

PARRAMATTA POWERHOUSE PROJECT - Application No SSD-10416 Objection - Michael Houlahan

Submitted by : Michael Houlahan
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Dear Sir/Madam

I **object** to the Parramatta Powerhouse Project.

The reasons for my objection are as outlined below:-

1. The destruction of the existing museum in Harris Street, Ultimo (misrepresented as a “relocation”) and the consequent loss of public access to most of the current exhibits.
2. The willful destruction of the two heritage-listed buildings at the proposed new site - in particular “Willow Grove”.
3. The scope of the project - what is being delivered is not a museum as approved by Cabinet in 2018.
4. The location of the new site in a flood zone and the failure to consider any alternate proposals or sites within Parramatta.
5. The exorbitant cost of the project.
6. The lack of any publicly accessible Business Plan outlining the case for the project.

1. Destruction of Existing Museum in Harris Street and its Collection

The Ultimo building is eminently suitable for the existing collection - especially the larger and irreplaceable exhibits. We now know that these will not fit into the proposed Parramatta site given that the total floor space in the new Powerhouse Museum is about 75% of the existing one and museum standard climate controlled exhibition space is 25% of the existing site.

This can only mean that a significant part of the current collection will be put into storage, possibly never to be seen again; or scattered to regional museums across NSW. How the Very Large Objects will be handled is anybody’s guess. Considering the risk of damage in transit and in the storage and display of these items, the plan is deeply flawed.

It also means that we are not getting the “relocation” as promised by the Premier but something substantially different.

The existing location is close to Sydney CBD and Sydney’s globally known attractions (i.e. Opera House, Harbour Bridge, Sydney Harbour, etc.). It is hard to fathom why visitors to Sydney would make the 30-60 minute trip out to Parramatta to see the museum when the other attractions are so close. The 2 million figure for visitors to Parramatta seems fanciful - 5,500 visitors every day of the year - seriously!

It is presumed that the government's desire is to sell off the existing Powerhouse site for commercial development. This building has significant history attached to it. It is I believe around 134 years old, a heritage artefact in itself.

So we have a double whammy - destruction of heritage assets in Ultimo (as well as the proposed destruction in Parramatta - more on this below).

2. Destruction of heritage listed properties

There is much angst within the community about the destruction of Willow Grove and St. George's Terrace. As I understand it, some 14,000 petitions have already been signed by community groups and individuals protesting this destruction.

When the proposed site was first mooted, the Premier gave an undertaking for the new building design have as little impact on these heritage sites as possible. The current design proposal for what will arguably be the ugliest building in Parramatta has ignored this undertaking. Given the substantial reduction in floor and exhibition space, there seems to be no justification for an expanded footprint that requires destruction of these two buildings.

The Parramatta community is justifiably proud of its heritage. There were many examples of our cultural history in and around the Parramatta CBD. However many of these have disappeared over the years, the most recent example being the demolition of the 200-year old Royal Oak Hotel to make way for the Light Rail.

This wanton destruction of our heritage needs to stop before it is all gone. Willow Grove and St Georges Terraces are rare examples of architecture that no longer exist in Parramatta CBD. A relatively small investment could restore each of these buildings to their former glory. Willow Grove in particular has so much potential to be repurposed as a cultural/exhibition space that could become a jewel in the crown for Parramatta.

3. The scope of the project - what is being delivered is not a museum as approved by Cabinet in 2018

"The Powerhouse Precinct in Parramatta is not the science museum concept endorsed by cabinet in April 2018. It is not a museum. It is not about science. It is not for families. It is designed to support the night time economy of Parramatta, a 24 x 7 entertainment zone for large events. That is why it is located on a flood prone riverbank, a site that is entirely unsuitable for a museum." (Winkworth, 2020)

Clearly the project is not about relocating the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta. As noted, it's about providing an entertainment facility in Parramatta. Not what Cabinet approved and not what we have been promised by the government.

This is completely unacceptable.

4. Location in Flood Zone and the failure to consider any alternate proposals or sites within Parramatta

The proposed location sits in a flood prone site. As a resident of Parramatta for less than three years, I've personally seen the site flooded twice. This is therefore not a once-in-a-hundred year flood zone but almost an annual event.

The folly of siting a major museum with specific environmental requirements for its (reduced) collection in such a location beggars belief. Moreover, the cost of flood mitigation works to minimize flood impacts seems to be a completely unnecessary expense.

I note also that [a report to the NSW Legislative Council](#) by hydrologist John Macintosh dated 5th January 2018 outlined specific concerns relating to the risk of "loss of life" as well as "loss of irreplaceable collections". This report seems to have been ignored as project plans have developed. This is a serious concern.

The Parramatta community supports the creation of a major museum which will be an integrated element of Parramatta's cultural infrastructure. However the Powerhouse "move" to the location as proposed is not supported.

Parramatta's Cultural Plan developed by Parramatta City Council in 2017 is the product of extensive consultation with the local community. It identifies very clear objectives for Parramatta's cultural development including:

- **Indigenous** – *"Our place is deeply significant for Aboriginal people and sits at the heart of cultural and social engagement. Reconciliation is vital to our identity and role as a place of gathering and influence nationally and internationally".¹*
- **Historic Places** – *"Our City is home to historic sites of national and global significance. In the midst of a new contemporary, cosmopolitan City we need to anchor, promote and share this World Heritage for our local and national community.As the first seat of government, our built environment features some of the Australia's most important colonial buildings, peppered throughout our City's changing landscape. More than the architecture, these heritage assets tell a story of the past and help us better understand our future".²*

It would be logical to establish a new museum in Parramatta that embraces these objectives. The move of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta was endorsed as a part of the Cultural Plan however that was before any information was available regarding the scope of the plan and its proposed location. In view of the change in scope, the heritage impacts and firmer details about the location, I believe that this endorsement is now invalidated.

What would be preferred to the current proposal is a purpose built museum that could reflect for example, our ethnographic collections - also endorsed in the Cultural Plan. This would be a far better

¹ [Parramatta Cultural Plan 2017](#)

² *ibid*

spend at a fraction of the price yet maintains the government's desire to establish a major cultural facility in the West. It also retains the existing museum and its priceless collection in Ultimo.

Such an approach is also consistent with other aspects of the Cultural Plan including "increasing accessibility of the city's cultural collection of archives, artefacts and research resources" and providing "long term storage of cultural collections".

As for a location, there are public-owned sites within the Fleet Street precinct that align with heritage considerations that would be far more suitable for a museum than a flood prone location.

5. Project Cost

Whilst the government's initiatives to boost employment across NSW are to be applauded, these should be focused on projects that are needed, which make sense and which are broadly supported by the community. The move of the Powerhouse Museum is not needed, doesn't make sense and based on feedback I've received as a Parramatta resident, does not have broad community support.

Therefore this project can only be viewed as a waste of \$1.5b (likely more as project costs inevitably increase). Moreover, anecdotal evidence suggests a significant part of the project costs relate to the storage and relocation of the existing exhibits. Obviously this cost is avoided if the museum is left at its present location.

I expect also that significant costs will be incurred in flood mitigation works on the site. There are plenty of alternate sites in Parramatta that are public land and are not flood prone. Any of these could be a better location for a new museum.

6. Lack of Publicly Accessible Business Plan

The fact that Business Plan justifying the "relocation" has not been released is also unacceptable.

The public still does not know why this project is happening or its justification. The entire project has been veiled in secrecy. Public statements on the project are unsupported by expert's comments and plain old common sense.

The NSW public has a right to know in detail why this project is happening and not rely on glib and fanciful statements made in press announcements.

Yours Sincerely

Michael Houlahan

2nd July 2020