

The Fake News of Labor's Powerhouse Ultimo Heritage Hoax

Kylie Winkworth, 28 September 2024

In an era of rampant fake news, it's still a shock to see ABC News recycling spin and government propaganda. On Monday 16 September ABC News platforms carried news of the expanded heritage listing of the Powerhouse Museum Complex, 'locking in the government's \$300 million revitalisation project'. Being the ABC News, many people celebrated the Powerhouse Museum was finally protected, even the journalist. Little of what followed was true.

The heritage listing does *not* lock in the government's \$300 million revitalisation project. (More like \$400 million plus, but the government has stopped counting the cost of the Powerhouse \$1.5 billion spendathon.) The Powerhouse Ultimo project hasn't been approved or even assessed by the Department of Planning, although the ABC reported it as a done deal. The development is still open for public submissions until 7 October.

The heritage listing, gazetted two months ago, does *not* prevent the sale or commercial development of the Powerhouse Museum site as ABC News stated. It does *not* guarantee the 'site must remain exclusively as a museum', another tendril of ABC misinformation. In fact, the project is an *adaptive reuse* of the Powerhouse Museum, as the proponents told the Heritage Council. They just haven't told the rest of us what use they have in mind for the former museum.

The State Significant Development (SSD) plans show the gutted shell of the PHM reduced to three 'large volume presentation spaces'. The MAAS CEO's ambitious 'decluttering' project reduces the museum's exhibition space by 75%; demolishing all the medium and small-scale exhibition galleries that were purpose designed for applied arts, design, history, science, technology *and* international exhibitions. Powerhouse Ultimo, minus the museum word, looks like a contemporary art, performance and venue hire facility. But Labor's shroud of secrecy around the project means no one knows exactly what the place will be. Despite repeated promises of transparency, the government has refused to release any of the documents that would normally be public in a genuine museum renewal project. There is no museum plan, no exhibition plan, no design brief, no master plan, and no business case to explain or justify the wasteful demolition of a museum that is only 36 years old.

Instead of protecting and conserving the Powerhouse Museum, the hoax heritage listing greenlights the demolition of the museum that Labor promised to save. There is no heritage revitalisation of the Powerhouse Museum. Labor's big promises are the same as the Liberal's. Just three large objects will or may return to the former museum that was purpose designed to display the museum's priceless power and transport collections in a heritage complex about power and transport.

No part of the design and fabric of the 1988 Sulman award winning Powerhouse Museum is protected by the expanded heritage listing. The Powerhouse Museum's architecture, design, concept, fabric, exhibitions and renowned collection installations are either ignored, or assessed as having no heritage significance that is worth keeping.

Buried in the fine print of the heritage listing, is an extensive set of site-specific exemptions that allow the removal of all the post 1980 fabric of the Powerhouse Museum. This includes the exhibitions, all trace of the museum's award winning design and fitout, all the education and visitor facilities, three theatres, all the galleries, mezzanines and interiors, and all the post 1980 exteriors. Which is everything really.

The exemptions were drafted by the government's heritage consultants, in tandem with their work on the Powerhouse Ultimo development. Far from protecting and conserving the Powerhouse Museum, the listing facilitates the museum's demolition and redevelopment. Over the four years the heritage consultants worked on the Powerhouse Museum's demolition and adaptive reuse, they failed to notice the relationship between the site's history and the museum's concept, architecture,

design, spaces and collections. The internationally significant power and transport collections were not even worthy of mention in the heritage listing that treats the museum as an empty box. In the years spent finessing the museum's erasure they didn't even find time to speak to the museum's architect Lionel Glendenning.

In contrast, the recent state heritage listing of the Kwong War Chong Building in Dixon St Haymarket suggests it's one rule for the private owners of heritage places while the government gives itself a pass on heritage protection, advancing its development plans free from heritage constraints. The listing for this wonderfully atmospheric historic shop specifically mentions the interiors *including partitions, doors, stairs, and hand-operated goods lift, as well as the historic ephemera of packing-crate furniture, washing machines, bathtubs, calendars, crockery, merchandise, and personal effects*. The owner's heritage consultants had no chance to write their own site-specific exemptions for the ephemera, crockery, merchandise and interiors.

It is striking that the Heritage Council's listing identifies and protects the packing crate furniture and ephemera in an old shop in Dixon Street, while the Heritage Council overlooked the internationally significant *in situ* working steam engines, the priceless 1785 Boulton and Watt engine, and Locomotive No.1, tender, and carriages in their conceptually resonant settings in the Powerhouse Museum. None of these treasures for which the museum was purpose designed were even worthy of mention in the state heritage listing, let alone protection and *in situ* conservation. The Heritage Minister refused a request from the Powerhouse Museum Alliance for an Interim Heritage Order to enable significance assessment of these renowned installations. It's shocking this request was even necessary, let alone refused.

What is a museum but a place designed to display its most significant collections? This basic proposition seems to have escaped the heritage consultants, the NSW Heritage Council and the museum's management. The CEO is bent on 'undoing the institution' and 'breaking the museum' so it is free to paddle in a self-referential embrace with artists exploring 'contemporary ideas and issues'. How liberating to sever the museum from its legacy of pesky heritage collections, and their troubling history of industrialisation and technological progress.

The hoax heritage listing of the Powerhouse Museum Complex ignores the thousands of letters and submissions from the community and experts over the ten years of this saga; including two politicised confected heritage listings, two petitions, two parliamentary inquiries, four state significant development proposals, nine rounds of fake consultations, and two governments promising the Powerhouse Museum is saved. Only it isn't saved. In NSW the idea that a museum is a permanent institution held in trust for current and future generations counts for nothing. The government thinks the museum is owned by the current management, and not the people of NSW whose taxes and donations have built the museum as an intergenerational legacy.

Helping the government get away with museum murder are failures across what should be institutional checks and balances: statutory agencies like the Heritage Council, ideally Treasury, but also the media. The SMH's respected art critic John McDonald, one of the most consistent critics of the government's mismanagement of the Powerhouse Museum, was terminated after speaking truth to art puffery, poor performance and wasteful cultural projects. This is not good for Sydney's culture. The ABC's head office on Harris St is just up the road from the Powerhouse Museum. Over nearly ten years the organisation has barely noticed the threats to one of the oldest cultural institutions in NSW. Even so it's a new low when ABC News regurgitates the government's spin. It seems that when it comes to culture in Sydney applause is mandatory, not scepticism or fact checking.

<https://cityhub.com.au/fake-news-about-labors-powerhouse-ultimo-heritage-hoax/>

Have your say on the Powerhouse Museum's demolition/ revitalisation by 7 October. The development is at the response to submissions stage. Plans and submissions on this link:

<https://www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/major-projects/projects/powerhouse-ultimo-revitalisation>

For the ABC News report of the Powerhouse Museum Complex heritage listing, 16 September 2024 see: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-09-16/powerhouse-museum-ultimo-refurbishment-government-heritage/104348054>

Minister for the Arts media release *Powerhouse heritage listing guarantees Museum's future in Ultimo* 16 September 2024 <https://www.nsw.gov.au/departments-and-agencies/dciths/ministerial-media-releases/powerhouse-heritage-listing-guarantees-museums-future-ultimo#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20expanded%20heritage%20listing%20of,Complex%20is%20recognised%20and%20protected.>

For the Powerhouse Museum Complex state heritage listing see: <https://www.hms.heritage.nsw.gov.au/App/Item/ViewItem?itemId=5068313> For the site-specific exemptions scroll down the listing to the Procedures and Exemptions tab or see the exemptions on this link: https://gazette.nsw.gov.au/gazette/2024/7/2024-7_268-gazette.pdf NSW Government Gazette No.268 Planning and Heritage, 12 July 2024. Of note, the extensive list of site-specific exemptions for the erasure of the Powerhouse Museum are self-assessed don't require Heritage Council permission.

For the state heritage listing of the Kwong War Chong Building at 82-84 Dixon St Haymarket see: <https://www.hms.heritage.nsw.gov.au/App/Item/ViewItem?itemId=5056577>

For the PMA's request for an Interim Heritage Order (IHO) on the Powerhouse Museum and its significant *in situ* movable heritage items and relics see: <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Winkworth-PMA-to-Penny-Sharpe-IHO-25-June-2024-1.pdf> For the Heritage Minister's letter of refusal see: <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Sharpe-to-PMA-re-IHO-28-June-2024.pdf> The Minister cites the Heritage Council's resolution to ***not proceed with further consideration of listing the Powerhouse Museum Collection, noting it is managed by an appropriate statutory body.*** Heritage Council minutes 4 October 2024, see link below. <https://www2.environment.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-08/heritage-council-of-NSW-meeting-minutes-2023-Oct-4.pdf> The Minister ignored the conceptual and spatial relationship between the significant power and transport collections in the spaces and settings that were purpose designed for their exhibition. **The PHM is one the few museums in Australia that was purpose designed for particular objects and collections of outstanding international significance.** It is irrelevant that the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS) is a statutory collections body. It was not necessary to list the whole collection. The Heritage Council should have sought independent expert advice, as they have done with other listings, and considered the collections that are inextricably related to the architecture, design conception, interiors and spaces of the PHM. State heritage listing is about defining and protecting the significant heritage values of a place, including *in situ* relics and movable heritage items. Heritage assessment requires consideration of the whole place and all values, assessing heritage significance based on research and evidence. The power and transport objects are of outstanding significance and are integral to the museum's architecture, concept, design, interiors, innovation and public esteem. It is inexplicable this isn't recognised in the listing. These collections in their settings should have been protected by the listing of the Powerhouse Museum Complex. Instead, the heritage listing is tailored to facilitate collection eviction and museum demolition.

The Heritage Council's submission to the Powerhouse Ultimo SSD notes: *While the Power House Museum Collection (sic) is not covered by the current SHR listing or the amended SHR listing as recommended by the Heritage Council on 8 May, it remains an integral part of the Power House Museum Complex. **The inter-relationship of the purpose-built Museum and its permanent displays is relevant.** The application should clearly demonstrate the ability to adequately accommodate the Museum's operations and curatorial display including all the permanent displays.* <https://majorprojects.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/prweb/PRRestService/mp/01/getContent?AttachRef=PAE-70275217%2120240611T043901.312%20GMT>

Relevant? The place for the Heritage Council to recognise the relationship between the PHM and the collections for which it was purpose designed, was in the state heritage listing, as it did with the contents and interiors of the Kwong War Chong Building. Instead, they washed their hands of the museum's design, interiors and collections, signing off on a confected listing, written in cahoots with the developer's consultants. The listing entirely failed to notice or protect the obvious relationship

between the museum's significant collections in the specific spaces that were purpose designed for their display. Dozens of submissions to the Heritage Council made this point. Instead of protecting the museum and its conceptually resonant installations and *in situ* collections, the perverse outcome of the Heritage Council's listing, and the site-specific development exemptions, is to permit the demolition of these exhibitions **and** the spaces and interiors of the PHM which were purpose designed as the setting for the power and transport collections. It's an appalling travesty.

Decluttering and Shrinking the Powerhouse Museum into Powerhouse Ultimo Performance Space

Before and after cross sections of the Powerhouse Museum, gutted and substantially demolished in the Powerhouse Ultimo (fake heritage) Revitalisation. The yellow cross section shows the demolition of all the mezzanine floors and galleries designed to display the museum's internationally acclaimed collections and exhibition installations in the purpose designed spaces of the Powerhouse Museum. The grotesque scale of the museum's demolition and erasure is permitted by the hoax heritage listing. If approved, the PHM loses 75% of its dedicated exhibition spaces, including all the medium and small-scale galleries suitable for the applied arts, history, science and technology collections, and international exhibitions. Not shown in this cross section, two floors of exhibition galleries in the Switch House are also going. These were used for exhibitions of applied and decorative arts, Indigenous design, international exhibitions and exhibitions for kids and families. Demolition also includes the beautiful board room at the top of the Galleria, three theatres and education spaces. In addition, the Wran building and the Galleria are partially demolished, and the Galleria becomes a brick clad passageway with the 1785 Boulton and Watt stuck up the back like an embarrassing relic of the lost museum. The demolition scheme includes all the works completed in the 2011-13 revitalisation, including the new education spaces and schools' entry from Macarthur St; new amenities, lifts and escalators; and the café and shop and sunny Harris St forecourt. **No part of the Sulman award winning Powerhouse Museum survives the wrecking ball.** The scale of demolition is inexplicable and unjustified on any grounds – cost, visitor needs, public amenity, museum functionality, cultural and heritage impacts, reduction in exhibition capacity, sustainability, and the waste of assets endowed by previous generations. None of this demolition is needed to create a new entry from the Goods Line. (The PHM has long had an entry from the Goods Line until it was closed by the current management.) There is no possible museum or exhibition need for spaces of this scale and volume unless the transport and power collections are going to be restored to their purpose designed spaces, which they're not. After \$400m+ the former museum shrinks to three large 'presentation' spaces. The secret agenda is to gut, demolish, downsize and repurpose the former museum into a creative industries, performance and venue hire facility with occasional fashion and design displays. This may be why the key documents that Labor promised to release are still secret. In a final indignity the landmark Wran building that Labor promised to save is buried in brick and hidden behind a row of shops. There are no great museums anywhere in the world without a prominent street address and setting, and none are hidden behind shops. This is not a museum.

