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## City Hub

# Fake museum consultations under cover of Covid-19

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Years of crippling drought, devastating fires, and a pandemic with no end in sight. Any one of these disasters should give the NSW Government pause to review its unpopular, destructive and absurdly expensive scheme to demolish the Powerhouse Museum (PHM), and build something half the size at Parramatta.

The government says it's 'the new Powerhouse'. To the rest of us, this is the building resembling two abandoned milk crates on the banks of the Parramatta River. Whatever it is, it's not the real Powerhouse, and it's not a museum.



### **Gladys in Wonderland and her tin ear**

In the world of Gladys in Wonderland, not even the \$1.5b price tag, and a looming budget black hole can bring the Premier to any semblance of common sense. When it comes to community opinion on this project, the Premier has a tin ear. If she's listening to anyone it's the business and developer lobby. It's a shame the pubs are closed, so she can't hear the punters give it the pub test. Despite a shattering sequence of biblical-scale disasters, the Premier is pressing on with the demolition of the Powerhouse Museum. The government is moving the name to Parramatta, perhaps some trophy objects, but not the actual museum. In a first for Australia, the NSW Government is doing cultural planning by ministerial diktat. Lacking community consent, legitimacy or any authentic enthusiasm, the project is now being pushed as a Covid-19 recovery priority.

Infrastructure NSW (INSW) is currently running consultations on the Parramatta project so it can tick the 'community engagement' box as part of the EIS approval. You can have your say by email, phone, or survey.

But nothing anyone says is going to have any impact. All the important decisions have long been set in concrete. The Powerhouse Museum will be demolished. The 'design excellence' milk crates will go up on the riverbank. And Parramatta will get the cultural project the government says it's getting, not the museum they really want in the Fleet St heritage precinct.

During the webinar consultations this week, not one person spoke in favour of the project. The PHM's CEO outlined the facilities for conferences, performances, immersive digital experiences, events and functions, cafes, 40 apartments, a dormitory for schools, and some exhibition space. All this sounds like a vision for Carriageworks West (the arts venue in repurposed train sheds at Eveleigh). There was no mention of any museum until someone asked. Oops.

The Powerhouse to Parramatta scheme was never about building a new museum for western Sydney. This project has always been a front for a monstrous property play, so developers can get their hands on the Powerhouse Museum's land at Ultimo. The rest is just process to give the asset stripping of a major public museum a semblance of legitimacy.

### **Parramatta history erased**

Poor Parramatta. This is a community that's going to be 'tired of winning' by the time the NSW Government is finished.

There was the demolition of the War Memorial swimming pool, and still no replacement three years on; the appropriation of land belonging to Parramatta Park for a stadium that shows its virtual bum crack to the views from the Park and Victoria Road; the imminent demolition of the 200-year-old Royal Oak Hotel to make way for the light rail; and the demolition of Willow Grove and St George's Terrace so Parramatta can have culture.

With no trace irony, the Stage 2 design brief for the Parramatta project required the competition entries to be 'sympathetic to the local heritage of the site'. That would be Whelan the Wrecker, a pile of rubble-type heritage sensitivity.

Despite the Premier's assurances in the election campaign that Willow Grove would be kept, the demolition of these buildings was baked into the project. The government lied. Now oozing fake sincerity, INSW replies to protests with the script 'we understand the local community place high value on Willow Grove, which will not be retained as part of the project. As part of our planning we want to ensure their history remains a part of the community'..... Perhaps the opening exhibition should be Demolished Parramatta?

The NSW Government claims this is the biggest cultural investment since the Sydney Opera House. Showing staggering hubris the Premier is blowing \$1.5b of our money on a project that people don't even want. They are plundering a 140-year-old museum that has been in Ultimo since 1893. And now, under cover of Covid-19, the project will be rammed through with complete indifference to community opinion.

For what it's worth, re the fake community engagement, people may want to tell the Premier that this is the wrong museum on the wrong site at Parramatta, and we must keep the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo. It's our museum, not the Premier's plaything.