

The curse of the NSW government strikes again

SMH 11 April 2018

Opinion

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The Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo. Photo: Louise Kennerley

Sadly, poor implementation is fast becoming the curse of the NSW government. Whether it be the CBD light rail project, the botched Fire and Emergency Services Levy, forced council amalgamations, the arbitrary banning of our greyhound industry, the return-and-earn recycling fiasco or the \$2.5 billion stadium imbroglio, governments invariably make poor decisions when they don't do their homework before making an announcement, fail to properly consult those affected and don't really listen.

The latest instance of poor implementation is the long running plan to uproot the Powerhouse Museum from its current purpose-built premises in Ultimo to a new flood prone site beside the Parramatta River. The original decision was made in February 2015 by the former premier Mike Baird, as part of the development of an arts and cultural precinct in western Sydney.

The decision was announced prior to the commissioning of a preliminary business case in September 2015. A final business case was commissioned in April 2017 and a two-phase consultation process commenced in June 2017. The fait accompli, the final decision by cabinet, is expected shortly. Reportedly, a summary of the business case will only be released some 90 days later – very odd indeed.

The Powerhouse decision has also been the subject of a comprehensive inquiry by a Legislative Council committee which issued an interim report in December 2017.

This committee was appalled that the decision to relocate the Powerhouse Museum was publicly announced before a preliminary business case had even been prepared for cabinet. The committee found that “the credibility of the relocation decision has been undermined by the lack of genuine community and sector consultation undertaken in relation to the proposed move, and by the secrecy surrounding the funding, relocation costs and business case itself”.



The site of the new Powerhouse Museum in Parramatta. Photo: Louise Kennerley

The committee found that “the final cost to government of moving the Powerhouse may be up to \$1.5 billion. Much of this is wasted in the expensive project of moving and repurposing the existing collection. It also comes with the unquantifiable cost of damaging the much-loved Powerhouse Museum”.

The committee concluded that “spending up to \$1.5 billion to destroy a cultural icon is an act of vandalism by this government”.

Instead, the committee believed that “it would be more appropriate for a Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences satellite site to be established in western Sydney which could display items of the collection currently in storage and hold different exhibitions to those at the Ultimo museum”. Indeed, this is precisely what has been done with similarly iconic museums in other major cities like London and New York.

A satellite Powerhouse at Parramatta could incorporate a modern interactive science, technology and engineering centre along similar lines to the hugely successful Questacon in Canberra. Questacon was completed in 1988 at a total cost of \$20 million and has become a major tourist attraction, engaging with over 32.5 million people, predominately children and their families.

Similarly, the Parramatta Powerhouse could inspire and guide our children towards a path of creativity and innovation and to consider careers in technology and engineering. As is the case with Questacon, this could be complemented with a science outreach program and a touring program of exhibits and science shows to

regional NSW along with school and holiday workshops based on design, technology and the innovation process. All at a fraction of the estimated cost of the proposed Powerhouse relocation – doesn't this sound like a better investment?

The savings of up to \$1 billion would be better spent urgently addressing the worsening crises in our child protection system. Last financial year the Auditor-General reported that 86,000 children were reported at risk of significant harm in NSW, up from 78,186 in the previous year. Of these about 59,000 (55,000 in the previous year) did not receive a face to face assessment – their files were closed due to resource constraints.

The decision to uproot the Powerhouse to Parramatta is looking, to quote a classic, 'curiouser' and 'curiouser'. It would be much wiser to just leave the existing Powerhouse where it is and build a Parramatta Powerhouse that we can afford, and which will inspire the next generation not just in Sydney, but across our entire state.

In the meantime, the government should urgently direct any savings to address the tragedy we are inflicting on our next generation through our dysfunctional child protection system.

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