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Opinion

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<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/parramatta-s-rich-history-is-worth-more-than-a-museum-20191217-p53ktb.html>

'New Powerhouse project needs a practical vision'

The release of a design for the new \$1.2 billion museum in the centre of Parramatta at last gives some shape to an idea that has been gestating for at least five years.

The design by French-Japanese firm Moreau Kusunoki is sleek and structurally interesting but it gives few clues about how the building will be used. It is a big box with lots of big halls but it could just as easily be a convention centre as a museum. That is an indication of one of the project's main problems. The design is impersonal because the government has failed to explain what the building is for.

With the \$350 million extension to the NSW Art Gallery it has always been clear that it was a museum for modern art. But the Parramatta project is a building in search of a purpose. Sometimes the government seems to want the building to be an updated version of the Powerhouse Museum (part of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences) in Ultimo, sometimes a space for travelling blockbuster exhibitions and sometimes a cultural centre for local shows.

Developing a clearer vision will be important for the building's success in the long term but it could also be a stumbling block before it even starts.

The state government has now also revealed that it needs to raise \$75 million from private donors to get the project off the ground. That is a big ask for any project in the western suburbs, since rich cultural philanthropists like to donate closer to where they live. It will be even harder without a clear project to sell.

The state government has muddied the waters from the beginning by linking the project to the plan to close and redevelop the Powerhouse Museum's current site in Ultimo. Sceptics believe the government is motivated more by the desire to sell off the valuable inner city land in Ultimo than by the desire to expand Sydney's cultural vision to the geographic centre of the city.

The plan seems to be that some of the Powerhouse's historic collection will move to the new site in Parramatta. But the historic turbines and locomotives might look out of place without the historic atmosphere of the old power station.

Anyway, if the government wants to turn this into a museum of advanced technology, a few old locomotives are not much of a drawback. The state government will have to promise a lot more money every year to pay for the computer-generated wizardry that kids expect these days.

There is no reason why this new building needs to have anything to do with the Powerhouse, which has struggled to attract visitors.

A parliamentary inquiry this year recommended using part of the building for an Indigenous museum, which could attract support from the Indigenous community in the western suburbs. That at least would be a clear and practical purpose.

If the plan is simply for a new cultural space, it is not clear why it needs to be so huge. It will have to compete with several similar venues such as the Casula Powerhouse and Carriageworks in Redfern and, indeed, the Riverside Theatre just across the Parramatta River. The Australian Museum is also opening a property in Rydalmere to showcase the world's largest Pacific collection.

The odd thing about the design is that it seems determined to ignore its location in Parramatta. While it looks across the river, the design involves bulldozing two heritage buildings. Unfortunately, Arts Minister Don Harwin said it was too expensive to keep them.

The idea of a new cultural attraction in Parramatta is welcome but a lot more work is needed before the huge price tag for the current project is justified.