

Does Sydney need a new theatre on the Powerhouse Museum site?

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The NSW government's intention to split the MAAS collection into sciences at Parramatta and fashion at Ultimo is an appalling decision, compounded by the announcement that a large part of the Ultimo heritage site will be handed over to developers. The current plan would see a substantial portion of Ultimo Powerhouse become a venue for musical theatre and the whole Harwood Building knocked down to make way for a block of flats.

Both the proposed uses of the Powerhouse building are at high risk of failure: a smaller museum with a narrow brief and select audience; and a venue for a 'boom and bust' theatre genre (witness the long history of Sydney theatres being sold to developers) at the whim of overseas producers. It is a strange lens indeed through which these uses, and yet another block of flats, are seen as of 'higher value' than a great museum located close to densely-populated suburbs and major transport hubs.

There are many ways the MAAS collection could be used to create a wonderful museum at Parramatta while continuing to offer a wide range of experiences at Ultimo Powerhouse. This solution for our rapidly growing city would not leave MAAS without a major venue for at least three years (as is proposed by the government) and thus not deny important educational opportunities to thousands of students and families or reduce the city's cultural offer to tourists.

There will of course be a secret business case to 'prove' the necessity for a theatre at Ultimo and to extol its economic benefits. But was any serious groundwork done before the announcement? Where will the shows come from? Where do potential audience members live? And are there too many competing theatres in eastern Sydney and too few in the west?

Heritage

The Ultimo Powerhouse building is heritage listed because of its significance as Sydney's first public power station, built to power Sydney's electric trams, and it is also significant because of the excellence of its adaptive reuse as an award-winning 'iconic world-class museum'. It is not just an anonymous building, a shell to be filled at the whim of politicians and lobbyists. The museum's existing theatres were built in the wing added in 1988 and so do not compromise the heritage interiors. A new, large theatre would have to be placed within the power station itself, and proper acoustic design would necessitate the hiding of important heritage features such as chimneys and cranes.

It has been asserted that the Harwood Building, the old Tram Shed that now holds offices, laboratories, workshops, and a library as well as thousands of objects, is ripe for development as it's not heritage listed. In fact, it is on both the Register of the National Estate and the National Trust Register in its own right. And, while the NSW Heritage Register does not list it as a separate building, its heritage status should be acknowledged as it has always been part of the curtilage of the Powerhouse: it was built at the same time as part of the same project, was owned by the same organisations (first the Railways and then MAAS), and the uses of the two buildings have always been interdependent. While Ultimo Post Office, adjacent to and owned by MAAS, is much less significant than the Harwood, it was placed on the NSW Heritage Register as a separate entity because it was not part of the curtilage of the power station.

Does eastern Sydney need a new theatre?

The public's attitude was 'softened up' before the announcement of the plan to build a theatre within a public building, via statements from vested interests to the effect that 'Sydney is missing out on shows'. However, there are serious counter-arguments, which are backed up with detail below:

- the 'eastern city' is very well served by theatres
- there is a long history of private owners closing theatres and selling the sites to developers
- the Theatre Royal has been closed for many months, probably paving the way for development.

Theatres in eastern Sydney

Here is a current list of theatres suitable for musicals and concerts, in order of seating capacity.

- ICC, Darling Harbour, 9000
- Hordern Pavilion, Moore Park, 4200
- SOH Concert Hall, 2679
- State, 2034
- Capitol, Campbell St, 2034
- Centennial Hall, Sydney Town Hall, 2000
- Lyric, Star City, Pyrmont, 2000
- Luna Park Big Top, Milsons Point, 2000
- Enmore Theatre, Enmore, 1710
- SOH Opera Theatre, 1507
- Metro, George St, 1350
- City Recital Hall, Angel Place, 1238
- Theatre Royal, King St, 1183
- Lower Town Hall, 1000
- Town Hall, Paddington, 1000
- Concourse, Chatswood, 1000
- Sir John Clancy, Kensington, 945
- Roslyn Packer, Woolloomooloo, 896
- Science Theatre, Kensington, 825

- York, Seymour Centre, 788
- Parade, Kensington, 709
- Everest, Seymour Centre, 605
- SOH Drama Theatre, 544
- SOH Studio Theatre, 544
- Verbrugghen Hall, Conservatorium, 528

Lost theatres by date of demise

Here is a list of developments on theatre sites over the past thirty years. Will the Theatre Royal, rebuilt in 1976 as a result of public concern over loss of another heritage venue, be the next to fall? Or can our politicians convince its overseas owner to reopen the theatre or sell it to an entrepreneur who can?

- Entertainment Centre, Darling Harbour (seated 13,250) demolished 2016 and replaced by smaller ICC
- Footbridge, Sydney University, converted to lecture theatre c2010
- Her Majesty's, Quay St – demolished 2001, replaced by block of flats
- Regent, George St, demolished 1990 despite heritage loss, high-rise development began 2006
- Mayfair, Castlereagh St, demolished 1984, replaced by shops and office block
- Tivoli, Castlereagh Street, closed 1966, replaced by office tower and shops 1980s

Theatres in western Sydney

Surely the Arts Minister could instead do more for theatre in western Sydney, beyond redeveloping the Riverside Theatre. Here is a list of theatres existing in, or planned for, the west, in order of seating capacity.

- Western Sydney Performing Arts Centre, Rooty Hill, 2000 – to open late 2019
- Riverside, Parramatta, 761
- Bankstown Sports, 635
- The Joan, Penrith, 580