

Objection to Powerhouse Development

Dear Sir/Madam

I object to the Powerhouse Parramatta project. My reasons are based on government transparency, lack of community desire for the project, impact on the Ultimo site and heritage considerations.

It may be useful to know that I have worked in and advocated for service development in Western Sydney and have some familiarity with major capital projects from a service planning perspective. My paternal family origins are from the Parramatta area.

Transparency

The planning for this project has not met democratic standards of transparency. There is limited publicly available information outlining the financial and cultural need for the project, assessing the impact of the move of the museum items or the cost impact of maintaining the museum in its current site and developing a new museum in Parramatta. Arguments presented in the media supporting the project often attempt a false dichotomy between retaining the Ultimo facility and supporting the development of Western Sydney. The EIS makes much of supporting the development of the creative arts in Western Sydney, yet this argument appears phrased more as a justification for a prior decision than the launching pad for genuine consultation and options development. The proposed Parramatta design appears to be developed around proposals that have less to do with museum development and more around entertainment and accommodation.

Community Support

There has not been to my knowledge a groundswell of desire from the residents of Western Sydney to have the Powerhouse move to Parramatta. I am not aware of any survey seeking views of residents of the sort of museum they might like, apart from the Willingness to Pay study referenced in the EIS of about 2,500 households, where presented options were no museum vs two options for a museum in Parramatta. The most popular reported theme for the museum among respondents was “space travel” with little support for performing arts spaces. The study gave no sense of what the local population might want more broadly.

The residents of Western Sydney deserve a high class museum, not a secondhand transposition from the CBD. Western Sydney is the traditional home of the Dharug people, the cradle of agriculture in the European settlement period and has been a major resettlement area for new immigrants, particularly refugees. The opportunities are great for a spectacular museum focusing on these areas, particularly as Sydney has no major museum of Aboriginal life in NSW, of State history or of immigration. Parramatta would be a perfect location for such a museum. On the other hand Ultimo is the logical location for a museum focusing on the 19th and 20th century industrial development of Sydney.

Impact on the Ultimo Site

The proposal to transfer the MAAS from Ultimo to Parramatta includes numerous components the costs of which have not clearly been stated. These include forgone revenue following closure,

transporting large and fragile exhibits, the financial risks of such transfer (repair, replacement, maintenance, transport management, etc) and the costs of reestablishment in the new venue. There is general suspicion in the community about the reasons for vacating the Ultimo site, which have not been clearly and transparently articulated. The argument that the current site is no longer “fit for purpose” has not been well made. There are large numbers of items that are currently in storage, and the EIS does not make clear how many of these would be able to be displayed in the Parramatta site. The value of the Ultimo site is that it was indeed the power house for the Sydney tram system and has immediate connection to its historic purpose.

Heritage Considerations

The EIS makes very clear that proceeding with the Parramatta site will require the permanent loss of two major heritage items, Willow Grove and St George’s Terrace. Willow Grove is one of four such buildings remaining in Parramatta, while St George’s Terrace is the only remaining 2-storey terrace in Parramatta. In the EIS the heritage consultants said: *When considered against its context, Willow Grove is the only one of its kind within the core of the Parramatta CBD, meaning its demolition would have a significant impact on representation of this architectural style in this particular location. St George’s Terrace, as a collective group, is also the only remaining example of this style located in the Parramatta CBD, recognising that whilst there are other examples in the Parramatta CBD these are typically single storey terraces or are attached rather than a complete row.*

The EIS identified that the “cumulative impact” of loss of these items would be small, but that only makes sense in the context of the loss of so much already (it is like suggesting that the death of a child would be less traumatically felt the larger the family). The risk mitigation plan (section 8 of the EIS) suggests developing a “Heritage Interpretation Plan” in the new museum for the two items to “interpret the key heritage conservation values” of Willow Grove and St George’s Terrace. One of those values would surely be to conserve them.

What is difficult to understand is that the development of a new museum, which is about celebrating and understanding our history, and which has not been sought by the local residents, can be traded against the destruction of two of the diminishing remaining heritage items of Parramatta, particularly when other sites would be available. There is no guarantee that this new museum, like its predecessor, will not be considered “no longer fit for purpose” in another 30 or so years.

People in NSW travel every weekend to seek out historic and heritage connections, particularly in places like The Rocks, Berrima, Bathurst, Windsor and Morpeth. The value of these places lies in their historic streetscapes which tend to be at human scale. Parramatta currently has a wealth of such historic locations and local plans appear to be seeking a way to capitalise on them for tourism and education. We must be very careful to avoid arguments for the destruction of our own heritage for reasons that may have only temporary political value.

David Small

30 June 2020

Creative arts

The EIS refers to the importance of providing support to the development of creative arts. This does not require this location or design.

value of heritage in attracting tourism

Willow Grove is one of four such buildings remaining in Parramatta

St George's Terrace is the only remaining 2-storey terrace in Parramatta

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Significance of Ultimo site as original power house for Sydney tram system

Not clear that new site has more exhibition space

Financial Review announced that 70% of space is for performing arts and exhibitions, 60 apartments (could be anywhere) – not clear how need for this is identified in business case

Options for museum and gallery focussed on Western Sydney

Is there business case for Ultimo site? Was to be in April. Was the do nothing option costed?

Museum development in consultation with residents

On 100-year flood plain

Cost and risk of transporting items

Desire for museum from Western Sydney residents – mainly based on Willingness to Pay study of about 2,500 households, where options were no museum vs 2 museum in Parramatta options. Most

popular theme was “space travel” with little support for performing arts spaces. No sense of what population might want more broadly.