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Powerhouse Parramatta: entertainment centre ‘masquerading’ as a museum has high flood risk, inquiry finds

NSW parliamentary committee releases scathing appraisal of decision to build \$1.34bn project on site with ‘very real flood risks’



The Moreau Kusunoki and Genton design for Powerhouse Parramatta. Photograph: Moreau Kusunoki and Genton

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The New South Wales government’s controversial \$1.34bn Powerhouse Parramatta project is in danger of becoming an entertainment and events centre “masquerading” as a museum, and the ongoing risk of flooding to a priceless collection still has not been comprehensively addressed, according to the findings in a NSW upper house inquiry.

Tabled in parliament on Friday, the committee report also delivered a scathing appraisal of the state government’s contentious decision to dismantle Victorian mansion Willow Grove to make way for the Parramatta museum, saying it had “robbed Parramatta of its rapidly dwindling heritage”.



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The report is the culmination of a two-and-a-half-year inquiry into the Liberal state government's management of cultural institutions. It was chaired by Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party state leader Robert Borsak, and compiled by three Liberal upper house members, two Labor members and one Greens member – with the three Liberal members issuing a dissenting statement in its appendix.

‘Very real flood risks’

On the ongoing issue of the government's decision to build the new museum on the banks of the Parramatta River, the report concluded: “It is still difficult for the committee to fathom why the NSW government would choose a flood-prone site to build one of the most significant pieces of cultural infrastructure – billed in evidence as the largest investment in cultural infrastructure since the Sydney Opera House – and then attempt to design their way around the inherent and very real flood risks.

“The committee looked aghast as the project site was flooded on several occasions during the course of our inquiry.”



The Willow Grove heritage building in Parramatta was dismantled in August 2021 to make way for the Powerhouse Parramatta project. Photograph: David Maurice Smith/Oculi

In March last year, the Parramatta site – by then already under construction – flooded for the second time in just over a year during heavy rainfall.

The 142-page report is also critical of the state government’s plan to split the collection housed in the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (better known as Ultimo’s Powerhouse Museum) to furnish the new Parramatta museum.

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“There is no commitment to retain the Ultimo Powerhouse Museum in its recognisable, internationally-renowned form,” the report said. Instead of “a thematically coherent science and technology museum”, the new Ultimo site would host “a confused hotchpotch of fashion items displayed alongside a handful of large items of industrial and transport heritage devoid of their broader storytelling contexts and installations”.

As the report was being tabled in parliament on Thursday, the Powerhouse Museum announced it would stage a major retrospective on former fashion designer Carla Zampatti, opening 24 November.

An attempt ‘to score cheap political points’

In an appendix to the report, the three Liberal government members – Taylor Martin, Peter Poulos and Chris Rath – delivered a dissenting statement, saying the report lacked constructive recommendations and instead was an attempt “to score cheap political points and even delay the project through further red tape”.

A key recommendation in the report calls on the NSW government to address all outstanding flood-related concerns, and to re-test the flood immunity of the Parramatta site.

The dissenting statement says this was one of two “sensationalist” recommendations based on conjecture.

“The reality is that flood risk was a key consideration throughout the design and development process. Extensive flood modelling was undertaken by Arup, which is an internationally recognised engineering firm. It confirms that it would take a flood event in excess of one that could occur one in every 1,000 years to enter the ground floor of the finished museum.”

The Liberal committee members also disputed the report’s findings that the Parramatta site was dedicating too much floor space for commercial use, at the expense of collection exhibition. “The level of dedicated commercial space is equivalent in scale to current Australian and international museum developments including WA Museum, Sydney Modern and M+ Hong Kong,” the dissenting statement said.

‘Erasing history and heritage’

More than 140 submissions were received by the inquiry, which heard from more than 70 witnesses during six public hearings. Along with flooding concerns and possible threats to the integrity of the Powerhouse Museum’s collection, the removal of the historic 1880s Victorian mansion Willow Grove to make way for Powerhouse Parramatta received extensive attention.

Willow Grove held cultural and heritage significance to First Nations people in the Parramatta district, the inquiry heard from multiple witnesses, and, as the area’s former maternity hospital, held a special place in local women’s history.

An array of organisations, including the National Trust of Australia, the International Council of Museums Australia, the local First Nations’ Dharug Strategic Management Group and the North Parramatta Residents’ Action Group were among those opposing the government’s decision to dismantle Willow Grove with the possibility of reassembling it elsewhere.

“The irony of erasing an important part of Parramatta’s history and heritage, to make way for a cultural institution that tells other stories about our past, was not lost on the committee,” the report noted.

“Indeed, the government’s own heritage impact statement concluded that the removal of Willow Grove would have a major physical and visual impact on its heritage significance, resulting in the total irreversible loss of the conservation values that constitute its heritage significance.”

Guardian Australia sought comment from the Powerhouse Museum’s chief executive, Lisa Havilah and was provided with a written statement from a NSW government spokesperson, stating the government would be forging ahead with the delivery of Powerhouse Parramatta and was securing key partnerships and attracting “significant private investment” to deliver the project.

“Powerhouse Parramatta will create over 4,100 direct and indirect jobs across the project lifespan, and over 400 ongoing jobs once it is operational,” the statement said.

“The project is injecting hundreds of millions of dollars into the economy through the procurement of labour and construction materials.

This important project will also deliver an important boost to Western Sydney businesses and the local economy.

The NSW Government makes no apologies for investing in Western Sydney.”

Suzette Meade, spokesperson for the North Parramatta Residents’ Action Group, said the upper house inquiry report confirmed that successive NSW premiers – Mike Baird, Gladys Berejiklian and Dominic Perrottet – had consistently ignored expert advice on the poor site choice for the museum.

“The state government, regardless of an avalanche of community objection and expert advice, bulldozed through the history of women in western Sydney,” she said.

“The Powerhouse Parramatta has never been about what the people in western Sydney wanted, but what this government wanted.”

The NSW government has until 30 December to respond to the report.