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(Sydney Morning Herald)

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# Powerhouse Ultimo wing tipped for fashion, design precinct

By [Linda Morris](#) and [Caitlin Fitzsimmons](#)

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The Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo is likely to re-emerge as a museum of fashion and design.

The Berejiklian government has been looking to split the Powerhouse collection and its disciplines between Ultimo and Parramatta as part of a business case for a creative precinct at the museum's inner-city location.

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

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian and Treasurer Dominic Perrottet announced yesterday that the museum at Ultimo would be spared from sale for commercial and residential towers. Mr Perrottet said the decision was an infrastructure investment in "museums, not just motorways".

The government remains committed to building a \$645 million museum in Parramatta, as well as retaining the Ultimo venue. It is forgoing the \$195 million it expected to reap from the sale of the Ultimo site, bringing the total cost to the budget to \$840 million.

Former NSW premier Mike Baird announced the original Powerhouse relocation plan as part of the Coalition's 2015 re-election campaign. The government's stunning change of heart yesterday was welcomed by opponents of the \$1.17 billion project who had argued the museum's closure at Ultimo amounted to cultural vandalism and economic waste.

The Powerhouse's chief executive, Lisa Havilah, said the announcement gave the museum the opportunity to continue its legacy at Ultimo while building towards its new home of science and technology.

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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.

"It is a wonderful outcome for our institution," Ms Havilah said.

A briefing document obtained by *The Sun-Herald* shows planning under way for the Powerhouse Fashion and Design Museum within a fashion and design precinct. Returned to their original industrial aesthetic, the renovated heritage halls of the Boiler House, Turbine Hall and Engine House would be used for ticketed and free contemporary exhibitions and public events.

Next door, the Harwood Building was to be used as Fashion and Design Creative Industries Hub with offices, studios, workshops, fashion and design markets.

The document predates the government announcement to keep the Powerhouse Museum open at Ultimo. Its idea to isolate the museums into centres of excellence cuts across the idea of a multi-disciplinary collection. It is understood that the document could be the blueprint for a revamped Powerhouse at Ultimo.

"Fashion is linked to transport, materials technology, manufacturing and engineering," said one former staffer. "Health and medicine links to arms and armour, decorative arts, and computer technology. Social history is inherent in every object. The Powerhouse Museum is one museum."

The government had been resolute that the Ultimo site would close to fund the Parramatta museum for five years, but Mr Perrottet said it had reassessed its priorities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic slowdown. "There's no time for pre-pandemic thinking," he said. "We're putting the economy before the budget. This is the right decision not just for the economy, but it's the right decision as we build our city and state for the future."

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A softening in commercial real estate prices is understood to have partially triggered the rethink.

Newly reinstated Arts Minister Don Harwin, who on Friday was cleared of wrongdoing during lockdown, congratulated the "passionate" campaigners and museum staff. "We are delighted about the fact that this museum is going to get a whole new lease of life, this museum here at Ultimo and the museum at Parramatta," he said. "This is a great city already for its museums but we really are going to become the museum capital of the Asia-Pacific." Mr Harwin said 98 per cent of the Powerhouse collections were in storage so there would be easily enough to fill two museums.

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An upper house inquiry into the disputed project would not be abandoned despite the welcome announcement, Greens MP David Shoebridge said. "It's a clear victory for the Powerhouse but there are many unanswered questions," he said. "This is why the ongoing upper house inquiry continued to be essential."

NSW Opposition Leader Jodi McKay called the decision a "craven political fix", based on the Premier's support for Mr Harwin. "The Powerhouse Museum has been a farce for the last six years; we've had \$46 million spent on consultants and not one job created," Ms McKay said.

Museum consultant and opponent of the relocation Kylie Winkworth welcomed the change of heart but said the energies of campaigners to save the Powerhouse at Ultimo would be redirected if the museum's very large objects were moved and proper funding was not given for the museum's renewal.

It's not known if the emblematic objects of the steam age, including Locomotive No.1 will be kept at Powerhouse Ultimo.