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## Swords crossed as biggest cultural project since the Opera House takes shape

The Australian, Australia



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## Designs for the new Powerhouse Museum have come under fire

MATTHEW WESTWOOD

Designs released this week for the new Powerhouse Museum in Parramatta — featuring two tower buildings, a vast indoor-outdoor exhibition area and 60 research studios — have not dampened the anger in some quarters over the contentious development.

Paris-based architects Moreau Kusunoki and Australian company Genton won an international competition to design the new museum, which NSW's Berejiklian government says will have a net cost to the taxpayer of \$645m. A capital-raising campaign due to start next year is expected to raise \$75m from private supporters.

Artist impressions of the plans for the riverside site show two multistorey towers with a lattice-like exterior that resembles a Meccano construction, but which the Labor opposition immediately

branded a “monstrosity on stilts”. The elevated structure described as a “hyper-platform” is necessary because of the risk of flooding from the Parramatta River.

Earlier plans for the development to include retail and residential units appear to have been rejected in favour of 60 “creative residences” that will be available for students, researchers and scientists. The museum will have seven large exhibition rooms and smaller, intimate spaces in the interstitial areas, which the designers describe in terms of the Japanese concept “ma”, or negative space.

In all, the new Powerhouse will be almost 30,000sq m with 15,000sq m of exhibition space, compared with 11,500sq m of exhibition space at the Ultimo campus, says Powerhouse Museum chief executive Lisa Havilah.

“This is a bold and transformative investment from our government that resets and rethinks who has access to culture and where,”

she says.

But opponents of the scheme say it is now clear that the project

will involve the destruction of two heritage sites in historic Parramatta: the 19th-century mansion Willow Grove that was formerly a maternity hospital, and a row of buildings called St George's Terrace, constructed in 1881.

Parramatta Lord Mayor Bob Dwyer says the city welcomes the new development but there is strong community feeling about protecting local heritage.

“Our community feels very strongly about Parramatta's rich history, and council will continue to work with the state government to explore opportunities for the design to incorporate our important heritage assets Willow Grove and St George's Terrace,” he says.

Groups including the Powerhouse Museum Alliance vehemently oppose the planned removal of the Powerhouse Museum collection from inner-city Ultimo to furnish the new Parramatta institution.

A parliamentary inquiry earlier this year rejected the scheme to relocate the long-established Ultimo museum, saying it was based on poor planning, a flawed business case and insufficient consultation. It heard that the Powerhouse Museum was an acclaimed urban-renewal project, built to last a

century or more, and was being dismantled after just 30 years.

The proposed Parramatta building is billed as the state's biggest single cultural project since the Sydney Opera House was completed in 1973. It is larger in scale and double the cost of the \$344m Sydney Modern project, the new contemporary art wing for the Art Gallery of NSW that is now under construction.

Some estimates put the final cost of the Powerhouse at well north of \$1bn, once the cost associated with moving the collection from Ultimo is taken into account.

The assets include significant

items of industrial heritage — such as the 1785 Boulton and Watt steam engine and Locomotive 1243, the oldest surviving locomotive built in Australia — as well as collections of decorative arts, fashion, communications technology and musical instruments.

Exhibits at Ultimo gradually will be shut down from June next year, and the museum will close in June 2021, after which the Powerhouse will present a regional program.

The future of the Ultimo site is yet to be determined. Options include a smaller design and fashion museum, a lyric theatre, and residential and commercial developments.

The changes have provoked the anger of groups such as the Powerhouse Museum Alliance, which has campaigned persistently against dismantling the Ultimo institution.

Heritage expert and PMA member Kylie Winkworth says the downgrade is a breach of faith with the museum's stakeholders, including donors to its collections.

She says the Parramatta Powerhouse is the “wrong museum on the wrong site”, and that Parramatta instead could have a museum that celebrates the city's built heritage and history of indigenous, colonial and migrant populations.

“It would be cheaper to keep the Powerhouse Museum (in Ultimo) and build a new museum in Parramatta,” she says. “We have always supported a new museum for Parramatta but this government has broken every rule in the museum-planning rule book.”

**“This government has broken every rule in the museum-planning rule book”**

**KYLIE WINKWORTH**  
HERITAGE EXPERT



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