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Powerhouse backflip as Ultimo site saved by Berejiklian government

By [Alexandra Smith](#)

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The Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo has been thrown an extraordinary 11th-hour lifeline and will not close but instead operate across two sites, including one in western Sydney. Five years after the move was first announced by her predecessor, Gladys Berejiklian's government will abandon plans to sell the Ultimo property and will now use the Parramatta site as a second Powerhouse location.

[The controversial site in Ultimo that was to have been sold. *CREDIT:KATE GERAGHTY*]

Ms Berejiklian and Treasurer Dominic Perrottet said the about-face would ensure Sydney had two world-class museums in a boost for the arts, tourism and employment.

Pressure on the government to rethink its controversial decision to close the inner-city site has been increasing in recent weeks as it emerged the Ultimo collection could be dispersed across the state.

The new Powerhouse is scheduled to open in late 2024 on the banks of the Parramatta River while the Ultimo site closed its heritage halls to general public entry on July 1. The rest of the museum was due to close in July 2021.

The government had planned to sell the site at Ultimo for as much as \$195 million, with the proceeds to go to the cost of building the new museum at Parramatta.



Play video

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New Powerhouse Museum design unveiled

[A state government media release of the proposed design of the new Powerhouse Museum planned for Parramatta.]

But the government will now explore if some of the funds earmarked for relocation costs can be used on renovating the Ultimo site.

Ms Berejiklian said the decision meant the Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences would soon boast four centres, including the Powerhouse at Parramatta and Ultimo. It also has the Sydney Observatory and the Museums Discovery Centre at Castle Hill.

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"Sydney is a global city of more than 5 million people and this will allow us to provide an outstanding visitor experience in the areas of technology, science, engineering and design at two major locations," Ms Berejiklian said. "It will mean far more people have access to many more of the amazing exhibits held by the Powerhouse and importantly, help us create vibrant centres to inspire learning in the fields of sciences and applied arts for the next generation."

Mr Perrottet said the museum at Ultimo would complement the new "future-focused Parramatta facility" and provide a jobs boost to the arts community, which has been hard hit by COVID-19. "We are focused on growing our economy and building our state, with the western Sydney Aerotropolis, Parramatta light rail, Metro West train line and building a new world-class museum at Parramatta all part of that," Mr Perrottet said. "This is about recognising the passion and hard work that has created the Powerhouse and ensuring the vision for a bigger brighter future is realised."

[NSW Treasurer Dominic Perrottet and Minister for the Arts Don Harwin announcing that the Ultimo Powerhouse Museum will continue. *CREDIT:JACKY GHOSSEIN*]

The government says keeping the Powerhouse at Ultimo would ensure "several hundred" staff remained employed at the site while the new museum at Parramatta would create more than 1100 construction jobs, up to 2400 indirect jobs, and hundreds more once opened. As the looming closure approached, it emerged museum management was proposing to lend steam trains, vintage race cars, planes and trams to regional museums when Ultimo closed.

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Documents released to NSW upper house showed negotiations have been under way 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 site.

The government's \$1.17 billion plan to demolish two heritage buildings for the Parramatta museum also hit a setback, with unions threatening to block demolition work that damages the buildings. The Parramatta environment impact statement supported the demolition of the 19th-century Italianate villa Willow Grove, formerly a maternity hospital, and a row of terraces known as St George's Terrace.

But the building and construction union, CFMEU NSW, said green bans meant no work could be done to destroy the sites.