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Weekends with Luke Grant: 2GB Radio

<https://www.2gb.com/show/weekends-with-luke-grant/>



Photo: supplied by Save the Powerhouse

Interview: 'Powerhouse Museum: Past Present and Future?'

Kylie Winkworth is interviewed by radio presenter Luke Grant and historian Jim Haynes, in 'Weekends with Luke Grant' on 2GB Radio. <https://www.2gb.com/show/weekends-with-luke-grant/>

A well-known museum heritage consultant, and former Powerhouse Museum trustee, 'Kylie Winkworth's expertise is in policy, strategy and planning for heritage collections and museums, including infrastructure, staffing and funding', and she is an active member of the Powerhouse Museum Alliance. Listen to the interview HERE <http://tiny.cc/cr25101> or HERE:



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Transcript of Interview:

LG 2GB: Why don't we have a chat to Kylie Winkworth, who, amongst other things, is a former trustee of the Powerhouse Museum, 40 years' worth of experience as a museum and heritage expert. And Kylie Winkworth is on the line. Kylie, it's Luke here. Lovely to talk to you again. I hope you're well. **KW:** Hello, Luke.

LG: And I'm alongside Jim Haynes, who just said all sorts of things, including referring to exhibits of junk. In the old days.

KW: No **2GB:** I hope it... ; **KW:** It's not junk; **2GB:** Correct.

2GB: I was actually... I was thinking about this driving in. You know, the Powerhouse, of course, was about the future and interactive. But the word museum actually means to ponder the past. And I think that is really as important with a Powerhouse museum as any other. We've got to keep, you know, that history and knowledge of how it used to be. Otherwise, we won't understand where we're going. Would you agree with that, Kylie?

KW: Oh, I think that's beautifully expressed. We learn from the past and it helps shape our decisions about the future.

2GB: So the question we've got for you today, and we've got time to talk about this, is why is it moving? And perhaps, before we get to that, you tell me why it's so special.

KW: Well, it's one of a handful of museums of applied arts and sciences across the world. And it's Australia's only applied arts and sciences museum. And what's important about that is the way it makes the connection between science and innovation and technology and the industrial and subsequent revolutions and design and the way we live today. And so it's a completely unique institution in Australia and one of a handful in the world. So that's one thing.

When the Powerhouse museum opened as a reinvigoration of the mission and ethos of the old Technological museum on Harris Street, the museum's DNA was reinvented in the most exciting way. And all the things that we loved about that museum, the range of items, the surprising conjunction, the capacity to understand and look at how things work and how they're made, the interactivity, all of that was most beautifully reimaged and presented in a building that was purpose designed for particularly the transport and power collection, on a site that was essentially about transport and power. And those collections are of international significance. So the working steam engines, it was one of the few museums in the world that had such an important collection of steam engines operating under live steam. And then the most extraordinary collection of transport items, including one of the C-class trams that operated out of the tram depot next door.

2GB: Now, when I first heard this, this was a long time ago, that they're going to move the museum, the first thing I thought, and maybe I'm naive, was why on earth would you want to pack up and move something because Sydney's expanded and people in the west deserve museums? Why not give them their own? Why not build another one? Is there anything that we can't replicate in a second museum out there?

KW: Well, that's the question that everybody was asking. Why would you do that? Because when this all surfaced, the museum was a little more than 30 years old in state-of-the-art premises with a suite of exhibitions and ways of working, best practice facilities, a museum that completely redefined what museums could be for Australia. It had a national impact on museums and galleries in Australia for the quality of its storytelling and interpretation. So we all said, why not a new museum? Parramatta has such extraordinary history, both its pre-contact history and its history since 1788 and its development in a way that secured the future of the colony in its early years. It's extraordinary interesting multicultural history, also dating from its first years of settlement. So why not a new museum? Because New South Wales has really glaring gaps in its museum, in its framework of museums. We have no museum responsible for New South Wales history. We have museums of history in New South Wales, but that's a collection of house museums and historic buildings and they don't have responsibility for collecting history. So what the people of Parramatta wanted was a museum of New South Wales, and they said that very clearly through consultations. But everything that experts and the community said across the tragic 11 years of this saga has been ignored. And this has gone on in a way that, in my view, is an extraordinary public deception. The Powerhouse Museum is not moving. What's left of the Powerhouse Museum is in storage at Castle Hill. The actual museum in Ultimo has been completely demolished, not even down to the bare brick shell of the former Ultimo power station as if it had never existed. The wastage of high-quality cultural infrastructure built for a working life of 100 years, only 34 years old at the time the museum was closed when Labor promised to keep the museum open. The wastage is absolutely shocking.

2GB: Do we know what state the exhibits are in, Kylie? Do you have intel?

KW: Well, we have heard that there's been damage to objects in the move, particularly in the last phases of the move to get rid of all the collections of Ultimo so they could set about their museum demolition project. But it's also what it represents in terms of the demolition of an historic state

cultural institution. And what New South Wales needed was a project that added to the suite of museums in New South Wales because we know, and Jim knows, we know, that visitors are interested in visiting history and heritage sites. It's the number one interest of high-paying cultural tourists to New South Wales. And yet we're in the bottom 20% of global peer cities for the number of museums.

2GB: It was almost as if we were being told, oh, the maritime museums are the eastern suburbs, the CBD's got all this stuff, it's too much. We have to take some of it away and give it to these poor people out in the western suburbs. And you're so right about Parramatta. I mean, Parramatta's better preserved than Sydney, and it was, of course, settled and set up at the same time. And because of the destruction in the heart of Sydney and around the harbour, Parramatta has far more. It's got the oldest cemetery, it's got the oldest graves, it's got government house. So it made perfect sense to do something new and different out there.

KW: Yes, and it's got a number of World Heritage listed buildings and it has the opportunity to add the 1818 female factory to the World Heritage list if the New South Wales government wasn't planning to fill that landscape with high-rise. So the opportunities for Parramatta to be a major tourism destination were there staring at the government in the face. Labor came to power promising to save the museum. They'd already made the decision on putting the so-called Parramatta powerhouse on the banks of the Parramatta River in a high-risk flood zone. So that was undoable. But I still think there was a chance for Parramatta to have a new cultural institution that actually added to the suite of cultural offerings because a city that doesn't explain its history and where it's come from is a city that in some ways has no soul.

2GB: Yeah, I'd have to disagree with that. I've got to move on, Kylie, but before I go, I have heard the story that the Powerhouse Museum was underperforming. Now, I don't know why or how you place a dollar value on your history and the heritage, but that itself is a furphy, is it not?

KW: Absolutely. Yes, yes. It was underperforming under the leadership of the current management because they failed to understand the museum's audiences. The leader of the museum has been frank about not bothering to listen to people or consult. And so what people are getting at Parramatta is what our CEO thinks they should get. There's no relationship to the Cabinet-approved STEM museum, as far as I can see, because much of the planning is wrapped in secrecy. But under the current leadership, the museum visitor numbers dropped to the lowest since 1960, and there's been an enormous decline in education visitation. So the failures, the alleged failures of the museum are actually the poor performance of the current management, but they've been gifted with what's going to cost New South Wales taxpayers the best part of \$2 billion by the time it's finished. And we won't have a museum at Ultimo. That's clearly been adapted to a theatre facility, although the government doesn't want to fess up to that. \$2 billion to not have one.

2GB: So we spend a lot of money and we lose them. And do you think that this is part of the... Because I was talking to somebody about the Observatory and they cleared out everything from there, all the flags that were used to signal the ships coming into Sydney, etc., etc. I've been told that it was all... It's all gone. It's just, you know, was just thrown out. And there seems to be a sort of great sense of shame about anything to do with our colonial past at the moment.

KW: Oh, I'm very shocked to hear that, Luke. That's just appalling. We've been very concerned about the performance at the Observatory, which has been basically used for nighttime entertainment and

artists and for ordinary families to go there. It's the best part of \$120 [*for family of four for a night-time tour; free in the daytime*]. So the Observatory has had a huge decline in visitor numbers. So it doesn't... I'm not surprised to hear that the site's history has been put at risk because I asked to see some of those documents in a Kipper and it was refused. [*More information about maintenance and programming to be supplied later online.*]

2GB: So they don't want to tell you what they're actually doing. Kylie, great to talk to you again.

Thank you so much for your time. That's an eye-opener for everyone.

Kylie Winkworth, Powerhouse Heritage Consultant and for some period of time she was there in an official capacity as a former trustee of the Powerhouse Museum. Thanks so much.