands White Paper](#) proposing a single trust for all of Sydney's great parks – Centennial, Moore, Queens, Callan, Bicentennial, Fernhill Estate, Western Sydney and Parramatta. At dinner time, Parramatta Council considered the draft CBD planning proposal that will march super-towers north to Pennant Hills Road and south to Harris Park. In the middle, bookended by these, and so well-attended the court room overflowed, was Willow Grove. Depending on the outcomes of these three events, Parramatta could become a sunless, soulless downtown peopled by the scurrying inhabitants of 69-storey stacks of lightless apartments, where virtually everything old is trashed and even the once-grand park moth-eaten by commerce. Or it could engage its beautiful natural setting, resplendent heritage and exhilarating ethnic diversity to flavour its emergence into tall, vibrant, modern cityhood.

Truly and confidently itself, it could become an irresistible honeypot for tourists, a Paris of the west. Will it?

[The planned Parramatta Powerhouse redesign.]

Let's consider the parks [white paper](#). It promised the legislative framework for the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust, established last July. (This in itself is weirdly horse-before-cart. Who creates the body before the rules that govern it are even discussed, much less made?) But the white paper offers no answers. Its 20 pages are full of people frolicking on grass and silly info-graphics like "85 per cent of people love walking, hiking, jogging or running". Do they think we're babies? The fluffery promises to increase open space, encourage "design excellence", promote "active landscapes" and stakeholder engagement and "identify new ways to provide public open space in high density environments". But a government that counts cemeteries and space under motorways as "open" (as in WestConnex), makes design excellence a justification for committee-led urban destruction, counts developers as stakeholders while ignoring communities, and considers a superyacht marina an "active" foreshore use ([as in the Bays Precinct](#)) has proved it cannot be trusted.

As to the Parramatta CBD planning proposal, this, by contrast, is cart-after-horse. The new draft LEP, eight years in the making, has already been spot-applied so many times the council feels itself shotgunned into this tripling of the skyscraper belt in length, adding almost a kilometre north of the river and the same again south of the train track, and more than doubling its height.

In the north, heights more than triple, from 24 to 80 metres. South to Harris Park, they go from 12 metres to 80 metres. In the middle, circling the city centre, heights go from max 80 metres to 211 metres (69 residential storeys).

Naturally, this raises the stakes, rather. Raises the temperature. So these extreme heights, although couched as rewards for “design excellence”, are already taken as minima.

[Willow Grove, built in the 1870s, is set to be demolished and rebuilt elsewhere to make way for the Parramatta Powerhouse. *CREDIT: JANIE BARRETT*]

Further, these enormous tower-zones flank some of Parramatta’s most fragile heritage precincts – the Sorrel Street and North Parramatta Conservation Areas in the north and, in the south, the Harris Park West Conservation Area with its rows of sweet weatherboard cottages. They also include dozens of heritage items. So the last-remaining shreds of its fabulous, intense history are rendered more precarious still.

Which brings us to Willow Grove, itself in a 211-metre zone. The court case is brought by the North Parramatta Residents’ Action Group and funded by cake stalls and sausage sizzles. But its argument is far from homespun.

NPRAG argues that the Environmental Impact Statement for the Parramatta Powerhouse, approved in February, breached the legislative requirement to analyse feasible alternatives. No such alternatives, on the same site or elsewhere, appeared. Indeed, there’s no evidence, there, in the competition brief or in the 2018 Business Case Summary, that the possibility of keeping Willow Grove was ever seriously entertained.

The respondents (Infrastructure NSW and the minister) had nowhere to go. Sounding a lot like developers on building heights, they blustered that it was too late to change, too much money spent. They said Willow Grove makes site access too difficult. But the community has been fighting five years for this, and the building occupies scarcely a tenth of the site frontage.

There’s also a CFMEU green ban on the site, with support from the National Maritime Union, the Nurses and Midwives Association, the Teachers’ Federation, the Public Service Association and the Dharug and allies.

The judge has reserved judgment. Meantime the government, having already let the demolition contract and scaffolded Willow Grove, has promised to cease work. Perhaps, as we speak, it’s frantically dredging up some alternatives to look like they’d been considered. It’d be easier, though, and cheaper – a fraction of the \$10 million relocation cost – to keep Willow Grove, work with it. Like the wise man said, you can’t build a house on sand.

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