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Powerhouse collection to be 'scattered' across NSW, plans reveal

By [Linda Morris](#) and [Carrie Fellner](#)

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Management of the Powerhouse Museum is proposing to lend steam trains, vintage race cars, planes and trams to regional museums across the state when its Ultimo site closes.

Documents released by order of the NSW upper house show negotiations have been underway since last year to find temporary homes for some of the museum's very large objects as Sydney awaits the opening of the new Parramatta Powerhouse.

[The Powerhouse Museum's Locomotive No. 1. *CREDIT: DALLAS KILPONEN*]

Locomotive No.1 could be moved to the NSW Rail Museum, in Thirlmere, from July 2021, according to an email sent last September by Julie Banks, the museum's director of Curatorial, Collections and Exhibitions.

The Sydney Tramway Museum at Loftus could take Sydney's only known surviving horse-drawn trams and a [Toastrack O-class tram](#), the most famous of all Sydney's electric trams.

The Powerhouse Museum is to close its heritage halls to general public entry on Tuesday with the rest of the museum to follow in July 2021.

On the weekend the museum's chief executive officer, Lisa Havilah, said booked heritage tours would continue until the end of 2020 due to popular demand.

Ms Havilah said the Powerhouse regional program was about giving communities access to its incredible collection during what was an exciting phase for the institution. A final plan is expected to be announced by the end of the year.

But the dispersal of the collection has prompted concern around standards for storage, display and management of these objects in regional museums and the risk of damage in transit.

Among the critics of the new Powerhouse was former NSW Premier Bob Carr, who labelled the state government plans for the museum "shockingly flawed".

"I can't believe that there would be any other city in the world where a government would be dissolving a major museum collection built up and nurtured by its people over generations, to scatter and disperse its contents for all time," he said.

The museum's former deputy director of collections, Jennifer Sanders, said the museum's artefacts spoke of global industrial heritage.

"These stories will be ripped apart by dispersing the museum's Very Large Objects, imposing artefacts of our industrial heritage which embody people's inventiveness, innovation, and creativity," she said.

"This is cultural and intellectual vandalism – connections and intersections – ideas and practical outcomes - all now visible in cogent, Powerhouse Museum exhibitions will be disappeared by this willy nilly act of breaking up and scattering trains, planes, stationary steam engines, space hardware, trams and automobiles across NSW."

Ms Sanders feared many regional museums did not have the museum-standard environmental conditions required to properly care for and manage collections.

It was unthinkable too, she said, that the 1785 Boulton & Watt rotative steam engine would be stranded alone, not steam-powered, in a circulation corridor in the new Parramatta Powerhouse.

Premier Gladys Berejiklian, in her capacity as NSW Arts Minister, and Ms Havilah did not respond to questions about the adequacy of the Parramatta facility on Sunday. They declined to address suggestions the plans appear to cater to entertainment, cafes and events over exhibitions.

They also remained silent over concerns regarding the construction of the building on a flood plain and wear and tear to the collection arising from its storage off site.

Labor's Walt Secord said it was not too late for the government to abandon its plans to shift the museum to Parramatta.

He was deeply concerned that the collection would be "smashed up into little pieces and flung around the state with bits going to Thirlmere, Temora, Albury, Armidale, Broken Hill, Orange, Grafton, Wagga, and Wollongong".

With objects regularly loaned to regional museums and galleries, Ms Havilah said: "I can't understand how anybody would criticise sharing our collection with our regional museums and galleries.

"The safety of the objects is always our top priority and any suggestion the program would disrupt the collection is an insult to the professionalism of our amazing staff. I won't stand for that."

Transport Heritage NSW confirmed it had been in early discussions with the Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences, better known as the Powerhouse Museum, about the temporary relocation of Locomotive No.1 to its Thirlmere museum for public display.

Those discussions were continuing but no decision has been made. As custodians of the NSW Government's broader transport heritage collection, executive officer Andrew Moritz said the museum currently cared for and had on loan and public display, a number of MAAS collection items including the ornate Governor-General's carriage and two operational steam locomotives.

Locomotive No.1, tender and carriages have been on constant display at the Powerhouse Museum for more than 31 years.

An inspection of the locomotive last August showed some evidence of wear and corrosion, one document showed. It was recommended then that environmental monitoring be carried out at the Powerhouse and in any new display or storage location.

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