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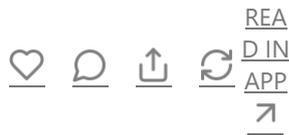
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# The Vision Thing

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On the banks of the Parramatta River, a Vision Splendid

“Those whom the Gods would destroy, they first make mad,” said Sophocles, or some other ancient Greek. To that I’d add: “Those good and useful institutions CEOs would destroy, are first given a new name.”

The outstanding example is ‘X’ - formerly known as Twitter. The old name sounds benign and playful, so Elon Musk decided it needed to be changed into something cold, brutal and cliched. ‘X’ is the way illiterates sign their name, and that just about sums up the content one finds on the platform nowadays. Ever since the big takeover, my ‘X’ account has been filled with right-wing spam, conspiracy theories, hate speech and plain stupidity, on a scale I scarcely thought possible.

Another great example, closer to home, is the Powerhouse Museum, now known as 'Powerhouse' - after a million dollar rebranding which advances the "visionary" schemes of CEO, Lisa Havilah, even as she trashes the very concept of a museum.

Discussing the destructive efforts of Donald Trump, Elon Musk and their croneys, economist, [Paul Krugman](#), recently noted that many are divided as to whether we are witnessing "mind-boggling incompetence" or "a sinister plot". His own verdict was that these terms are not mutually exclusive: "These people are both incompetent *and* evil."

Vis-à-vis the PHM, which I will persist in imagining as a museum, the campaign to save this venerable institution has been going on for a decade, battling against secrecy, deception, obfuscation, and outright lies. Much of this, I'm sorry – and a little shocked – to say, may be laid at the door of the NSW government. First it was the Coalition, hell-bent on destroying the museum, then the job was taken over by the new Labor government, which came in on an election promise of fixing the problem. Well, they've fixed it alright!

A new document published by the NSW Planning Department on 24 March, confirms the worst fears of the museum's defenders and the staggering dishonesty of a government which has consistently said one thing and done another. Having assured us before the last election that "NSW Labor remains concerned about the focus on event rather than museum spaces," decrying the Coalition's "obsession with commercialisation and privatisation," the current government has shown itself to be even more gung-ho than its predecessors in this regard. To whatever sins the Coalition accumulated, we may add large helpings of hypocrisy and dishonesty.

I'm not saying this simply to be provocative because the glaring contradictions between what was promised and what has happened, are documented in the most scrupulous detail. Everything is on the record, and that record is damning. What's so depressing is that the government has made virtually no attempt to cover its tracks or explain its actions. It has ignored the protests, the petitions and the results of the sham "public consultations", in which more than 90% of respondents have been overwhelmingly critical of the proposed "revitalisation". Instead, it has continued to issue press releases telling us what a wonderful job it is doing.

The media, which in days of yore would have ravaged this specious snowjob, has swallowed it wholesale. It seems that all one has to do nowadays is send out a press release, and outlets such as the ABC and the *Sydney Morning Herald* repeat the good news like parrots. The incompetence of the media is akin to a form of corruption, playing along with those in power rather than holding them accountable for their actions. When nobody is prepared to investigate these nonsense claims and brassy announcements, the destroyers become ever more brazen, feeling invulnerable and omnipotent; determined to impose their own fantasies on a public that has rejected them time and again.

This is precisely what we've seen this week, as the latest Planning Department document mocks previous claims. The Save the Powerhouse group details the devastation in a new mailout, confirming that 75% of exhibition space will be eliminated by the Ultimo "revitalisation". Instead, there will be three large volumes more suitable for rave parties than exhibitions. What was previously a functioning museum will become an occasional entertainment venue.

Most shocking of all, the Harwood Building, which has long served as the PHM's best practice support facility - the centre for collection management, research library, accessible collection storage and conservation - is now viewed as "having an 'intrusive' impact on the Core Buildings and its removal would have a positive heritage impact."

This is a jaw-dropping betrayal of previous promises to preserve the building, which has gone from being an integral part of the site's architectural heritage, to being classed as a mere "intrusion". This means both the award-winning Wran Building, and the Harwood Building are due to be swept away by a government that uses the term "heritage" as a cover for the *destruction* of heritage! One wonders how the removal of a heritage building – in contradiction to expert opinion and public sentiment – could ever be considered to have "a positive heritage impact"?

It's like saying if all the inhabitants of a suburb were rounded up and put in a camp, it would have a positive impact on litter and crime. If all the trees in a forest were chopped down, it would have a positive impact on the views. We are now in Orwellian mode with a government telling us that war is peace, freedom is slavery, and destruction of heritage is good for heritage.

Neither should we forget Orwell's most famous insight: "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past."

By eliminating all trace of the previous museum - not only the collection, which has been dumped unceremoniously onto trucks and carted off to storage in Castle Hill, but the actual buildings themselves - the NSW government has attempted to expunge the history of the site, replacing it with a gleaming, if poorly defined, vision of the future. But the past is a known quantity, the future a gamble. Does the government's vision stand any chance of ever being realised?

It's pie in the sky – and very expensive pie. Powerhouse CEO, Lisa Havilah, is happy to let herself be described as a "visionary" leader. She often boasts about her triumphant reign as director of Carriageworks, an institution she left on the verge of bankruptcy, no longer capable of holding regular exhibitions. At the helm of the PHM she returned the museum to attendance levels last seen in the early 1960s, while spending millions on projects that seemed to benefit hardly anyone. The most scandalous is the Powerhouse "associates" program, which has poured money into the pockets of a few anointed mates for very little tangible benefit to the institution or the taxpayer. In 2022-23 alone, \$1.52 million went on "artists' fees".

PHM initiatives have included residencies in Paris, dance parties, photography and writing competitions, etc, etc, - things that bear no relationship to the core business of a museum. It seems that 'reinventing' the museum, means abandoning the very concept of a museum, and taking on the role of Creative Australia.

I've been over this territory many times, while the Save the Powerhouse and [Powerhouse Museum Alliance](#) groups have done a hundred times more research and exposure. Nothing has had the slightest impact on Minister, John Graham, who thinks Havilah is "a good operator" – an interesting choice of words.

To see what a good operator she is, one need only look at a piece she wrote for *The Daily Telegraph* on 21 March, titled *Our Next Cultural Centre is Out West*. It's part of a concerted campaign to sell the museum to the western suburbs, perhaps revealing concerns that the great launch in 2026 may prove to be an anti-climax.

First of all, one wonders how this puff in the tabloid press was instigated. Who pulled the strings to make the connection? The entire piece deserves close analysis, not

because it's especially profound, but because it is an excellent example of propaganda-in-action.

It begins with a comparison between Utzon's Sydney Opera House and the new Powerhouse building in Parramatta. But to suggest the "milk crate" is of the same architectural magnitude as the Opera House is simply ridiculous. It's notable that Havilah doesn't even name the architects of the Parramatta building, although she is full of praise for Lendlease, which is doing the construction work – at vast expense to the NSW taxpayer.

We are told the Parramatta project will be: "one of the world's most significant new museum projects." In fact, all indications are that it will hardly be a museum at all. There'll be function centres, dormitory accommodation, a vegetable garden, commercial kitchens, and so on, but no storage facilities. Don't expect museum-standard lighting or climate controls, or a dedicated goods lift. Only a quarter of the space is expected to be up to museum standard. Oh, and let's not dwell on the fact that it's sitting in a flood plain. All this for about \$1.2 billion!

Havilah says they are "pioneering a new model". That means a "museum" that is not a museum. It will be "a place that contributes to our night-time economy. A place that represents, records and engages with the industry and innovations of our times." Don't worry, I don't understand what she means either.

The nod to the "night-time economy" is a shameless suck to John Graham, who is also Minister for the Night-Time Economy, which must be one of the most bizarre ministries ever invented. "Industry" suggests the backing of major corporations, but it's more likely that the new PHM will be shelling out funds to support "creative industries" that should be supporting themselves commercially. "Innovation" sounds very scientific, but so far it has only meant inserting contemporary art into everything. Under Havilah's visionary leadership, the PHM's science and technology components have been decimated. Curatorships in these areas have been abolished, and a whole raft of Mickey Mouse curatorships created to fit the new – but ill-defined – vision.

Next, we learn that the Parramatta building will attract "two million visitors from across Australia and around the world each year." There is no indication of how these figures were formulated. In 2024, the Art Gallery of NSW boasted 1.33 million visitors, which

they claim as an all-time record, but still managed to finish the year \$16 million in the red. How any museum in Parramatta, let alone one with few conventional museum facilities, could be expected to attract 2 million visitors is anybody's guess.

We are subsequently informed that this miraculous museum will “play a vital role in recalibrating the cultural inequity that has long existed in our city, removing geographic barriers that hinder access for Western Sydney communities.”

Access to what? To culture? I can't see any “geographic barriers” that prevent someone in Parramatta hopping on the train to the CBD, just like someone from the country, or indeed, from Bondi. They all seem to come into the city for the annual *Vivid* lightshow. Are we to believe that people in western Sydney have been sitting at home, pining for cultural attractions, but can't bring themselves to visit the city? This is not only stupid, it's incredibly patronising to western suburbs communities, viewing them as a bunch of hicks who never venture far from their own turf.

Then we get a few words about the Lang Walker Academy, sucking mightily to the late property developer who sat on the board of the PHM for the last 18 months of his life without attending a single meeting. We are left to assume that Mr. Walker was merely a great philanthropist, who saw no personal advantage in putting money into a project that will support his own Parramatta development plans.

We wind up with another comparison between the Opera House and the Milk Crate, and some self-congratulation about having “the same uncompromising courage, ambition and vision.”

I'll pay “uncompromising” and “ambition” but have grave reservations about what George H.W. Bush memorably referred to as “the vision thing”.

Let's summarise. The Parramatta ‘museum’ will right all the wrongs inflicted on western suburbs communities, attract 2 million visitors, and wow the world with its architectural marvels. It may also cure cancer and bring peace to the Middle East.

How dumb do you have to be to believe this? About as dumb as John Graham and the NSW Labor government. I don't think the Coalition ever believed it – they were simply thinking of a land grab. Labor, however, would like us to accept this is all for the greater good of western suburbs communities. Roughly \$150 million has gone into this “vision”

over the past year, while the AGNSW begs for a few million, and the Museum of Contemporary Art – recipients of a government stipend of \$4.2 million that hasn't been increased since 2008 – is now having to charge for admission.

The question is: Are Labor politicians actually convinced they are doing something wonderful for the western suburbs – and shoring up votes in the process – or are they simply pandering to the developers? In its earliest stages, people in Parramatta asked for a museum of art and culture. Weirdly, they were promised a science museum. Ultimately, they are getting a function centre that will compete with every other function centre in the vicinity, hoovering up business by virtue of being subsidised by the NSW taxpayer. The historical legacy of the Minns government will be one of wholesale cultural devastation.

By the time the long-drawn out, \$2 billion vandalism of the Powerhouse Museum is complete, we will be left with three dysfunctional venues that bear no relation to museums, struggle to attract audiences, and put an ongoing burden on the NSW taxpayer that will leave no change from \$100 million in annual operating costs. The big claim today (and indeed, for the past few years), is that matters are too far advanced to stop at this point. **This is simply untrue.** No matter how much it costs to stop now, and pay out contracts, it would prove much cheaper in the long run than to continue with this reckless, lunatic piece of empire-building being driven by “a good operator”. The Wran Building and the Harwood Building are still standing and could be preserved with the stroke of a pen. The bottom line is not even about expense, it's about doing the right thing for the state's cultural assets and its citizens.

Everything that is racing ahead with the PHM “revitalisation” is so very *wrong* it is set to be the greatest cultural catastrophe in Australian history. I'm not kidding.

Isn't it about time that we stopped listening to the propaganda and started listening to people with experience and expert knowledge of museums, and to the communities who do not want a bar of the Havilah “vision”. When every vestige of the old museum is gone, it'll be too late to say, in the words of the advertisement, “She should have gone to Spec Savers.”

The art column this week is an impressionistic round-up of [Hong Kong](#) during the annual Art Basel festivities. I've written another piece for the *Australian Financial*

*Review*, which should be published this weekend, but there'll be a pause before it appears on this site. In the meantime, I've tried to capture a week's experiences in a more free-form manner than usual.

The film being reviewed is [The Return](#), which finds Ralph Fiennes in the role of Odysseus, coming back to the island of Ithaca, after a good 20 years away. Low on confidence, high on guilt and trauma, he has a lot of explaining to do to wife and son, but first he has to deal with a palace full of brutal freeloaders. The story has been around since the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, so you may already be familiar with it

*Ithaca* was also the title of the most famous poem by [Constantine P. Cavafy](#) (1863-1933), whose apartment in Alexandria has been made into a museum by the Onassis Foundation. A few weeks ago, I visited the museum and the Cavafy Archive in Athens, with assistance from the Foundation, and wrote a piece for the AFR which I'm now posting. As most of Cavafy's poems blend the classical past with contemporary psychology, I can only wonder what he'd make of the Powerhouse Museum. The Greek concept of *hubris* would surely spring to mind.

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