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From
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These three musketeers from the ALP were set to save the day, but have yet to show up.

It's time for another look at the Powerhouse Museum saga. I know current management has dispensed altogether with the idea of a museum, and is now calling the institution simply "Powerhouse" - like "Tate" or "Sting" or "Prince". Being an old-fashioned kind of guy, I can't help thinking of the place as a *museum*, even though this obviously isn't cool.

A better reason to persist with the word "museum" is that when we change the name of something it changes the way we see it – what the philosophers might call its ontological status. If the name was changed to the Powerhouse Nightclub or the Powerhouse Chip Shop, it would signal a drastic rearrangement of the way we view this entity. It's a more insidious to simply remove the word

“museum”, but there are far-reaching implications.

Firstly, it eliminates a mass of cultural preconceptions about what a museum is and does. Secondly, it creates a neutral “brand” that may be shaped into anything the administration deems appropriate. This brand, with logos and graphics, may then be attached to anything at all. There is no longer any issue about what is or isn’t the right and proper business of a public museum.

Labor came to power in NSW with a promise of ending the long drawn-out vandalism inflicted on the PHM by their predecessors. After two months in office there has been little indication from relevant ministers such as John Graham and Pru Car, that the government is following through on this commitment. Instead, there has been a great deal of prevarication, while the management of the PHM fasttracks its destructive program.

It’s entirely predictable that members of the business lobby and sympathetic bureaucrats will tell the incoming ministers it’s impossible to stop these processes; that it will cost millions to get out of contracts; that the only way to go is full steam ahead; that it’s a great deal for the western suburbs. It’s predictable that PHM management will take every opportunity to suck up to the new government and make their case as forcefully as possible.

Let’s put these claims against the counterclaims:

The entire redevelopment is massively unpopular. It serves the vested interests of a few, and effectively destroys a major public asset. Community opinion and expert opinion are solidly opposed – and have been for almost a decade!

If the project proceeds as planned, there will be three separate buildings under the “Powerhouse” label, in Ultimo, Parramatta and Castle Hill. The Ultimo site is currently being emptied of its collection in preparation for a rebuild that will remove fifty percent of current exhibition space. The Parramatta building, set in a floodplain, has had so many features excised it no longer meets international standards for a museum. It’s hard to say exactly what it actually *is* – aside from a kind of overgrown function centre. If I had to venture a definition, I’d say it’s a massive white elephant that delivers nothing to the vast majority of people of Parramatta.

As for Castle Hill, it promises to be a glorified storage depot in the outer suburbs where the bulk of the PHM collection will be left to gather dust in perpetuity. It will double as a place of exile for most of the museum departments, such as conservation, curatorial, etc, that will be relocated to this impractically distant location.

There is much talk about “residencies” in Ultimo and Parramatta, but why? What is the point of the Powerhouse turning itself into a hotel for artists, designers and students while forgetting the core

business of a museum – which is to preserve and display important items of cultural heritage.

The ultimate outcome is not hard to visualise: Nobody will go to these three venues. Castle Hill is simply too far away from the city to be a viable attraction. Parramatta is a completely unresolved mess of a project, while Ultimo is in the process of being transformed into yet another venue for contemporary art and fashion. This represents a considerable reduction of the PHM mission, as art and fashion were previously only two of the many areas represented in this building. Highlights of the collection, such as Watt's steam engine, are set to be dismantled, but it's not clear where they will pop up next.

However many millions it will cost to stop and undo this ongoing catastrophe, this will represent a fraction of the cost of proceeding as planned. Once demolition begins in Ultimo, this heritage site is gone forever. As it is proposed to close the museum for three years while the work is being done, this already represents an enormous loss of revenue and a waste of human resources. What are staff members doing for the next three years? When the makeover is complete, attendances will never come close to justifying the expense.

Labor has spoken out about the Coalition's mania for privatisation, but they should recognise that what is happening at the Powerhouse is little more than the privatisation of a major public asset by a small group of people with a particular agenda. An industrious member of the Powerhouse Museum Alliance has told me about a plan to have a new department called "Community Curatorial", to be headed by one Ivan Muniz Reed, a co-founder of the independent exhibitions agency, The Curatorial Department, with Glenn Barkley, husband of Powerhouse CEO, Lisa Havilah. Mr. Muniz Reed's big idea is the "decolonisation of the museum". Having watched this "decolonisation" stuff in action for a number of years, I can only say it is a problematic, pernicious ideology cloaked in heroic colours. As the museum already has the lowest visitor numbers since 1960, it's doubtful that decolonialising it will bring in the crowds.

And what are we to make of the infamous event held last December, for trustees and friends, in which management unveiled its new acquisition of an \$18,000 dinner set purchased from ceramic artist, James Lemon, another colleague of Glenn's at Sullivan + Strumpf Gallery, which carried hand-written slogans insulting the diners? Had I been seated at this table, confronted with a dinner set covered in smartarse obscenities, I would have asked for a plain white plate.

Why did the trustees, such as Peter Collins and his peers, see this as acceptable? Do they think it's funny to be called cocksuckers by their dinner plate? When an institution sacrifices its dignity in an effort to be hip it's no laughing matter.

All of this is most uncomfortable for me to write, as it puts me at odds with people with whom I've always had cordial relations, but the PHM story is rapidly approaching a final chapter, and I'd like to see a happy ending rather than a tragedy. If everything proceeds as it is currently proceeding, the entire bill over the course of a decade will be around \$2 billion for a negative result. That's 4-5 Sydney Moderns, and 5-10 times more than it would have cost to give a major facelift to the Ultimo building.

After all this time we have yet to see a convincing business plan for the schemes that are underway. There is no business plan for a disaster.

The turnover of staff at the PHM over the past year has been unusually rapid. What I hear on the grapevine is that existing staff are too demoralised to speak about problems, feeling they will be victimised and sacked if they complain. The proposal to send everyone to Castle Hill and Parramatta, apart from maybe, Mr. Muniz Reed, is hardly more than a way of forcing long-term employees to resign, so the culture of the PHM can be rebuilt from the ground up with fresh, willing drones. There's no concern whatsoever about the knowledge and expertise that will be lost.

Dear Ministers: we stand on the brink of a cultural debacle of mammoth proportions that you have inherited from an irresponsible and secretive former government. It is overwhelmingly opposed by the community and by expert opinion. The museum with the largest and most diverse collection in Australia is being taken apart before your eyes, and turned into a contemporary art and fashion hub, with "residencies". It is a national disgrace and an international embarrassment that suggests we do not care for our own heritage, and are not fit to borrow from other countries. The most urgent action is required. If the ongoing proposals are implemented in their entirety we will have created a black hole that will absorb ever greater amounts of public money, with scant capacity to generate revenue. Aside from sheer moral cowardice there is no reason whatsoever - be it cultural, economic or even popularist (it's the opposite of popular!) - to continue down this path to perdition.

What more can I say?

[...and more newsletter items...]



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