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OPINION

## *Powerhouse project reeks of empty immensity*

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/powerhouse-project-reeks-of-empty-immensity-20210617-p5821i.html>



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Empty immensity. Every part of the Powerhouse project reeks of empty immensity – from Mike Baird’s initial thought bubble (I know, let’s move it!) to the design brief lite, from the retrospectively recreated 2018 “business case summary” (there being no actual business case) to the big empty milk crate now set to be built on Parramatta’s flood-prone riverbank.

This week’s two big pieces of Powerhouse news are no exception. The first is Wednesday’s Land and Environment Court decision on [Willow Grove](#), in which Justice Tim Moore (a former Liberal minister) found against a group of Parramatta residents who oppose the government’s effective demolition of Willow Grove, a heritage-listed villa, to make way for the new Powerhouse museum. The case hinged on whether the government ever considered keeping the villa.



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

The judge found (a) that although the regulation requires “[analysis of any feasible alternatives](#)”, [Infrastructure NSW did not need to do this](#) and (b) that even “if I am wrong” there “[was no feasible alternative](#)”. [Moore adduced as evidence an Infrastructure NSW diagram that more](#) than doubled Willow Grove’s heritage footprint by including its modern addition, supposedly showing no through-route could be found. Weirdly, for a judicial review, this is a design decision. It’s also manifestly not the case that Willow Grove makes any alternative through route impossible. Empty promises, empty arguments, immense expenditure.

The same holds for the [half-a-billion-dollar Powerhouse Ultimo dollop](#), announced on Tuesday by Arts Minister Don Harwin. Some consider it a big community win. Perhaps it is, although a fashion museum in the Powerhouse’s Wran building was always envisaged. Now, instead of having to flog its workshop building to survive, the museum will be funded. But there’s no guarantee to keep the Harwood building in the longer term. Indeed, no information generally. Just a 400-word media puff. Yet another politically-inflated thought bubble, this is less a plan than a press release.

This newly announced Ultimo frock museum brings the whole misconceived Powerhouse project, including the new museum at Parramatta, to almost \$1.5 billion. That’s six times the spend on Sydney Modern. Yet there’s no detail. Barely even a description. It’s a design and fashion museum with subsidised workspaces, an “academy” and, oh yes, student accommodation.

That rang a bell, the accommodation thing. Strangely enough, as [Harwin told 2GB](#), the Parramatta Powerhouse also includes apartments for “visiting students”. This sounds innocuous – three or four kids from Coonabarrabran for a weekend. But there’s no longer anything innocuous about “housing”.



An artist's impression of the Parramatta Powerhouse. MUSEUM OF APPLIED ARTS AND SCIENCES

[These days, a 40-storey residents-tower atop a three-level commercial building \(as at 617 Pacific Highway, St Leonards\), can be officially called “shop-top housing”. And “student accommodation”](#) means 25-storey towers of nasty apartments profiteering on public land, like the four Lend Lease jobs a moment away at Darling Harbour. So the bell it rings is an alarm bell. Be ye warned.

None of which did anything to quench bureaucratic enthusiasm. Of course not. Within hours of Harwin's announcement, one of his underlings, Alex O'Mara, the group deputy secretary for place, design and public spaces in the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, posted [breathlessly on LinkedIn](#).

It was “thrilling,” breathed O'Mara, to be involved in the Powerhouse project, making it “the heart of a new cultural precinct”. She quoted “the brilliant” Powerhouse chief Lisa Havilah envisioning the Powerhouse as “a place for the creatives, the thinkers, the makers and the innovators” and gushed happily about her role in nurturing another “vibrant 24-hour cultural and entertainment destination”.

This should also ring alarm bells, since 24-hour precinct can only mean housing, with yet more “creative hubs” and “Shanghai eat streets” on way.



NSW Arts Minister Don Harwin announces the revamp of the Ultimo Powerhouse as a fashion and design museum. NICK MOIR

To prove her point, and embrace the functionally illiterate, O'Mara decorated her post with emoticons of clapping hands, shooting stars and party dresses, not to mention photos of girls in frilly frocks. It was greeted with return enthusiasm from colleagues. "Such great news," wrote executive director for public spaces at the NSW Department of Planning and Environment (\*but views are my own) Dr Caroline Butler-Bowdon. "Brilliant outcome Alex," simpered Connie Kirk, executive director for infrastructure, assets, property and urban development at the NSW Department of Communities and Justice.

All this breathless backslappery reminded me of [Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's](#) tale of a speech by some petty party bureaucrat in Stalin's Russia. During the compulsory standing ovation that followed, no one dared be the first to stop clapping. "With make-believe enthusiasm ...," writes Solzhenitsyn, "They fell where they stood, till they were carried out of the hall on stretchers." Eventually, one man sat down. That night he was arrested and spent 10 years in prison.

I mean enthusiasm is lovely and I have nothing against frocks, or even wallpaper, but really? What are they on? Half a billion dollars for fashion and a few remnant steam machines (\*no longer working, because the steam reticulation system has been removed)?

Harwin, grasping at content, likened the frock-shop to the Smithsonian and the V&A. But those museums combine stupendous collections, centuries of scholarship, curatorial genius and profound driving ideas. You couldn't capture them in 400 pages, much less 400 weasel words. Powerhouse Ultimo, by contrast, leaves an eviscerated collection in a building designed for steam engines, while exiling the steam objects to "celebrate" Parramatta by demolishing that city's heritage. How does that work again?

What would be better? Recognition of the truth that the best museums are seldom the biggest. It's not about blockbuster shows. That's so eighties. The best museums display a natural and intimate relationship between collection and place. I think of the Soane Museum in London, Simounet's Picasso Museum in Paris, the Louisiana outside Copenhagen, the Miro foundation in Barcelona, the Rothko Chapel in Houston.

For half a billion we could have 10 of these; museums of Sydney's Gadigal tribes, its opium dens, its razor wars, its nuts-and-berries architecture, its film life, its waterways and, yes, its frocks. Substituting thought for weaselry and local muchness for empty immensity we could make something intense, eccentric, flavourful and very, very Sydney.



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Elizabeth Farrelly is a columnist and author. Her latest book is Killing Sydney.

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