



BRITTA CAMPION

Tom Lockley at the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo, Sydney, with Frigate Bird II, a Catalina flying boat

Museum makeover has volunteers in revolt

EXCLUSIVE

STEPHEN RICE
NSW EDITOR

Tom Lockley walks through his beloved Powerhouse Museum like a man lost.

It's not that he can't find his way around – the retired school-teacher and volunteer guide has shown 20,000 visitors through the museum over more than 14 years.

It's that so many of the familiar landmarks have gone, including his great loves, the historic aircraft. He counts them off: the B14 Bleriot, the 1927 Cirrus Moth, the pioneering 1976 Wheeler Scout. All boxed up and shipped off to storage and an uncertain fate.

"It's the deliberate, ideological destruction of the soul of the museum," he says, pausing to chat to museum staff, who greet him warmly and treat the 80-year-old with reverence.

Mr Lockley's own future at the museum is uncertain after a hotly

disputed meeting with a supervisor last month at which he says he was sacked because of his vehement opposition to the controversial plan to convert Sydney's science and technology museum into a fashion and design complex. Mr Lockley says he was told he was no longer welcome at the Powerhouse after being accused of stoking "tensions" among the other volunteers.

"I'd like you not to return, you are emotionally involved and we worry about your health," he says she told him.

Mr Lockley says she cited an argument he had with one of the few volunteers in favour of the move. "She felt that my presence was disturbing the flow of the museum, and I'm pretty sure she was acting under orders. That's it in a nutshell – the anti-democratic nature of that whole process," he said.

That account of the meeting is strongly disputed by the Powerhouse, which says no one sacked him or asked for his resignation. "Tom has always been warmly

welcomed to the Powerhouse no matter what his opinion is. The Powerhouse supports and encourages robust discussion and multiple points of view. We would never attempt to censor anyone," a spokesman said.

'They want to make the Powerhouse an entertainment centre with a few old knick-knacks as decoration'

TOM LOCKLEY
FORMER POWERHOUSE
MUSEUM VOLUNTEER

Regardless, Mr Lockley can't see himself returning to guide visitors through the shell of the museum he loved, as the collection of industrial and scientific items is broken up.

"They want to make the Powerhouse an entertainment

centre with a few old knick-knacks as decoration," he says.

The passionate volunteer had made no secret of his own views, angry at what he saw as the lack of consultation and the secrecy surrounding the \$500m "renewal" of the Ultimo site, the construction of a new centre in Parramatta and the expansion of a facility at Castle Hill at a total cost of at least \$1.4bn.

Mr Lockley points out that references to the sites as museums have recently been removed, instead rebranded as "Powerhouse Ultimo", "Powerhouse Parramatta" and "Powerhouse Castle Hill".

He says 95 per cent of volunteers at the museum oppose the changes.

The Australian has spoken to a number of museum volunteers who vehemently disagree with the move. Most declined to be named for fear of recrimination, but Garry Horvai, a volunteer for 17 years, has already handed in his badge. "I just can't bear volunteering there anymore, watching the destruction of a once world-class

museum," he says. "The place certainly needs tender loving care because it's been neglected for years, but the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo as the world knew it has been cancelled."

Mr Horvai confirms that volunteers were told not to express concerns about the move during tours, even when the subject was raised by visitors. "Yes, I was told that too, we are not to engage negatively with the public – they're quite strong about that, almost as if you're a public servant."

As Mr Lockley was leaving the Powerhouse after his meeting with the supervisor but still wearing his volunteer tag, he says a teacher asked him for directions to the steam gallery. He led the class from a western Sydney high school to the gallery.

"The machines were working and the kids lit up with enthusiasm as two wonderful volunteers answered questions and demonstrated the merry-go-round callopie," he recalls. Losing those experiences, he says, would be a blight on the nation.

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MUSEUM MAKEOVER HAS VOLUNTEERS IN REVOLT

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