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Kylie Winkworth: Wasting the Powerhouse Museum's Assets and Purpose

It is bizarre that the Powerhouse Museum's Harwood building is proposed for inclusion in the City of Sydney's heritage floor space scheme when it isn't even on Council's LEP (Local Environmental Plans), let alone the state heritage register which used to be the eligibility criteria for selling air space rights for heritage floor space.¹ For years the City of Sydney rebuffed and ignored the PMA's letters and emails to have the Harwood building, Sydney's largest and oldest tram depot, listed on Council's LEP. Once the amendments are approved the owner can sell the heritage floor space rights and still not have any heritage conservation obligations. Will it be the MAAS Trustees selling out the Wran legacy and the endowment of previous generations of NSW taxpayers, the legacy that John Graham promised to preserve? Or will it be UTS or some other developer that cleans up after the people charged with protecting the assets of the Powerhouse Museum sell out the public interest?

All these machinations fit perfectly with Minister John Graham's fake 'heritage overhaul' announced on Monday 4 December, an empty slogan to cover the delivery of the LNP's museum eviction scheme using the same team to downsize and repurpose the former PHM as a creative industries, arts and entertainment centre modelled on the same principles as Parramatta - aka Carriageworks West.² Less than nine months ago he stood in front of the PHM and said 'only Labor will save the Powerhouse Museum'. **No they haven't. The Powerhouse Museum is not saved.** The Minister has mistaken preserving the 'Wran legacy' for keeping the shell of the Wran building, when it is the museum itself that is at risk: its mission and education purpose, its assets, facilities, collection-centred museology and expert professional staff, along with the transport, power and engineering collections in the dedicated exhibition spaces that were purpose designed to display them.

One of many misleading statements in the Minister's media release is the absurd promise that when the museum reopens **it will support increased access to the collection**. That would be the PHM's collection stashed away in an inaccessible store at Castle Hill so the museum can be emptied of the treasures of NSW and its vacant galleries monetised as venue hire opportunities. Before the election John Graham criticised the Liberal government's focus on events rather than museum spaces. After the election he is delivering the next stage of the Liberal's plan to turn the former museum into a commercially focused creative arts and events centre, with some occasional exhibitions. Before the election he promised to release key details of the plans for Ultimo and Parramatta.³ Nothing has been released. The cone of silence worthy of a national security project continues. The PMA was invited to a briefing on the plans but was asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement. We didn't. Before the election John Graham promised a museum with a traditional focus on science, engineering and transport. After the election he has endorsed the management's eviction plan for these collections which are to the central the purpose, conceptual narrative and design of the Powerhouse Museum.

When the PHM closes in February 2024 anyone wanting to see the museum's transport, engineering and technology collections will have to trek to Castle Hill (no parking and no public transport), or visit some random regional museum that might be open one or two days a week.

It's a shocking act of cultural vandalism to disperse these collections and disconnect them from their meaning and place at the heart of the Powerhouse Museum, and their context in the industrial history of Ultimo. This is the only collection relocation project anywhere in the world where taxpayers have been slugged to move the museum's collection into inferior, less secure and less accessible facilities to what the PHM already owns at Ultimo. At a cost of more than \$100 million this is an outrageous exercise in asset destruction that puts the collections at risk every time items are moved. And there will be higher packing, handling, conservation and transport costs for the museum – that is taxpayers - in perpetuity. The management of MAAS are hiding information on the hundreds of museum objects damaged in the completely unnecessary collection relocation. More damage is inevitable when they start moving the large fragile objects in *Transport Flight and Space*, *Steam Revolution* and Loco No.1 and carriages. This will cost millions of dollars and require parts of the boiler house and the Wran building to be demolished. It is unnecessary, wasteful and destructive. These collections would be safer protected *in situ* but this would wreck the management's vision to '*break the institution*' and cleanse the museum of its industrial and transport history. More money will be blown inserting a loading dock into the PHM to replace the expansive loading dock and collection facilities in the Harwood building just 50 metres away.

It has always been the CEO's plan to empty the PHM of its defining collections to create what the President of the MAAS Trust called a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate scraped clean of heritage, collections, memory and meaning. The concept plans for the stage 1 'Ultimo Renewal' delivered the spirit and intent of the *tabula rasa*, showing the former PHM devoid of its renowned exhibitions.⁴ The mystery is why Minister Graham, having promised a heritage revitalisation, has continued the LNP's concept scheme with some minor tweaks, when these plans erased all trace of the Powerhouse Museum's design, heritage adaptation and power and transport installations. They treated the PHM as if it was an empty box, which was the whole point of the CEO's plan. Linda Morris in the SMH reported that Arts Minister John Graham '*has guaranteed that **all three of the museum's iconic large objects** will be on show at Ultimo when it reopens by 2026.*'⁵ All three! That should read **only three**. He has not even upped the exact same miserable promise made by the LNP. After blowing \$250 million only three large objects will be returned to the former Powerhouse Museum which was purpose designed to display the nationally significant transport, power and engineering collections in the grand and conceptually resonant spaces of the former Ultimo power station and the Harwood building. The exhibition of these priceless collections was the centrepiece of the investment case for the PHM's creation from 1978, and at the heart of Neville Wran and Jack Ferguson's vision for the Powerhouse Museum.

After only 35 years and more than 22 million visitors, the Labor Government that promised to save the Wran legacy, is now delivering the *coup de grace* to the Powerhouse Museum. People should visit the PHM before it closes on February 5 to ask why the government is closing the museum to empty it of its defining collections, when only three months ago Minister Graham promised they were keeping the Powerhouse open.⁶

With no sense of irony the key players at Monday's announcement stood alongside the Harwood building, the museum's purpose designed collection, conservation, research and workshop facilities, effectively wasted by the MAAS CEO and 'Trust'. This is the building the CEO has emptied of its functions and collections for no public benefit or museological purpose, so it

can be turned over to artists and UTS. Few doubt that it will ultimately be sold as a property play. Without any shame the proponents of this attack on the history, functionality and design integrity of the PHM insisted the Castle Hill J store development *'does not seek to replace existing operational or functional components of the Powerhouse Museum.'*

The scheme that John Graham announced in front of the Harwood building is stage 2 of the LNP's museum demolition and collection eviction plan, otherwise known as the Ultimo Renewal Creative Industries Precinct. There is no heritage revitalisation. The shell of the buildings will remain, but not the meaning and heart of the museum, nor its assets and funding. What we saw are some revised concepts by the same proponents who see no heritage value in the actual Powerhouse Museum. *'We will not be a museum that bows down to the monuments of the 20th century'* promised the MAAS CEO.⁷ The power is ebbing away from the Powerhouse Museum, as it has been since the CEO set about planning the museum's closure five years ago. Two public announcements that the Powerhouse Museum was saved and would remain open were ignored, demonstrating her principle of *'not responding until it no longer matters – and that's a very special bureaucratic strategy.'*

It was fitting the Minister stood beside the former Liberal arts minister Peter Collins, the president of the MAAS Trust, along with Don Harwin's pick for the current MAAS CEO, since he is delivering the LNP's plan to radically change the PHM's purpose and remit, evict the collections and professional staff, ignore family audiences the museum's education mission, and downsize the museum's assets, facilities and functions. At best what will emerge from the former PHM is a commercially focussed part time exhibition centre, a clone of the scheme for Parramatta. All this is being done behind a shroud of secrecy inconsistent with the obligations of a public museum. There's no master plan, no museum plan, no design brief, no exhibition plan and no business case – or not one that the government is prepared to release. 'Powerhouse' as it is now known will offer more consultation in an information vacuum, although the CEO's stated policy is to *'stop asking audiences'*. So once again they will ignore what people say, just as they did in the last eight rounds of consultations. No one believes the PHM will reopen in three years' time, or that it will even be a museum. The museum is in the hands of a leadership team intent on *'breaking the institution'*. This is one promise they will keep unless the PHM can be saved for a third time.

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¹ <https://www.facebook.com/savethepowerhouse/>

² Media Release 4 December 2023 <https://www.nsw.gov.au/departments-and-agencies/enterprise-investment-trade/ministerial-media-releases/powerhouse-museum-heritage-overhaul>

³ Only Labor will save the Powerhouse Museum, Media Release, 22 March 2023 <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Labor-media-release-22-March-23.pdf>

⁴ SSD is a state significant development. It specifically turns off protection under the Heritage Act and neutralises meaningful consideration of heritage issues. For the concept plans see <https://www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/major-projects/projects/powerhouse-ultimo-renewal>

For the Stage 2 SSD EIS now in preparation see <https://pp.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/major-projects/projects/powerhouse-ultimo-renewal-detailed-application>

⁵ <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/goodbye-powerhouse-museum-revised-shutdown-plans-revealed-20231201-p5eo9i.html>

⁶ Media Release 2 September 2023 <https://www.nsw.gov.au/departments-and-agencies/enterprise-investment-trade/ministerial-media-releases/powerhouse-museum-ultimo-revitalised>

⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDkCKQS_o9s