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Powerhouse push slammed as more 'pleasure palace' than museum

By [Linda Morris](#)

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On June 30 the curtain will come down on the Catalina flying bird, the largest suspended plane in any museum in the world, Australia's best collection of working steam engines and the train destination board that stood for 76 years at Central Station.

The heritage halls of the Powerhouse Museum are to shut, the museum's purpose-built galleries housing the Locomotive No 1 and the Boulton and Watt steam engine to close 12 months later.

[Former deputy director of the Powerhouse Museum Jennifer Sanders talks to supporters of the Powerhouse Museum gathered in front of the Ultimo museum to protest the closure on June 30. *CREDIT: KATE GERAGHTY*]

A new Powerhouse is to rise phoenix-like transplanted to the arable soils of the Parramatta riverfront by 2024.

To its opponents including former and current staff, heritage and museum experts and advocates, the new Powerhouse will not be a museum at all, more an entertainment pleasure palace sucking up increasing amounts of Treasury revenue and public goodwill.

To chief executive Lisa Havilah, it will be Sydney's first example of a 21st-century cultural institution drawing record numbers of visitors to the city's second CBD.

The difference is one of philosophy, she says: the past versus the future, traditional museum practices versus contemporary.

[Lisa Havilah, CEO of the Powerhouse Museum. *CREDIT: WOLTER PEETERS*]

This week thousands of documents were released by parliamentary order of Upper House MLC's David Shoebridge and Robert Borsak ahead of a fresh inquiry into the Powerhouse's \$1.17 billion relocation - the same select committee that urged the Powerhouse be kept in Ultimo and western Sydney be given its own institution.

Together the documents show that in mission and practice, the Parramatta Powerhouse will be much different from the institution it replaces.

Email chains within the design team and consultant reports track monumental changes to the project since State Cabinet approval in 2018.

Refinement continues even as the Environment Impact Statement this month controversially recommended the demolition of Parramatta's heritage sites Willow Grove and St George's Terrace.

Missing from the 17 boxes of documents is the 2020 business plans developed by the Berejiklian government justifying the redevelopment of Ultimo and the building of the new Powerhouse.

The architectural plans confirm the Powerhouse will open with no permanent collection display, no dedicated spaces for museum exhibitions and no on-site permanent storage for its vast collection.

The collections team will be based at the museum's Discovery Centre at Castle Hill which is to be expanded for the museum's 500,000 collection items and it is where exhibitions will be built.

As many as two million people are predicted to visit in its first year, according to the EIS, driven by longer opening hours and the changing program. This is about the same number expected to flock to the Art Gallery of NSW when Sydney Modern opens in 2023.

These bold visitation forecasts were informed by a market-depth analysis and modelling of the capacity for each of the exhibition and public spaces which have yet to be publicly released and tested but likely assumes free general-entry and premium-ticketed events and exhibitions.

[Artist's impression of the new Powerhouse museum in Parramatta.]

Inside the lattice framework of the Parramatta Powerhouse designed by architects Moreau Kusunoki Genton (MKG) there will be seven presentation spaces stacked over the east and west wings, along with a research lab, apartments for visiting researchers, a rooftop terrace and a student dormitory.

The primary use of the presentation spaces will be to stage exhibitions, Havilah says, but they have also been designed for flexible or "secondary" use and available for commercial events, according to documents seen by the *Herald*.

The largest presentation space, capable of housing the Powerhouse's Museum iconic Locomotive No 1, can switch to a live music hall and venue for civic and corporate events.

Design teams are working on the broad assumption of eight-month-long exhibitions, four-months of commercial programming and bump in-and-out, leading critics to question if the museum will be in service of its collection or other financial priorities.

Havilah says the building is being designed with exhibition runs of between six and 18 months and rapid turnovers along lines of a more modern museum experience. Dynamic programming and flexible spaces will allow more of the collection, much of which is currently not available to the public, to be rotated through, she says.

A ribbon of restaurants, shops and bars, and markets, conferences, corporate launches and festivals will drive commercial revenues, far exceeding the \$3 million brought in annually at Ultimo.

There is, however, unlikely to be any reduced call on NSW Treasury which supported Ultimo to the tune of \$29 million in 2018-19.

In fact, the documents make it clear that the design team has been on the hunt for savings and efficiencies - anything from the number of lifts and escalators to the \$1 million to be saved on power infrastructure.

Already compromises have been made around the public floor space of the presentation spaces. Shortlisted architects were asked to provide a minimum 15,000 square metres of presentation space - that now sits at 12,644 square metres, according to the EIS.

In February the design teams discussed the relaxation of climate-controls in the presentation spaces from museum standards to a proposed category of comfort AC [airconditioning], documents show. Exhibition spaces need to be controlled for temperature, humidity, dust and light with air, water vapour, dust, pollutants and pests contributing to the deterioration of museum objects.

Moist air encourages mould and the corrosion of metal. Light can cause irreversible damage to materials including photographs and fabrics. There are various grades of climate control, AA being the gold standard at which world museums will make loans.

Ninety per cent of the total exhibition space area at Powerhouse Parramatta will be "conditioned to museum standards", management says only.

The Australian Institute of Conservation of Cultural Materials warns against mixing uses across the museum front and back of house, saying it risks contaminating the museum's collection from food, pests and wastes.

The Institute's NSW president Alayne Alvis is concerned no one with long-time museum experience was present on the international design jury.

"The lack of anyone to speak for the needs of a museum in this process would indicate that this process is not committed to creating a world-class museum, but having a museum as one of many changing sources of entertainment on the site."

[Supporters of the Ultimo Powerhouse Museum at a protest on Thursday. *CREDIT:KATE GERAGHTY*]

Meanwhile, expert in collection management and assessment, Kylie Winkworth, an opponent of the move, says the Powerhouse's research output had crashed over the past 15 years. Winkworth has had 40 years' experience working with museums, collections and heritage sites, and co-authored a definitive guide to collection management.

"It's a completely porous building, open to the river, with multiple doors and access and no foyer. And no parking whatsoever, but still with the fantasy that they will have high-rotation multiple events, performances and commercial activities, plus support for 40 apartments and a school boarding house."

The Trust of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences has a legal mandate to protect and preserve its collections while sharing it with the public. Its chairman Professor Barney Glover, who is the vice-chancellor of Western Sydney University, is confident Havilah's vision will deliver a cultural institution in Parramatta that will sit at the forefront of museum design and function globally.

"The public will have access to more of the vast Powerhouse collection than ever before both in Parramatta and the significantly expanded Museum Discovery Centre at Castle Hill – this is an excellent arts and cultural outcome for Western Sydney but in fact for all of NSW," he says.

"The Trust has full confidence that the MKG design for Powerhouse Parramatta will ensure the safety and protection of the Powerhouse Collection."

[Bruce Lay with his rare posters by A.M Cassandre. He says if the Powerhouse goes, he will re-assign his museum gift.*CREDIT:JANIE BARRETT*]

Heritage researcher, Bruce Lay, is among those questioning if he should donate his rare and valuable posters, classics from the 1920s period by A.M Cassandre to the Powerhouse. "They belong in a national institution either in Sydney or Canberra; not buried because of irrelevance, in storage in Parramatta. If the Powerhouse goes, we will re-assign the gift."

Sydney has to wait until 2024 to see the physical results of the planning now underway for western Sydney's Powerhouse. Havilah says it will be worth the wait.

The brief to architects references some of the most iconic cultural buildings in the world including the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern, The Shed Arts Centre, New York, Shanghai's Powerstation of Art and the Grand Palais Paris. Each are renowned for interpreting arts and culture for new, often younger, audiences.

Each is at the forefront of new thinking around the management and display of collections, looking at ideas to bring the city into exhibition halls, even tossing out traditional chronological hangings. Havilah wants the Powerhouse to be a similar disruptor.

There are global precedents, too, for the establishment of publicly accessible satellite archives like that foreshadowed for Castle Hill. The Louvre, the Musée d'Orsay and London's Victoria and Albert Museum are looking at or building satellite storage solutions that may be partially open to the public.

A [promotional animation by MKG](#) hints at what is to come on the riverfront: scenes shift from fashion show to gallery, to lecture hall to children's playground and outdoor concert, and research laboratories, a public domain that is active day and night.

[An artist's impression of the new Parramatta Powerhouse museum being used as a concert venue.]

It silenced staff early this year. This was no stand-alone museum. There will be no compromise, Havilah says. "I have spent my career working in western Sydney arts and culture and I know first-hand the appetite in the community for greater access to arts and culture where people live," she says.

"We won't just see people return visit to the Powerhouse Parramatta once, we'll have people returning regularly as our changing exhibition program educates and inspires audiences of all ages."

The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences grew out of the blaze that levelled the Garden Palace exhibition hall in the Royal Botanic Gardens along with some of Australia's early industrial, manufacturing and agricultural riches.

The nation's loss inspired the establishment of the museum in 1879, dedicated to the collection of Australia's material heritage and stories of Australian culture, history and lifestyle.

The Lionel Glendenning-designed galleria, which opened in 1988 in the shell of the old tramways powerhouse in Ultimo, now sits in one of the densest precincts of technological enterprise in Australia, according to the Pyrmont Action Group which still wonders why the government is ready to abandon a purpose-built museum just 30-years-old.

Staff giving the last tours are asking if it has to happen: why not leave Ultimo open until there is something built-in Parramatta?

"Not one visitor has said they agree with the move," says one. "In fact, overwhelmingly it is the opposite. The museum has provided visitors with beautiful, memorable experiences for literally generations, and the next generation will not have this family experience."

There have been tears from visitors and staff, they say: "All share a common mourning. The cold and unnecessary - and preventable - death of a perfectly healthy family member."