

# Powerhouse plan betrays people of NSW

SMH 2 May 2018

Opinion Kylie Winkworth

The Berejiklian government is closing the Powerhouse Museum next year, in what will be a world-first museum eviction and demolition. Yes, the shells of the Ultimo site may be left standing but it is the end of the Powerhouse Museum as we know it, a museum that has brought joy and wonder to millions of visitors.



*The Powerhouse Museum, which will be moved to Parramatta. Photo: Fairfax*

There is no masterplan for the site, although one can expect another mediocre block of units, or two. A theatre for Broadway musicals is mooted for the exhibition halls that currently hold the treasures of NSW. A few pages of blurb trumpet an Ultimo "creative industries presence" with fashion and design displays. The government's spin doctors must have forgotten this is what we already have in Powerhouse Museum.

No government anywhere in the world has closed a major state museum to move it out of the city to a less accessible location. And no government has ever forced a major museum to give up its historic site, with purpose-designed infrastructure and state-of-the-art facilities.

You don't need to be a real estate genius to see the rip-off in swapping an expansive accessible 2.6 hectare city site, fully owned by the museum, for a smaller museum on a flood-prone riverbank at the base of a 50-storey apartment block.

This is shameless asset stripping of cultural infrastructure, land and buildings that belong to the people of NSW, held in trust for current and future generations. And at a cost of \$1.179billion, it is not even replacing like for like. Only in Sydney could the property of a major state museum be seen as a development opportunity.



Illustration: Shakespeare. Photo: Fairfax.

Most of the case for the demolition of the museum has been framed around cultural equity for western Sydney. Everyone supports the claims for an iconic state museum in Parramatta. But the government can't explain why a new museum in Parramatta must entail closing the Powerhouse at Ultimo.

It is even less credible after the \$2.4 billion cash splash on three stadiums between the city and Parramatta. Proposals for a Smithsonian-style satellite in Parramatta were rejected out of hand as second best. This is absurd. None of the Smithsonian's unique museums are second best. And the Smithsonian has never closed one of its museums in the guise of meeting contemporary cultural aspirations; nor should NSW.

Would the UK government close the Victoria and Albert Museum to open a museum at Olympic Park? Is Tate Modern a lesser museum than its parent Tate Britain?

Cultural equity is an important principle, not just for western Sydney but for regional NSW. Where is the cultural equity in spending \$1.2 billion on a new museum in Parramatta, just 23 kilometres from the city, for no net cultural gain, without a plan for museums in the rest of western Sydney and NSW?

More than a dozen major towns and cities across Sydney and regional NSW do not have fit-for-purpose museums with paid staff that can take travelling exhibitions, collect and exhibit their own heritage, or borrow significant objects from NSW state institutions. This includes Penrith, Campbelltown, Bankstown, Sutherland, Gosford, Wollongong, Port Macquarie, Tweed Heads, Lithgow, Bega, Goulburn and Maitland. Just 10 per cent of the cost of moving the Powerhouse would build 12 new regional museums at a cost of \$10 million each.

NSW has had decades of under-investment in museums so one might have hoped that a government awash with money from asset sales would expand the state's museum portfolio. The last major museum to open in Sydney was the Powerhouse. It still has Sydney's largest exhibition spaces, which makes the waste of cultural infrastructure at Ultimo even more questionable.

The Powerhouse Museum is not redundant or surplus to the cultural needs of NSW. It is Australia's only museum of applied arts and sciences, based in Ultimo since 1893. The museum was 10 years in planning, design and construction, opening in 1988 as the cultural centrepiece of the bicentenary of European settlement. The Sulman award-winning museum was built with the highest quality materials, technology and engineering, designed for a working life of at least 100 years. The majestic volumes of the turbine and boiler halls are uniquely appropriate for the museum's nationally significant power, transport and engineering collections.

The Powerhouse Museum was the ambitious vision of Neville Wran and Jack Ferguson, who wanted a people's museum for NSW. Inspired by this vision, thousands of people donated money and family treasures. These collections are held in trust for the people of NSW. They are not the assets or political pawns of the government of the day.

In trashing a great public museum, the state government betrays the trust of donors and the investment of generations of NSW taxpayers.

**Kylie Winkworth is a life fellow, donor and former trustee of the Powerhouse Museum.**

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/powerhouse-museum-demolition-parramatta-trust-winkworth-20180501-p4zcmp.html>