

Objection letter re Powerhouse 20July2020

from

Laurie O'Brien

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I do not require my name details to be withheld.

I have not made any political donations.

I object to the Powerhouse Parramatta Project.

I object to the current Powerhouse Parramatta Project for the following reasons:

the location and adequacy of the intended Parramatta facility is not suitable. The location is flood prone. There are concerns regarding the construction of the building on a flood plain and wear and tear to the collection arising from its storage off site. There is no room for expansion as none is contemplated. It is physically and environmentally disastrous, and also culturally destructive to close Ultimo in order to rebuild elsewhere.

I object to the intention to destroy heritage buildings to build new buildings. These currently include the unique Italianate Willow Grove villa and an entire heritage terrace, St George's Terrace. I object to the Powerhouse Parramatta Project because I do not want to see the destruction of both Willow Grove and St Georges Terrace. These buildings are rare examples of architecture that no longer exists in the Parramatta CBD. Infrastructure NSW has prepared an Environmental Impact Statement that admits Willow Grove is "one of its kind" .

A sense of history and a sense of place are vitally important to the character of such an historic city as Parramatta.

It's been well documented that the new building is to be situated in a flood plain, which makes it unsafe for the display of objects, and perhaps for human occupation. According to hydrologist, John Macintosh, to put a public building on such a site is a "crazy proposal".

The new Powerhouse in Parramatta is set to be an embarrassing example of worst practice by international museum standards. The Powerhouse would not loan valuable pieces from their collection to any institution so poorly equipped.

The plan for the 'New Powerhouse' reveals completely inadequate facilities for displaying works of artistic and historical value. It will have only 25 per cent of the display area of the existing museum, and will not meet the necessary minimum thresholds to allow for loans from overseas institutions.

There will be retail areas, 10 cafes and bars, but no collection storage, no conservation laboratory and only a single loading dock. The idea of "flexible" exhibition spaces means display areas will have to double up as party venues, severely limiting the kind of items that may be shown.

A "relocated" Powerhouse Museum will be nothing more than an entertainment venue with cafes and reception areas.

There is no on-site storage facility in the plans for the new building, and no thought given to a permanent collection which is the very heart of the institution.

Alternative site options can be the Cumberland Hospital site, the North Parramatta Orphanage and Hospital site, Parramatta Jail site. An adaptive re-use of the hospital precinct as a museum of NSW can be made, using some of the state's oldest buildings.

The Government plan has continued to be met with overwhelming opposition from the public and from museum professionals.

There has not been provided to the NSW public a clear description of the proposal or a plausible cost-benefit analysis that justifies the Government proposal and cost structure.

The facilities will be inadequate and therefore not able to display many of the works of artistic and historical value now held in the Ultimo Powerhouse.

Whenever displays are to be changed, items will have to be trucked over, incurring needless expense, wear and tear, and the risk of accident.

The valuable museum pieces - including the Locomotive No 1243 built in Sydney in 1882; the Boulton and Watt engine and the Catalina flying boat - will not be showcased in the Parramatta Powerhouse.

The lack of adequate planning and arrogant disregard of expert warnings

The entire project has been veiled in a cloak of secrecy. Volumes of expert reports have been ignored. The findings of comprehensive inquiries have been treated with disdain.

The government has either refused to disclose business plans or produced figures so hopelessly fudged that no-one with the slightest knowledge of museums would take them seriously.

I object to the closing of the Powerhouse Museum. My objections are;

In 2016, more than 10,000 Sydneysiders signed and presented to the state government a petition to force the creation of a special, cross-party parliamentary inquiry committee to review the plan. That committee gave it a firm thumbs down.

The Powerhouse has earned world renown and respect. It has assembled, through acquisitions and donations, a unique, priceless and irreplaceable collection of objects relevant to the history of Australia in general and to NSW in particular. All aspects of human creativity – in science, technology, industry and the decorative arts – are represented in the collection which is now to be dispersed. Many items will never be seen again and a good deal of the collection will probably be sold off.

Our beloved and marvellous Powerhouse Museum should not meet the same sad fate as so much else of our rich heritage. The pattern of scandalous and wilful destruction continues and flies in the face of the people's wishes

When NSW Treasurer Dominic Perrottet and Minister for the Arts Don Harwin announced that the Ultimo Powerhouse Museum would continue, they stated: "This is about recognising the passion and hard work that has created the Powerhouse and ensuring the vision for a bigger brighter future is realised." Keeping the Powerhouse at Ultimo would ensure "several hundred" staff remained employed at the site. A complete turnaround by a government that does not include the NSW citizens views.

Mr Perrottet said the museum at Ultimo would complement the new "future-focused Parramatta facility" and provide a jobs boost to the arts community.

The intention to open a Powerhouse at Parramatta years before any kind of replacement, no sooner than 2024, will mean that a closure of Ultimo Powerhouse would deprive the community of access to Ultimo Powerhouse facilities and collection.

The museum's former deputy director of collections, Jennifer Sanders, said the museum's artefacts spoke of global industrial heritage.

Former NSW Premier Bob Carr, labelled the state government plans for the museum "shockingly flawed". "I can't believe that there would be any other city in the world where a government would be dissolving a major museum collection built up and nurtured by its people over generations, to scatter and disperse its contents for all time," he said.

The dispersal of the collection has prompted concern around standards for storage, display and management of these objects in regional museums and the risk of damage in transit.

The multi-billion bill for this private extravagance will be met by tax-payers struggling because of the bushfires or COVID-19.

It would be much cheaper and more effective to build an entirely new arts venue there and leave the Powerhouse alone.

At every stage the process has been secretive and confusing.

The government's treatment of the Powerhouse Museum has astonished the international museum community. In 2018, The Art Newspaper noted this would be the most expensive museum relocation in history, while an editorial in the Burlington Magazine denounced the idea that the museum could be “so pointlessly and wastefully uprooted”.

The Powerhouse is unique in being a museum devoted to applied arts, science and technology. Its nearest counterparts are the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, whose brief is “art and design”, and the Smithsonian Institution in America, which divides its operations between 19 separate museums.

The Powerhouse Museum was opened in March 1988, but the core collection belongs to the old Technological, Industrial and Sanitary Museum founded in 1879. Unlike the Parramatta development the building in Ultimo, constructed on the site of a tram power station, was intended to provide adequate storage and display facilities for a collection that numbered more than 400,000 items (now more than 500,000).

Architect Lionel Glendenning won the Sulman Award for his design, which was a precursor of high-profile international museum developments such as Tate Modern in the former Battersea Power Station.

The 1988 adaptive re-use of the old Ultimo Tramway Power House, designed by government architect Lionel Glendenning for the Bicentenary, specially installed a reticulated steam system, run from the old boiler house, to drive the dozen or so steam machines in its collection.

The diversity of collections is enormous, assembling material from all over the world in fields that range from ceramics, glass, jewellery, costume and furniture to industrial design, folk art and large-scale pieces of machinery. This includes the Boulton and Watt engine, the oldest built locomotive in NSW; the Catalina flying boat, and other items for which there will be no room in Parramatta. To even consider moving these things the government would be obliged to buy a crane for \$400,000. Then there is the small problem that none of them would fit into the proposed new building's goods lift.

This project is to reinstate the Powerhouse on a flood-prone south bank of the Parramatta River. The only thing that will relocate intact is the name. Everything else – building, site and priceless collection – will be broken up, separated, decontextualised, diminished, disrespected and mothballed.

Glendenning's Bicentennial building on the Ultimo site looks modest on the outside but miraculously accommodates a 10-metre high turbine hall as well as galleries for locomotives, planes, trains, trams, horse-drawn buses and what was a working trainline.

There's No. 1 Locomotive, that hauled the first passenger train in NSW in 1855. There's Sydney's last Hansom cab, from Banjo Paterson days, a horse-drawn bus, and the Catalina flying boat that brought prisoners of war home from Singapore in 1945, suspended mid-air and inspectable from the balcony.

To close Ultimo Powerhouse means that most of the Powerhouse's large objects will be dumped in warehouses – or sold-off as a way of recouping spiralling costs. Expect unique pieces such as Kändler's 1739 ceramic bust of Baron Schmiedel or the Smith's Strasburg clock (1887-89), to be propped up in corners as part of a perpetual display of highlights, devoid of meaning or context.

Part of the collection will go to Parramatta, but since every space in the proposed new building is designed to double as an event space, the chance for any permanent display is slim. Meanwhile, the Ultimo site, excepting space for a small fashion museum, is intended to be sold. The Powerhouse itself will be a thing of the past. A memory.

Institutional destruction of a unique museum of this kind does not happen in the international world of museums.

I know of one arts student who states that when he studied design, they would always go to the Powerhouse, because it was 'was a great resource for us in art and design to access objects from our own past and learn from them to add to our future. The costume stores were a seemingly endless resource of inspiration that all of us could enjoy, be entertained by and learn from.' Closing the Ultimo Powerhouse would remove these learning tools from access.

