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Parramatta Powerhouse Museum: Residents lose battle to save Willow Grove

Demolition on a heritage-listed Parramatta villa is imminent to make way for the \$915 million Powerhouse Museum after a community group's legal battle was lost but they are defiant a green ban will halt the works.

After years of trying to save heritage-listed Willow Grove, its relocation is imminent after a residents group lost an appeal against the government in the NSW Court of Appeal.

North Parramatta Residents' Action Group began its hearing at the Land and Environment Court in May when it claimed Infrastructure NSW failed to undertake the proper planning approval for the museum because the environmental assessment failed to meet requirements for a state significant project.

On June 15, the group lost its bid to stop demolition on the 140-year-old Italianate villa when Judge Timothy Moore ruled that the government's environmental assessment did meet requirements for a state significant project.

The defiant NPRAG is calling for any works being carried out at Willow Grove stop until lockdown restrictions are lifted and said the green ban with the CFMEU would still apply.

"Plan A has always been the passion and the power of the community and unions working together," NPRAG spokeswoman Suzette Meade said.

"In the spirit of Jack Munday, a CFMEU green ban will save this site and Willow Grove will remain on Phillip St forever. The legal proceedings were always our Plan B^B."

Ms Meade said the community had already lost too many historic treasures.

"At the hands of the NSW Government the people of Parramatta have already lost our public pools for a stadium, a pub older (the Royal Oak) than Perth for a light rail. We will not lose Willow Grove."

Parramatta Labor councillor Donna Davis said the battle should never have ended in court.

"My community is at a loss to understand why and how it has come to this," she said.

"The government has given a green light to the demolition of Willow Grove to be placed in storage indefinitely. How is that, on any level, acceptable and respectful?"

"The people of Parramatta and western Sydney deserve investment in arts and culture, but it should not be at the expense of our heritage."

However, the Western Sydney Powerhouse Community Alliance labelled NPRAG sore losers and said the court's decision was "a victory for the families of Western Sydney".

"The original approval decision by the Department of Planning and the ruling of the Land & Environment Court have been upheld by the Supreme Court," alliance chairman Christopher Brown said.

"This is now strike three for the opponents of the Powerhouse Parramatta and it's time for them to get out of the way."

"I call on the opponents of the Powerhouse Parramatta to respect this decision."

"Challenging the approval of the Parramatta Powerhouse in the courts is a path that they chose to embark upon – it's now incumbent on them to accept the outcome and not be sore losers."

"This is another victory for the families of western Sydney who have been short-changed for generations by all of Sydney's cultural institutions being in the Sydney CBD."

In May, scaffolding was assembled around the former maternity hospital, a move that has prompted the community and CFMEU — which has placed a green ban on the building in June 2020— to keep round the clock surveillance on the building before lockdown.



North Parramatta Residents' Action Group spokeswoman Suzette Meade arrives at the Land and Environment Court with barrister Tim Hale in May.

In the Land and Environment Court in May, barrister Tim Hale told the hearing that Willow Grove, built in the 1870s, was regarded as a rare example as one of the earliest notable Victorian-style houses in the Parramatta region.

Mr Hale said that out of 1303 submissions into Powerhouse feedback, 85.5 per cent opposed destroying Willow Grove and neighbouring St George's Terrace, which is a row of two-storey terraces built in 1881.

He said Infrastructure NSW's EIS failed to inform the public of alternative sites for Powerhouse that would not jeopardise heritage buildings.

"A decision was clearly made that the subject site was the best appropriate location but where were the other alternatives?" Mr Hale said.



Willow Grove villa. Picture: Monique Harmer

He said the international design competition, which architects Moreau Kusunoki won, required entrants to incorporate heritage into the museum design but those were not presented to the public during the planning process.

“We do not know to what extent, if at all, the various design teams considered a design which would retain Willow Grove. There is no indication how that judging process considered alternative schemes.

“The preferred site has been determined from obviously a number of other sites but we simply do not see what they are, and the reasonable reader of the EIS is not in any position to make an evaluation, nor is the decision maker.

“The point of the EIS is to put that case before the objectors, or the public, so they might be able to express an alternative view.”

The government gave the green light to the controversial project in February.

While the government agreed to dismantle Willow Grove brick-by-brick, Mr Hale told the court 95.3 per cent of submissions opposed the “relocation”.

But Infrastructure NSW’s barrister Richard Lancaster said the EIS “comfortably” and “substantially” complied with the topics of alternative sites and designs that incorporated Willow Grove the topics of alternative sites and designs that incorporated Willow Grove.

“There’s no suggestion that either of the topics were extremely overlooked,” he said.

“On the contrary, there was an avalanche from North Parramatta residents on those topics and it demonstrates substantial compliance,” he said.



A barrister representing the government says riverside land was the only ‘feasible’ site for the museum.

“However, even if the EIS had some form of deficiency there was nonetheless assessment of Willow Grove as a heritage item.”

Justice Moore told Mr Lancaster he had to demonstrate why there were no “rational” options for alternative sites for the Powerhouse in Parramatta.

“A suggestion that the Parramatta Powerhouse should be the Powerhouse Silverton ... northwest of Broken Hill would not be feasible,” he said.

“It’s up for you to demonstrate why there’s no feasible alternative sites in Parramatta.”

But when Justice Moore asked to clarify the government’s argument that the museum had to be built along the Parramatta River banks, Mr Lancaster agreed.

He said alternative sites were not feasible — a submission which promoted scoffs from the pro-Willow Grove group in the public gallery.