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The Museum They Should Have Built

and still could ...

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The pre-emptive exit of CEO Lisa Havilah only weeks before the opening of Powerhouse Parramatta was a surprise only because despite everything she seemed untouchable. Even the many like me who had opposed it from the start at least expected her to be there to cop the inevitable attacks once the opening made it clear what an inadequate and inappropriate failure the project actually is. But maybe that

is now already so obvious that it was necessary to defenestrate her now to make it absolutely certain she copped the blame. That is of course grotesquely unfair because, enthusiastic bureaucrat that she is, she has only been following orders and the real criminals are in fact a conga line of corrupt Premiers and Ministers. Perhaps, as with the equally flawed Sydney Modern project, the truth will begin to be whispered after the initial blast of fulsome praise dies down.

So what should have happened, and could still happen once the guilty are swept out the door?



Western Sydney has an enormous, long standing and well researched deficit in cultural infrastructure. It also has 26 Coombes Drive, Penrith, a windowless brick and concrete box the shape of a couple of squat Egyptian mastabas fused together, and it is, by any measure, the most significant piece of late-twentieth-century architecture in Western Sydney, equivalent in its way to the Sydney Opera House. Marcel Breuer designed it - his only building in this country - with Harry Seidler minding the site and Bruce Rickard doing the landscaping, back in 1975. It made fans for air-conditioners. It sold in 2017 for $3 million to a private buyer, after the Museum of Contemporary Art's own director floated turning it into an arts hub for what she called "the capital of the west" and nobody in government bothered to

follow it up. $3 million! Somewhere in the same decade, the state government was spending north of $900 million building a new museum on a flood-prone bend of the Parramatta River, a building about half the size of the one it was meant to replace, with nowhere much to put the big machinery.

Just think about that gap for a minute before you read anything else, because it tells you almost everything about how this country decides what culture is worth, and to whom.



I've spent a working life inside the apparatus that people politely call "the art world" and less politely call the culture industry, and I have watched this particular manoeuvre often enough to recognise it immediately: an authentic grievance, real and long-documented, gets identified by the people with power to act on it and then gets answered with an act of demolition somewhere else entirely, a corrupt act of looting dressed up as a generous solution. That is the whole Powerhouse story. It is worth telling properly, because the true version does not split neatly into "the West versus the inner city," however conveniently that bad faith framing has served several premiers.

The deficit was real

Start with what was true and stayed true for decades. Western Sydney is home to roughly a tenth of the national population and is, by most measures, the third-largest economy in the country, and for the whole of that time it had almost none of the flagship cultural institutions that cluster instead around Circular Quay and the CBD fringe, forty and fifty kilometres east. This was not a matter of impression or grievance-mongering. Deloitte Access Economics, commissioned through Business Western Sydney, published a *Western Sydney Cultural Infrastructure Report* in 2015 that laid the numbers out plainly: a region carrying serious economic weight and a rapidly growing population, chronically under-provided with the buildings, venues and institutional support that culture actually needs to be made and shown. It was not the first document to say so and it would not be the last - Western Sydney University's Institute for Culture and Society has kept researching the same terrain for years since, and more recent mapping work by SGS Economics with Create NSW has kept finding the same gaps in the same places.

None of this was contested. The Western Sydney Arts & Cultural Lobby - a coalition running from Bankstown Arts Centre and Casula Powerhouse through to Parramatta Artists' Studios, Penrith Performing & Visual Arts and Urban Theatre Projects - took the Deloitte findings into the 2016 NSW parliamentary inquiry into museums and galleries and made the case in plain language. This is activism that worked. It shifted the argument. By the mid-2010s, no serious person in state politics could deny that the West had been shortchanged for generations, or that fixing it mattered. That is a genuine win, and it belongs to the artists, workers and organisers who spent decades building the case, not to whichever minister eventually stood up at a press conference to claim it.

The false choice

What the Lobby had won was an argument about need. What the Baird government delivered, in 2015, was a solution to an entirely different problem: what to do with a valuable piece of publicly owned inner-city land that was not returning a profit to their croneys. The announcement that the Powerhouse Museum would leave Ultimo for Parramatta arrived before any business case, before a confirmed site, and - this is the detail people forget - before an election. The museum's own founding director, Dr Lindsay Sharp, told the 2016 inquiry, in terms that still read as understatement, that the driving logic was the market value of a site sitting against the multi-billion-dollar

Barangaroo, Darling Harbour and Central Park redevelopment zones, not any cultural plan for what Parramatta needed.

Run the numbers, because they matter more than any amount of rhetoric. Selling Ultimo was expected to raise something in the order of $130 to $250 million. Credible estimates of what actually moving the collection would cost ran from $600 million up to $1.5 billion. The Parramatta build itself has been reported at figures between $915 million and $1.17 billion. Kylie Winkworth of the Powerhouse Museum Alliance - hardly a disinterested party, but certainly a well informed one - put the cost of properly restoring and maintaining the existing Ultimo building at something like $100 to $200 million over four years. Read those figures side by side and the "we can't afford both" story falls apart on its own arithmetic. It was always possible to keep a working, internationally regarded museum in Ultimo and fund something serious in the West, for considerably less than was eventually spent achieving neither goal particularly well. This was never a zero-sum contest between the city and the suburbs. It was dressed up as one because that framing was politically useful and the real one - a land deal wearing a cultural policy as a costume - was not, in fact was little more than stealing public assets.

What actually got built

The thing that exists now at Parramatta is not what was promised, on the government's own numbers. The 2019 parliamentary inquiry called the business case for the move "inadequate" and recommended restoring the Ultimo building to its former condition instead - advice that was heard and then filed away. The site chosen is flood-prone. The finished building is reported to run at roughly half the floor area of the Ultimo museum it replaces, without the storage capacity for the big historic machinery, meaning much of what the Powerhouse actually holds is now going decay in a closed store at Castle Hill where the public will never see it. And in 2021, to make room for it, the government tore down Willow Grove, a nineteenth-century villa on the site, over the objections of heritage groups and against a CFMEU green ban by construction workers refusing to touch the site, in the direct line of descent from the BLF bans of the 1970s.

That last detail matters more than it's usually given credit for. The people fighting to save Willow Grove and the people who had spent the previous decade demanding real cultural investment in Western Sydney were, to a significant degree, the same

networks - the same unions, the same heritage advocates, often the same individuals. This was never Ultimo sentimentalists lined up against a deserving West. It was a coalition of people who wanted the West properly served, watching government demolish one heritage building to build an inadequate replacement for another, and calling that a win for Western Sydney because it was easier to sell that way.

A better site, a better idea

Which brings us back to Coombes Drive. Penrith sits further west again than Parramatta, on the line, close to the growth corridors running out toward the new airport and up toward the mountains, in a position that actually reduces the distance culture has to travel to reach the people it is meant to serve, rather than shifting the destination one ring further along the CBD's orbit. For most of Western Sydney's population, Parramatta still means travelling east, toward the centre, not away from it. It solved half a problem and called it the whole solution.

The Torin Building, sitting there heritage-listed and half-forgotten since 2009, is not just a nice piece of real estate. It's an argument in concrete. Credit should go to the artist Billy Gruner who first alerted me and others, including Liz Anne McGregor, to this almost forgotten gem. Acquire the building and the block around it - there's room to do this properly, with parking and a nearby railway station, staged new-build galleries, the kind of expandable precinct that Parramatta's cramped, flood-exposed site was never going to allow - and you have the physical basis for an institution that doesn't have to be a diminished copy of what already existed at Ultimo. That's the deeper point buried in all of this. The Powerhouse's founding template - applied arts, industrial design, engineering history - was a specific nineteenth and twentieth-century museum category, built for a specific site and collection. Transplanting a shrunken version of that model to the West and calling it generosity was itself a failure of imagination, not an act of it. What the West was owed, and still is, is something bigger than a relocated brand: a genuinely broad cultural institution combining a proper art museum, a contemporary gallery, and space for the full range of what culture actually looks like now - built on its own terms, in a building that already has some claim to greatness, rather than assembled as an afterthought to a property rort. Times have moved on and this is a chance to build a genuine contemporary cultural institution, third time lucky after the abysmal failure of the Sydney Modern extension of the Art Gallery of NSW and the looming Powerhouse Parramatta embarrassment.

So: restore the Powerhouse at Ultimo, on its own site, properly funded, and stop treating that as some sentimental or reactionary demand - it's the cheapest and most straightforward part of the whole equation. Treat the Parramatta building, once it opens, as what it is, an expensive mistake, not a monument to be defended out of embarrassment, and be willing to sell or repurpose it rather than propping it up because too much has already been spent to admit otherwise. And put the money that's left, along with whatever the Parramatta site eventually returns, into Coombes Drive: buy the block, expand the building, build the institution Western Sydney was actually promised in 2015.

Who did this, and why

The honest answer is that more than one motive was operating, and they weren't in competition with each other. There's a straightforward profit-capture story, a valuable inner-city site adjoining some of the largest redevelopment zones in the country, freed up for sale under cultural cover, which is precisely what Lindsay Sharp and a string of 2016 inquiry submissions argued at the time. There's an equally plausible electoral-timing story, an announcement made before a state election, before a business case, before even a confirmed site. That looks a great deal like a desperate Western Sydney vote grabbing press release that a museum plan was built around afterwards, rather than a thought out cultural policy. And there's a third story, less conspiratorial and in some ways more damning: plain institutional momentum. Once close to a billion dollars had been committed and an international design competition run, no government, Coalition or Labor, found it politically survivable to admit the whole thing had been a mistake, however clearly the evidence said so. It is the sunk cost fallacy enacted on an enormous scale.

That last point is why it matters that this wasn't Labor's idea to begin with. The Baird government announced it, Berejiklian and Perrottet carried it forward with Harwin like Toad of Toad Hall in the drivers seat. The Minns government elected in 2023 inherited it with its own Pyrmont/Ultimo branch having passed a motion demanding exactly the reversal the party then declined to deliver in office. That's not evidence of a single villain or a single corrupt transaction, it's something more familiar and in some ways harder to fix, a decision that outgrew any one government's willingness to be the one that admitted it was wrong. Bureaucracies protect their own momentum. Sunk cost becomes its own political constituency. Nobody has to be venal for that to happen; they just have to find it easier to keep going than to stop.

Undoing it doesn't require a royal commission. It requires the same thing the original demand for cultural investment in the West always required: somebody in government willing to look at what actually serves people, rather than what's already been announced, and to admit that a building at Coombes Drive, sitting there since 1976, was always the better answer than the one they gave us.

In fact selling Powerhouse Parramatta and putting the proceeds into restoring the Powerhouse and developing the Torin Factory and its surrounding block would be an enormous win/win for a visionary government and they might even come out of it with a profit. And finally the West might get a good bit of the infrastructure it definitely needs and still won't be getting after years of drama around the Powerhouse Parramatta.

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