

The Sydney Morning Herald

New Powerhouse Museum report approves loss of heritage buildings

By Linda Morris

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Two historic buildings to be demolished to make way for the new Powerhouse Museum were "one of a kind" in the Parramatta CBD and their loss would have a significant impact on the community's connection with heritage, it has been found.

But a draft report prepared for Infrastructure NSW has recommended the development proceed as the public benefits of western Sydney's first major, world-class cultural institution outweighed heritage concerns and loss of the local community's sense of place.

The museum could bring two million tourists to Parramatta and generate 1100 full-time construction jobs.

[The refined design of the new Parramatta Powerhouse Museum. *Photo: Supplied*]

The loss of the 19th-century Italianate villa Willowgrove and a row of terraces known as St George's Terrace are listed among the negative social and economic impacts by the Environment Impact Statement into the \$1.1 billion relocation of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, known as the Powerhouse Museum.

The 2.5-hectare riverside site was also likely to have high social and spiritual significance to the local Aboriginal community and its flood-prone position warranted an early warning flooding system, including alarms and alerts to clear the public from the museum's undercroft during big downpours.

The draft EIS and associated reports briefly went online on Wednesday morning due to a technical error, before they were recalled.

A spokesperson for the Department of Planning said the EIS did not include important material including key plans, reports and consultation work and it would be exhibited in full once finalised.

In December an International Jury selected Moreau Kusunoki as the architects for the new museum, unveiling a structured concept design that controversially did not retain the two historic buildings.

The summary report of Ethos Urban confirms significant community attachment to Willow Grove, as well as St George's Terrace. In the Parramatta CBD, Willow Grove is "one of its kind" while St George's Terrace is the only remaining example of a terrace row in its architectural style.

The project is estimated to generate 1100 construction jobs, 2430 indirectly, and support 300 and 400 staff when opened.

The new institution would deliver world-class opportunities for education and research, alongside museum exhibition space, and ensure Parramatta's role as Sydney's second CBD, the summary report said.

"In addition, Powerhouse Parramatta, as a best-in-class facility, will help secure future exhibitions and events," the draft report said.

Investment in the establishment of Powerhouse Parramatta would also generate opportunities to participate in arts and culture and generate future exhibitions within western Sydney.

The museum and two main entrances will be set above the one in a 100-year flood level, with the building including an undercroft space and landscaped setback to store floodwaters during periodic inundation.

An early warning system has been recommended, where rainfall forecasts will be used to determine if the under-croft space should be opened and this would form part of a daily procedure prior to opening Powerhouse Parramatta.

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The demolition of Willowgrove and St Georges Terrace would be mitigated by the interpretation of heritage on the site and programs to connect people to multiple local histories pre and post-colonial contact. Heritage items could be salvaged and incorporated into the design.

Suzette Meade of the North Parramatta Action Group said: "It's highly suspicious the EIS was notified as on exhibition this morning and then pulled hours later – it's just more alarm bells ringing for the community on the disastrous project."

Labor's shadow Treasurer Walt Secord said there was no better time than in the wake of the COVID economic crisis to scrap the museum's move from Ultimo to Parramatta. "Five years and the shovel hasn't hit the ground and the only people to get work out of this is desk top consultants."