

Size does Matter: Shrinking the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta

The size of the Powerhouse Precinct building at Parramatta has been continually misrepresented in public statements and media releases as larger than the real Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo. It is not. **The Powerhouse Museum’s exhibition space is being downsized at Parramatta by 75%.**

Comparison of Museum Site, Building and Exhibition Spaces

Type of Space	Powerhouse Museum	Parramatta Facility
Total Site Area	24,378sqm ¹	19,896sqm ²
Total Building Size	42,594sqm ³ actual	24,830sqm ⁴ specified
Total Museum Standard Climate Controlled Exhibition Space	21,800 ⁵ actual	5,200sqm ⁶ specified

The spatial analysis in the EIS architectural plans shows the total Presentation Space is just 12,644sqm, see below.⁷ There will be just **5,094sqm** of ‘presentation space’ that meets international museum standard environmental conditions.

Location & Level	Space	Size sqm	Function	Climate control
Ground Floor East	P 1	2,759	Multi-purpose, for concerts, major events and installations, also designated for large objects but at high risk of flooding. Operable wall to open to the river. No access to loading dock!	A
Level 1 West	P 3	1,486	Talks and performance, events, exhibitions, flexible seating bank for 800	AA
Level 2 East	P 2	2,122	Large objects, exhibitions, performance, events, adjacent terrace open to the river. Only a hoist for large objects.	A
Level 2 West	P 5	1,486	Exhibitions, performance, events	AA
Level 3 East	P 4	2,122	Exhibitions, performance, events	AA
Level 3 West	P 6	1,486	Immersive screen program, performance, events, flexible seating bank for 800	A
Level 4 West	P 7	1,182	Commercial hire, events, conferences, functions, adjacent to a commercial kitchen, a transparent box open to a terrace overlooking the river	A
Total AA climate controlled space		5,094		
Total Presentation space A + AA		12,643		

The Powerhouse Precinct building at Parramatta will have **just 25% of the PHM’s international museum standard climate controlled exhibition space.**

There are no museum-specific exhibition spaces in the development. Every ‘presentation space’ is required to do double duty for performances, events, functions, and commercial hire.⁸

The Powerhouse Precinct in Parramatta is not the science museum concept endorsed by cabinet in April 2018. It is not a museum. It is not about science. It is not for families.⁹ It is designed to support the night time economy of Parramatta, a 24 x 7 entertainment zone for large events. That is why it is located on a flood prone riverbank, a site that is entirely unsuitable for a museum.

The government is liquidating the assets of the Powerhouse Museum to build Carriageworks West, a multi-purpose, commercially-focussed arts and entertainment complex. The winning building design is determinedly not a museum. It is hopelessly impractical and cannot work as designed, even as an entertainment centre.

The two buildings, over three and seven levels, are expected to host 2 million visitors a year, and have multiple events for up to 10,000 people at a time, 10 cafes and bars, retail and markets, 40 apartments, a school dormitory, the bump in bump out for performances and commercial activities, museum objects on high rotation and international travelling exhibitions, all this with **only one loading dock and not one single parking space**. At all. This is completely impractical and ludicrous.

Collection needs have come last in the design specifications. There are no designated spaces for museum exhibitions. The only curating in the building will be food programs.¹⁰ There is no designated space for collection management. There is no collection storage space. There is no conservation lab. Collection management and exhibition installation is supposed to share spaces that are also designated for catering, dressing rooms, roadies and technical preparation.¹¹ This is untenable for any serious museum. The back of house is grossly inadequate and in the wrong spaces. Corridors and lift vestibules are counted as back of house and staff offices.

The building cannot accommodate the PHM's large objects. They have not even worked out how large objects can be moved into the building. The ground floor P1 space in the eastern building is exposed to a 1:100 year flood – a high probability – and is not climate controlled to museum standards. The P2 space above it is also designated for large objects and will not have international museum standard climate controls. It is not known how a locomotive might be hoisted into this space. Both spaces open to the river, the P2 space having an adjacent terrace.

Of the AA museum standard spaces, P3 above the ground floor in the west building will mainly be used for talks and performance, not exhibitions. That leaves just P4 and P5 as potential exhibition spaces, also available for commercial hire and performances. Of the remaining presentation spaces P7 is a commercial conference and function space with a kitchen on level 4, not suitable for museum exhibitions; the P6 space is for immersive digital experiences, and the ground floor flood space P1 exposed to flood and open to the river. It is unsuitable for museum objects and exhibitions.

The eastern building has no escalators, only two regular lifts and stairs, contrary to the Stage 2 Design Brief requirements. This will compromise visitor movement to the upper floors and spaces P2 and P4, as well as the education facilities. It will also create evacuation risks. Incredibly, the large P1 space for major events and concerts is not accessible from the loading dock.

There is only one loading dock to support a building holding multiple events for up to 10,000 people. This is also contrary to the Stage 2 Design Brief and accepted museum standards.¹² One loading dock is expected to serve all the commercial, catering and function needs across two buildings, the retail hall, 10 cafes and bars, service needs for 40 apartments and a school dormitory, as well as collection objects on high rotation and international exhibitions, not to mention food waste and laundry.

Most seriously, the Parramatta site is in a high risk flood zone. The development poses grave and insoluble risks to visitor safety. It is not consistent with relevant flood policies and plans, or with Parramatta Council's DCP and LEP. In pushing on with this development the NSW Government is deliberately putting visitors and the PHM's collection at needless risk of injury and damage.¹³

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¹ Crone Architects for Johnstaff, Ultimo Presence Project 2 Options, Sept 2017, p. 3

[Ultimo Presence Project 2 Project Options](#)

² Johnstaff, New Western Sydney Museum, Final Business Case, v 4, 8 January 2018, p.32. Or 19,438sqm in the EIS, Appendix B Architectural Plans and Design Report, 1 May 2020, p.42

³ Steensen Varming, The Ultimo Presence Project 4 Site Infrastructure assessment 2; attachment F; 8 August 2017, p.13 <https://powerhousemuseumalliancedotcom.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/ultimo-presence-project-4-site-infrastructure-assessment-2.pdf>

⁴ Stage 2 Design Brief, p.126, these are gross floor areas and include the 40 apartments, school dormitory and function spaces. <https://maas.museum/new-powerhouse/competition-process/>

⁵ *The Powerhouse Museum, Australia's largest and most popular museum, is located in Darling Harbour, Sydney. Its unique and diverse collection of 385,000 objects spans history, science, technology, design, industry, decorative arts, music, transport and space exploration. The Museum has an ever-changing program of exhibitions covering approximately 20,000 square metres (equivalent to three international competition soccer fields). It presents 22 permanent exhibitions and several temporary exhibitions, complemented by more than 250 interactives.* <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/100602/20110120-1007/www.collectionsaustralia.net/org/171/about/index.html> Later the museum converted the Wran building as a temporary exhibition space at 1,800sqm, although part of this space was subdivided a few years ago for UTS to use for lectured because the museum is broke. This does not count other internal conversions of PHM space such as the mezzanine exhibition space at the back of the transport hall.

⁶ Stage 2 Design Brief p.130, 236-239

⁷ EIS, Appendix B Architectural Plans and Design Report, 1 May 2020, GFA Schedule Summary last page <https://www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/major-projects/project/26576?fbclid=IwAR0bB-du2l8qvLLOoTEoS-6fBmRsQNumHAwb5O2hQsqaoxFSoeAtba7vx1I>

⁸ Stage 2 Design Brief p.132-133 and 236-237 *The Powerhouse Precinct will not operate as per the existing Powerhouse Museum with fixed exhibitions and a touring gallery, with the focus on providing a series of robust functional spaces...* p.236.

⁹ The Stage 2 Design Brief has just two references to families, and one reference to children. There are 155 references to events and performances, only 40 mentions of exhibitions.

¹⁰ There are just five references to the term 'curated' in the Stage 2 Design Brief, all referring to food programs and public art. *The Powerhouse will actively generate income through establishing an integrated commercial program that includes multiple food and beverage retail offerings, a curated annual food events program, major events program, product development and commercial programs that are delivered across the Precinct.* p.28

¹¹ *Provide a flexible space adjacent to each Presentation Space that could be used for catering, dressing room, technical preparation space or Collection management space.* Stage 2 Design Brief p.135. In the EIS architectural plans this appears to be the landing space outside the goods lift.

¹² Stage 2 Design Brief, *Separate loading docks for collections/exhibits and general shipments are required to maintain Collection security, legislative compliance and the integrity of integrated pest management. In particular, food stuff and waste disposal should be handled via a separate loading dock.* p.268 Not delivered in the EIS plans.

¹³ See Winkworth submission 137a; and Dr John Macintosh, submission 95

<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/listofcommittees/Pages/committee-details.aspx?pk=264#tab-submissions>. Also

<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/submissions/59449/0174%20Dr%20John%20Macintosh.pdf>