

# Julie Owens MP

Your local Federal Member for Parramatta



21 July 2020

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: Powerhouse Parramatta EIS (SSD-10416)**

I object to the Powerhouse Parramatta Project. My reasons are as follows:

## **Heritage**

Parramatta is an extraordinary place. Rich in indigenous and European Colonial history, Parramatta embodies the migration story of our state and nation. Established along the banks of the Parramatta River there is little wonder why it has been such a popular meeting place for thousands of years. Regardless of the significance of this place there is a continuous threat to our heritage in Parramatta.

If this project proceeds as presented in the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) it will result in the demolition of 2 nineteenth century buildings that *"are the only examples of their type located in the core of the Parramatta CBD. The demolition of these heritage items would have a major impact on the representation of these respective architectural styles in the Phillip Street streetscape and Parramatta CBD townscape"*.<sup>1</sup>

Why was this site selected for the Powerhouse Museum, and by whom, knowing full well that it is the location of two significant heritage listed items?

When this site was selected for the Powerhouse Museum in 2016 the elected Parramatta Councillors voted unanimously in support of retaining the heritage items as part of any redevelopment of the site. These views have been echoed by the current elected Council on 2 separate occasions in the Council Chamber. The community genuinely believed that these buildings would be incorporated into the new Powerhouse development until the Minister for Arts, Don Harwin MLC, advised that the design brief for the architectural design competition did not require the heritage buildings to be retained on the site. With this announcement it became very apparent that the State Government's intentions for Willow Grove and St George's Terrace did not match the expectations of the community.

I have received countless emails and phone calls from residents completely opposed to the demolition of these heritage buildings. A petition circulated in 2018 by the North Parramatta Residents Action Group opposing the demolition of Willow Grove and St George's Terrace attracted more than 13,000 signatures within 7 days of the announcement.

I am sure that other submissions have highlighted the aesthetic and architectural significance of Willow Grove and St George's Terrace and a lot of the correspondence I received from the community also focused on these aspects. However, the community also expressed strong views about the social significance of Willow Grove and the role both buildings play in delivering a sense of place to Parramatta.

<sup>1</sup> Advisian, *Powerhouse Parramatta Statement of Heritage Impact*, Infrastructure NSW, 27 April 2020, p10.



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Built in the 1890s as a residential home, Willow Grove was transformed into a private hospital from 1920 until the 1950s. It is during this period that Willow Grove contributed so much to our social history as a maternity hospital. Originally operating as “Estella Private Hospital” it underwent a name change to “Westcourt” and then in 1925 to “Aloha”.

Estella Private Hospital (Willow Grove) was one of many private “lying-in” (maternity) hospitals operating in Sydney in 1920. Women travelled there from surrounding districts to give birth. Robert Power writes *“The place was definitely operating as a private hospital in 1919 as my mother’s youngest brother was born there on 8 September 1919. His birth certificate provides a description of the place as Nurse Davidson’s Private Hospital, Phillip Street, Parramatta.”* Barbara Muir (nee Lester) commented *“I was born at ‘Aloha’ 22/11/1934. In attendance was Doctor Whiting and Nurse McLachlan. Being November, my late mother always referred to the beautiful Jacarandas outside her window. In fact, I was very nearly named ‘Jacaranda’!!”*<sup>2</sup>

Willow Grove played an important part in the course of Parramatta’s medical history. Parramatta has been at the centre of the evolution of Australian medicine from colonial to modern times. Australia’s first women’s hospital was built by Sir Francis Greenway and formed part of the Parramatta Female Factory until its transformation in c.1850 to the Parramatta Lunatic Asylum. Macquarie Barracks, Brislington Medical and Nursing Museum, Parramatta District Hospital, Cumberland Hospital, the Children’s Medical Research Institute, Westmead Hospital and Children’s Hospital at Westmead are all institutions that have contributed to putting Parramatta at the centre of health service delivery and medical research in NSW for over 200 years. The significant role Willow Grove played, operating as a private hospital for over three decades, must not be dismissed.

In my Electorate Office there is a framed print featuring 30 Parramatta shops, churches and institutions that lined the streets of Parramatta at the turn of the Twentieth Century. Less than a handful are still standing. Similarly, if you walk the streets of Parramatta today demolition and construction is happening at breakneck speed. It is exciting and important that Parramatta progresses, but we must also ensure we respect our past in the process.

Together Willow Grove and St George’s Terrace make a significant contribution to the streetscape of Phillip Street. They set the tone in an area that is rapidly being modernised and transformed. The two buildings frame the corner and Willow Grove provides a delightful vista from Horwood Place. The setback garden of significant trees and plantings adds to the attractiveness of this handsome Victorian Italianate residence, the only one of its era still remaining in the Parramatta CBD core.

As the Federal Member for Parramatta I take my role as a representative of this city very seriously. I know that I have a responsibility to do all I can to ensure those who have come before are respected. I include the preservation of built heritage to be of the highest priority. It is a gift that can never be replaced. We must treasure our heritage and ensure that it remains for future generations to enjoy as much as we do.

### **Archaeological Significance**

It is a serious oversight that at the time the EIS was placed on exhibition only ‘Stage 1’ of the Aboriginal community consultation process had been undertaken. To ensure a transparent process, the public exhibition should have included the feedback and findings from the 27 Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAP). It is disingenuous presenting an EIS that does not actually include the views of the RAPs particularly when the local Dharug community have stated that the area is of high cultural and spiritual significance.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Estella’ Private Hospital, Parramatta 1920 -1953, Tsang A, *Parramatta Heritage Centre*, 29 November 2013 (updated 2017), viewed 15 May 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Curio Projects, *Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Assessment Report Powerhouse Parramatta*, 22 April 2020, p 10.

### **Site Constraints & Safety**

The Parramatta Powerhouse site as proposed in the EIS is constrained. The most significant constraint is the river. While the EIS refers to the site being in the 100-year flood zone, in fact the revised flood reports consider the river frontage to be a 20-year flood zone. This was evident with the 2 most recent Parramatta River flood events of February 2019 and 2020.

The flood strategy as defined in the EIS is inadequate. For a project that boasts attracting 2 million visitors in its first year of operation there is little regard for the safety of these visitors as a result of flooding. The proposed solutions for flood mitigation are weak and this includes overland flow. There also needs to be assurances that the building structure will not be compromised by regular flooding events nor the priceless exhibits put at any risk of damage or decay.

It is admirable that the museum project is seeking to provide community space for informal gatherings. The undercroft is pitched as a space protected from the elements that allows for a diverse range of activities. However, on closer examination of the EIS the area has major public safety concerns and while it may provide shelter from rain and sun, in the event of a flood event it has the potential to be a death trap. Evacuation measures are scant. The EIS advises that the evacuation plan will be determined as part of the detailed design but given the location and community concern for flooding this information should be included as part of the public exhibition.

The undercroft also fails to enhance any connection between the river, the public domain and the building. A public building of this stature should be drawing on the local character and responding to its location. Instead it gives the impression of an alien form that has simply been plonked on the site and has no relationship to its built and natural environs.

### **Objectives of the Development**

The EIS states that the *“key objective of the development is to be agile and adaptable, providing flexible consolidated facilities for the exhibition of the Powerhouse Collection across both public-facing and back of house areas that permit changes in the exhibition program and allow for the multiple uses of space.”*<sup>4</sup> Public consultation, media reports and comments from the Powerhouse Chief Executive, made since the EIS went on public exhibition, suggest that the Powerhouse Parramatta will exhibit artefacts currently in storage from the Powerhouse collection along with the world-class permanent steam and transport displays currently housed in the Powerhouse Ultimo. However, with the announcement that the Powerhouse Ultimo is no longer closing this has put into question exactly what will be exhibited, what will be the primary focus and function for this institution in Parramatta.

It is acknowledged that with the design and construction of a cultural institution of this calibre there needs to be ‘future-proofing’ and flexibility but the EIS is incredibly light on detail. The community needs to be assured that they are getting what they have signed up for – a museum. While it is acknowledged that the museums of today and tomorrow differ significantly to traditional museums there are many questions left unanswered about what percentage of this building will be given over to museum space compared to venues for hire. In addition, with the announcement that the Powerhouse will remain in Ultimo the question of how 4 not 3 Powerhouse sites will be funded is now questionable. There have been significant cuts to funding of the Powerhouse Ultimo over the past decade. Now that it will be remaining open there needs to be significant money channelled into revitalising the Ultimo site in addition to the construction and running costs of the Parramatta Powerhouse, Castle Hill site (proposed to be expanded) and funding of the Powerhouse Observatory.

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<sup>4</sup> Ethos Urban, Powerhouse Parramatta Environmental Impact Statement, 4 May 2020, p58.

**Failure to consider an alternative site by the EIS and in the Public Interest**

Given the potential loss of such significant heritage on the proposed Parramatta Powerhouse site, it is in the public interest and in accordance with the relevant Section 4.15(1)(e) of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act the EIS must consider other alternate sites and their suitability for this project. The EIS as a key part of the State Significant Development process is flawed as there is no detailed information or assessment of other suitable sites in Parramatta.

The Parramatta Female Factory Friends, North Parramatta Residents Action Group, Parramatta Branch of the National Trust and members of the community have been advocating for a museum that incorporates the Parramatta Female Factory in the Cumberland Heritage precinct. This site is incredibly rich in built, indigenous and social history thus providing a wonderful opportunity to be the site of a world-class museum. It is an ideal location with none of the constraints of the site selected for the Parramatta Powerhouse. Instead of demolishing heritage it would have heritage at its core with an opportunity to also build a new complimentary museum on the site at a fraction of the current proposal. The Parramatta Light Rail route will run directly through this precinct providing reliable public transport from Westmead and Parramatta CBD.

State Government investment in an arts and cultural institution in Parramatta is well overdue. However, it is imperative that we get it right. Investment must not come at any cost to our heritage. It should be enhancing our heritage not destroying it. I urge the NSW Government to revise any plans for the Powerhouse Parramatta that will result in the demolition of Willow Grove and St George's Terrace. With the decision to retain the Powerhouse in Ultimo there is now a perfect opportunity to pause and reconsider all options to ensure Parramatta achieves investment in an arts and cultural precinct that delivers the best outcome for Parramatta now and into the future.


Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Julie Owens".

**Julie Owens MP**

# Political Donations Disclosure Statement to Minister or the Director-General

If you are required under section 147(3) of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979 to disclose any political donations (see Page 1 for details), please fill in this form and sign below.

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You are the APPLICANT <input checked="" type="radio"/> YES / NO	You are a PERSON MAKING A SUBMISSION IN RELATION TO AN APPLICATION <input checked="" type="radio"/> YES / NO			
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