

What's in a Name? Killing the Powerhouse Museum Brand and its Museum Purpose

Kylie Winkworth, February 2023

The Powerhouse Museum's name and identity is set for the scrap heap at a ridiculous cost to NSW taxpayers of \$1.56 million. As reported by Linda Morris in the Sun Herald, the cost of deleting the museum word from the Powerhouse Museum's name and brand is a whopping \$764,000, with a further \$800,000 to redesign the website.¹ That's a lot of money to delete one crucial, defining, powerful word from the PHM's brand: MUSEUM.

There are many Powerhouse arts facilities, including Casula and Brisbane, but there is only one Powerhouse Museum. Now, after spending \$1.56 million, **Powerhouse**, minus the definite article, is a brand that can be applied to any event, program, place or platform. Anything that is except its historic purpose as a museum. Only the rarely open Sydney Observatory escapes this brand destruction.

The reason the museum word is being dropped is because the PHM won't be a museum anymore. Relieved of its museum moniker **Powerhouse** is morphing into a contemporary arts and entertainment organisation managing what will be two commercially focussed function centres.

The Powerhouse Museum is not saved. The media conference on 4 July 2020 to announce the Powerhouse Museum would be staying in Ultimo was a cynical ruse to defuse community outrage at the looming closure of the museum.² The promises made by then Treasurer Perrottet that the PHM would continue to display technology, science, engineering and design were a stunt. After the media conference the government went back to work on long standing plans to evict the collections and turn the PHM into the Ultimo creative industries precinct with some fashion and design displays and theatre facilities. It is the same plan outlined in the 2018 business case.³ Two months later, in September 2020 the MAAS CEO and now head of Create NSW wrote to the Pyrmont Peninsula Place Strategy, advising that a Final Business Case for the Ultimo Creative Industries Precinct was in preparation for renewal of the Powerhouse *site*, testing options for a 1,500 seat lyric theatre. None of the project elements detailed in the letter, or plans for a commercial and creative industries precinct, were revealed to museum experts or members of the community who were being asked for their views on renewing the Powerhouse Museum. The following two years of consultations on 'museum renewal' were a sham.⁴

The deletion of the museum word from the Powerhouse Museum is the logical consequence of this campaign of deception. It reflects the government's long standing intention to change the museum's remit and purpose, bury the PHM brand and demolish all trace of the 1988 Powerhouse Museum.

For more than 34 years the Powerhouse Museum (PHM) was one of the best known and most respected cultural brands in Australia. It is one of a handful of Australian cultural institutions recognised by its acronym PHM – along with the NGV, GOMA and MONA. The PHM brand was built on decades of work delivering popular exhibitions and collaborative projects across NSW, Australia and overseas. Collections were at the centre of this work. The PHM's exhibitions were renowned for their breadth, innovation, scholarship, design and accessibility. From the time the museum opened

in 1988, the PHM redefined what museums could be – popular, entertaining, inspiring, educational and fun.⁵

The root cause of this brand destruction is the failure to develop a compelling concept for Parramatta that is particular to its place, people and mission. It was promised as a STEM museum but the design brief and business case papers suggest otherwise.⁶ Powerhouse Parramatta is a commercially focussed performing arts and function centre, foisted on the community and built on the rubble of Willow Grove.⁷ Every space is available for commercial hire. It has nothing to do with the Powerhouse Museum. There are no dedicated museum exhibition spaces. There is no collection working area or space for collections. The PHM's large transport and engineering objects can't be moved into the building due to access constraints.⁸ Every over-scaled presentation space is purpose-designed for performance, events and venue hire, not museum exhibitions. The business case for Parramatta is to present just seven exhibitions a year. And this is supposed to be the 'flagship'.⁹

Only the Powerhouse name is going to Parramatta, not the museum, not the specialist curatorial staff, and not the collections, all of which will be evicted from the PHM's purpose designed exhibition spaces and collection facilities in the Harwood building, destined for burial in a vast new large object store at Castle Hill. This is the only museum project anywhere in the world where the collection is being moved to less accessible and inferior facilities to what the museum already owns, co-located on the PHM site.¹⁰ And the mug taxpayer is billed twice for this folly: \$44 million for the collection morgue at Castle Hill,¹¹ and millions more to build new exhibition handling and loading dock facilities in the former PHM to replace the museum's state of the art facilities in the Harwood building just 100 metres away.¹² After the announcement in July 2020 that the PHM would be staying in Ultimo, there was no practical or museological justification for the large object store development. The reason the project went ahead was the intention to empty both the Harwood building and the PHM's exhibition halls to make way for divestment and demolition of the museum's buildings and facilities.¹³ This is a development that forever degrades the functionality, collection access and museum potential of a great public museum that has been in Ultimo since 1893. It is a travesty that this is being done on a stack of lies, sophistry, broken promises and fake consultations.¹⁴



The PHM brand is indivisible from its landmark building, a Sulman award winning adaptation of the former Ultimo power station into a renowned museum. Central to the meaning, history and brand identity of the PHM are the museum's defining power and transport exhibitions, for which the PHM was purpose designed. At its heart the Powerhouse Museum is about power, transport, industry, design and innovation. This is the site's history and heritage, and the museum's underpinning concept and rationale. It has never been more relevant as the precinct evolves as a tech hub. But after eight years of protest and broken promises, the management is intent on evicting the power and transport collections to an inaccessible store at Castle Hill so the museum's exhibition spaces can be used for fashion parades and turned into venue hire opportunities. Just three large objects will remain in the former PHM's majestic exhibition halls, purpose designed to exhibit the transport and engineering treasures of NSW.

The brand destruction of the PHM is part and parcel of the government's secret plans to demolish all trace of the Sulman award winning Powerhouse Museum. The PHM was built with the highest quality infrastructure, designed for a working life of more than 100 years. Yet the government is planning to erase all trace of the 1988 museum, including the distinctive galleria and Wran building Harris St. The cost of demolition and development of the former museum into a creative industries precinct is a staggering \$500 million. The architect of the Powerhouse Museum Lionel Glendenning put the cost of genuine renewal of the PHM at \$250 million. His renewal scheme was never examined, nor was he consulted on the secret masterplan and design brief which called for the erasure of all trace of the 1988 museum adaptation, reducing the building to a brick shell. It is a shocking waste that a museum designed with the highest quality infrastructure, designed for a working life of more than 100 years is set for demolition after just 34 years at an absurd cost of \$500 million. travesty that high quality museum infrastructure is , reducing the site brick shell of the former power station, erasing all trace of the 1988 Sulman award winning museum. despite Premier Perrottet's promise in 2020 that the PHM was saved.¹⁵ The museum's mission, purpose, identity and Sulman award winning buildings are being demolished. After more than 20 million visitors and just 34 years after it opened, the Powerhouse Museum will close forever in 2023.

No museum anywhere in the civilised world has ever been deliberately destroyed in such a calculated, cynical and utterly wasteful act of cultural vandalism. This is a slow motion museum disaster delivered over eight years of policy failure, incompetence, deskilling, community protests and broken promises.

The current management has driven the Powerhouse Museum into the ground, delivering a 78% drop in visitor numbers over four years, and a 74% drop in education engagement.¹⁶ These are the lowest visitor numbers since 1960. The PHM has lost all sense of its design and narrative coherence. Many exhibition galleries are closed. Vegetation is growing out of the gutters. The museum looks like no one cares anymore. One of the current exhibitions would win an award for the most boring exhibition ever seen in a major public museum.

Instead of calling in the auditors to ask where the money is going, including \$55 million in recurrent funding, the government is gifting those responsible for this dismal performance an astonishing \$1.4 billion of taxpayers' money. This is more than five times the cost of Sydney Modern. If the CEO has a visionary new paradigm for museums, what she's doing in the PHM looks like a dud.

Now their best idea is to drop the museum word altogether. Not waiting for planning approval – let alone community consent, the management is pushing on with the eviction of the PHM's collection, emptying the museum's state of the art storage and exhibition halls, intent on erasing all trace of the 1988 Sulman award winning museum.

After ditching the museum word, Powerhouse management will be free to focus on its new business - sweating the real estate assets to generate a **promised \$38.8 million a year in commercial revenue. This is \$106,301 per day across the four venues.** ¹⁷ Any museum exhibitions will have to fit around the venue hire commitments. This change of purpose goes to the deeper reason behind the decision to drop the museum name and mission from Powerhouse.

The Arts Minister has declared the Powerhouse has a responsibility to support creative industries in NSW, and so the PHM is focussing on contemporary art commissions and subsidising fashion designers ,

Museums are among our most respected and trusted public organisations. They stand for permanence, integrity, ethics, scholarship, knowledge, research, curatorship, conservation, education and transparent communications. This is no longer the core purpose of Powerhouse, an arts and entertainment business that has appropriated the former Powerhouse Museum's assets, the gifts of generations of donors, and the brand, so these can be used for an altogether different purpose which is unrelated to the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences Act. It is an outrageous breach of trust that an historic state museum is being deliberately destroyed without any policy process, transparent consultation or community consent.

While the managers at Powerhouse are blowing \$1.5 million of taxpayers' money deleting the museum word from the Powerhouse Museum, community and independent museums in regional NSW are making do with **grants of up to \$2,000** for dehumidifiers, signage and collection conservation. Powerhouse is spending \$800,000 revamping its website. Community museums might hope for \$2,000. This funding program hasn't increased in the 12 years of the LNP government. After a decade of National Party pork barrelling, barely a drop has dribbled down to these irreplaceable museums and their heritage collections. Averaged across the more than 300 community museums in NSW **the amount available to each museum is \$235.** ¹⁸

What a mess this government has made of museum policy. That's because it doesn't have one. The best one could say is that in the government's mind policy is list of infrastructure projects. It is difficult to fathom why a responsible government would destroy a major state museum and plot the demolition of the museum's multi award winning buildings that it publicly promised were saved, while ignoring the needs of more than 300 independent and community museums in western Sydney and regional NSW. The custodianship of intergenerational assets such as museums should be among a conservative government's strengths. Instead the Perrottet government is spending \$1.4 billion to hijack the PHM's assets, destroy its brand and turn the former Powerhouse Museum into a commercially focussed contemporary art centre, all signed and sealed in secret and without a museum policy or strategy. What's happening to the Powerhouse Museum is an unprecedented cultural crime that runs against all the basic tenets and obligations of the custodianship of museums in civilised societies. The museum we thought we'd saved through an eight year community campaign is not saved. It's going on the scrap heap along with unique Powerhouse Museum brand

which is indivisible from its Sulman award winning building and iconic exhibitions built around the themes of power, transport, engineering, innovation and design.

Kylie Winkworth

Powerhouse Museum Alliance

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Unprompted, an architect colleague has called Perrottet's scheme **government sponsored cultural vandalism at its most destructive and malicious intent**. (This is not the PHM's architect Lionel Glendenning but someone who knows the museum building well.) It is ridiculous and outrageous to even consider the demolition of a Sulman award winning museum that is just 34 years old, built for a working life of more than 100 years, but now about to be thrown away like any cheap low-rent prefab.

What this government has done to the Powerhouse Museum is unprecedented in the history of museums and museum policy anywhere in the civilised world. K

One of these images is a museum, the other shows its future role as a venue hire opportunity with some interesting props.



¹ <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/what-s-in-a-name-powerhouse-drops-the-m-word-from-its-title-20221118-p5bzd1.html>

² *Sydney's Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo will continue to welcome visitors to its world renowned exhibitions....* In fact all but three of the PHM's world renowned exhibits are being evicted to Castle Hill. Far from complementing the future focussed Parramatta facility, as promised, the PHM will be reduced to a diminished clone of Parramatta. The jobs are not being retained at Ultimo as promised. Nor did the government explore if funds earmarked for relocation costs could be used on renovation. There is no PHM renovation. It is the same old demolition plan. Media release, More Powerhouse for the People – NSW Government to retain Ultimo Museum, 4 July 2020 <https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/more-powerhouse-for-people-%E2%80%93-nsw-government-to-retain-ultimo-museum>

³ For the 2018 Ultimo Presence business case papers see <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/find-out-more/business-cases-access-to-documents/>

⁴ [200911 MAAS to PPPS.PDF - Google Drive](#)

⁵ There is only one exhibition left in the PHM that demonstrates the museum's once high standard of exhibition practice with layered interpretation and hands-on activities. That is *Steam Revolution*, always the busiest exhibition in what's left of the PHM. See it before it's demolished.

⁶ For further analysis of the Parramatta Powerhouse design brief see Kylie Winkworth submission 137 to the Inquiry into the Government's Management of the Powerhouse Museum and other Cultural Projects, May 2020 [0137 Ms Kylie Winkworth.pdf \(nsw.gov.au\)](https://majorprojects.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/prweb/PRRestService/mp/01/getContent?AttachRef=SSD-10416%2120210212T213021.313%20GMT)

⁷ Powerhouse Parramatta is the only museum project where the community had no say in what the museum was about or where it is located. There were 1598 community objections to the Parramatta Powerhouse EIS, and just 26 submissions in support. The development was imposed on the community. It doesn't reflect community cultural aspirations or resonate with priorities in Council's Cultural Plan. See State Significant Assessment report, p.33

<https://majorprojects.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/prweb/PRRestService/mp/01/getContent?AttachRef=SSD-10416%2120210212T213021.313%20GMT>

⁸ The PHM's very large transport and engineering objects are destined for Castle Hill. There is no hoist or capacity to move large heavy objects to the upper floors of the Parramatta development. The P1 space on the ground floor does not have museum standard climate controls and is designated for large scale concerts and events. It is also exposed to flood risk.

⁹ See Budget Estimates, 5 September 2022, p.60.

<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/transcripts/2987/Transcript%20-%20PC%201%20-%20Aboriginal%20Affairs,%20Arts,%20Regional%20Youth,%20Tourism%20-%205%20September%202022%20-%20CORRECTED.pdf> The real PHM routinely presented 40-45 exhibitions and displays a year, so seven exhibitions a year is a pitiful cultural outcome from the investment of \$915 million. The MAAS collections are irrelevant to the Parramatta development, which is why there are no dedicated exhibition spaces or collection facilities.

¹⁰ Co-location of exhibition, collections and conservation functions is the gold standard in museums, evidenced in the new Cairo Museum. For a revealing account of the difficulties inspecting the PHM collection at Castle Hill, and its extremely dangerous access, see Robert Hannan's talk to the Unfinished Business Forum at NSW Parliament House, November 2022. There is no public transport and vehicle access is so dangerous that Transport for NSW declined to endorse the development plans for the new J Store.

<https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/A.S.-address-to-Select-Committee-Nov-2022.pdf>

¹¹ Answers to Questions on Notice, September 2022, p.17 and 28. It's not clear if the \$44 million includes purchase of the land at \$2,710,889. It does not include staff time and transport costs. This is will be a recurrent cost on the museum in perpetuity, every time objects are moved to and from Castle Hill.

<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/other/17814/AQON%20-%20Hon%20Ben%20Franklin%20MLC%20-%20Aboriginal%20Affairs,%20Arts,%20Regional%20Youth,%20Tourism%20-%20received%2029%20September%202022.pdf>

¹² Compounding the waste and degradation of the PHM's museum facilities, the Harwood building, the former tram depot, which is an integral part of the PHM's history, heritage and design conception, is being handed to UTS in a secret deal for just \$10 million. How much of this is cash has not been revealed. What a steal of public cultural assets.

<https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/a-game-changer-university-joining-forces-with-the-powerhouse-in-a-landmark-deal-20220919-p5bj9o.html>

¹³ If the PHM's transport, engineering and power collections were staying at Ultimo as Perrottet promised, the J Store development would not be needed.

¹⁴ The Museums Discovery Centre J Store development was approved partly on the false assertion that *the Applicant has advised that the proposal does not seek to replace existing operational or functional components of the Powerhouse*. Moving all the PHM's collection out of Ultimo was in fact a stated project aim in the EIS. Expansion of the Museums Discovery Centre Assessment Report, SSD-10472, p.31

<https://majorprojects.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/prweb/PRRestService/mp/01/getContent?AttachRef=SSD-10472%2120210423T061337.135%20GMT>

¹⁵ <https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/more-powerhouse-for-people-%E2%80%93-nsw-government-to-retain-ultimo-museum>

¹⁶ <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/museum-plans-and-problems-into-2023/decline-failure-and-irrelevance-now-on-exhibition-at-the-powerhouse-museum/>

¹⁷ Budget Estimates, 5 September 2022, p.60.

<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/transcripts/2987/Transcript%20-%20PC%201%20-%20Aboriginal%20Affairs,%20Arts,%20Regional%20Youth,%20Tourism%20-%205%20September%202022%20-%20CORRECTED.pdf>

¹⁸ [2022-Small-Grant-Recipients.pdf \(mgnsw.org.au\)](#)