

3 May, 2018

Extract, with permission, from a weekly newsletter by John McDonald, art critic for *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

To subscribe to his (free) newsletter, see <http://johnmcdonald.net.au/>

From
John
McDonald 

It may qualify as my hobby horse by now but I'm simply flabbergasted at the cynicism of the NSW Government in its determination to destroy the Powerhouse Museum. I can't improve on Judith White's comprehensive overview of the case in her *Culture Heist* blog (cultureheist.com.au) because the sheer volume of secrecy and spin involved is too voluminous for this newsletter.

Unsurprisingly, Liberal MP. Matthew Mason-Cox has been punished for crossing the floor to help ensure the release of the business plan that his own party wanted to keep hidden until three months *after* they had announced their plans. Mr. Mason-Cox was removed from his position as chairman of the upper house privileges committee, which means that a rare honest politician will not be vetting the misdemeanours of less scrupulous peers. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that "he is also likely to be removed as deputy chairman of the newly formed public accountability committee." This is wildly ironic because by crossing the floor he angered a government which is doing everything it can to avoid public accountability for any of its decisions.

Obviously it's far too dangerous to have someone on a public accountability committee who genuinely believes that politicians should be accountable to the public.

The Berejiklian government has been so determined to avoid accountability that it initially defied an Upper House order to release the business case for moving the Powerhouse. It claimed, incredibly, there were no documents covered by the resolution. Soon, however, Arts Minister, Don Harwin, found a "Final Business Case Summary" which he delivered to the media with great fanfare.

The devil is in the lack of detail. It is claimed that the cost of relocation will be \$1.179 billion, with a net capital cost of \$645 million. Most experts would agree that this figure is too low. It also leaves us wondering where the government expects to find more than half a billion dollars. The answer is pretty obvious: by selling off a huge part of the Powerhouse site to

developers. The sweetener is the idea of using part of the site for a "Broadway-style lyric theatre", plus a fashion and design museum.

As the Powerhouse is *already* a fashion and design museum this is a pretty empty promise. Neither is it clear how a "Broadway-style lyric theatre" is in any way a fit replacement for a world-standard applied arts and sciences museum. What's the educational component? The plan makes it inevitable that the collection will be split up, if not partially sold off.

As for the proposed Parramatta site the government is now promising a huge planetarium as a suitably Disneyfied addition to the building. We've already established that the new museum will share the site with offices and retail. More alarmingly, Michaela Boland, in an ABC report, interviewed hydrologist, John Macintosh, who says that moving the Powerhouse to a recognised flood plain is a "crazy, crazy proposal" that would put collections, and even lives, at risk. (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-04-12/powerhouse-relocation-proposal-is-crazy/9647870>)

In its case for the defence, the government has enlisted the services of the *Daily Telegraph* to argue that those opposed to the move are inner-city elitists trying to deprive the western suburbs of their share of culture. Predictably, we've also had a contribution by David Borger of the Sydney Business Chamber's Western Sydney branch, a man impervious to facts, who has given his standard spiel about how this is "cultural justice" for the people of the western suburbs.

Nothing could be more spurious than these claims. The opponents of the move have never for a second argued that Parramatta doesn't need enhanced cultural facilities. In fact, they've argued for any number of models – all of them cheaper and more appropriate than the cumbersome Powerhouse proposal.

When Premier Gladys Berejiklian says: "This is about making sure arts is (sic) accessible to the whole community," one wonders if she understands there is a difference between the arts and the sciences. The proposal would potentially split the Powerhouse into a fashion museum for Ultimo and a science museum for Parramatta. It does *nothing* to address the city's lack of arts facilities, which was supposedly the motivating factor for the (dumb) idea of relocating a major museum.

This is not an act of cultural justice, it's a piece of cultural imbecility. It's vandalism disguised as largesse. Are we to believe that the new science museum will also be an arts museum? What sort of compromises would that entail?

When one looks at this entire saga there is only one thing that explains the government's apparently irrational, spendthrift, determination to destroy a major urban cultural attraction, against all advice and common sense. As we've come to expect from a regime that has allowed and encouraged rampant over-development in many parts of Sydney, it's the commercial potential of the Ultimo site that drives their secretive decision-making.

The people of Parramatta are not even in the picture. They will get a second-hand science museum built on a floodplain when they may have expected a major arts venue. Meanwhile in Ultimo a site currently devoted to a public institution will be carved up and sold off to private developers, who will cram in as many apartments and retail outlets as possible. Public good is being brazenly traded for private profit.

The citizens of NSW have risen up against the idea of spending \$2.5 billion demolishing and rebuilding two sports grounds. One hopes they will they will show the same determination in opposing another shady deal that will be a disaster for Ultimo and for Parramatta. This government believes it is accountable to no-one - an attitude that should be punished at the ballot box. The danger is the amount of damage that can be inflicted on the public interest before the next election.

Sorry for the rave but it feels increasingly important to speak out against the authoritarian tendencies at work in this state.

[.....]

John