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By **Linda Morris**
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Berejiklian's Powerhouse backflip a crowd-pleaser for east and west

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The Berejiklian government's stunning change of heart to keep the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo is a crowd-pleaser. The museum at Ultimo lives another day to re-emerge as a centre for fashion and design, and so do its curators and conservators.

[A crowd gathers outside the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo, Sydney, last week, to protest at the NSW government's plan to relocate the museum to Parramatta. *CREDIT: JANIE BARRETT*]

Western Sydney gets its cultural trophy as the museum's new headquarters and the museum's chief executive Lisa Havilah is free to put her own signature on a modern museum a plus multi arts and culture venue.

The pragmatic appeal of a museum working out of multiple locations and serving different audiences, a model long championed by Professor Barney Glover and his board, has global precedent. Tate Modern runs satellite museums on the Thames and in Cornwall, the Guggenheim also does in Bilbao and Venice, and will soon have one in Abu Dhabi.

Sydney's Powerhouse will comprise its existing building at Ultimo, the Parramatta riverside, Museum Discovery Centre at Castle Hill and the Sydney Observatory.

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

In sparing itself political pain, the government has confirmed its willingness to bear the economic costs of keeping Ultimo. Back-of-envelope calculations suggest the decision could add more than \$400 million to the cost of the overall project to taxpayers. With the budget already in deficit by several billion courtesy of an

unforeseen global pandemic, Treasurer Dominic Perrottet clearly figures that's the least of his worries.

Treasury's original hopes of achieving \$195 million from the sale of the Ultimo site during a protracted recession were doubtful in any event.

The approved 2018 business case was predicated on the sale of the Harris Street site in a robust real estate market that is now turning south.

Treasury has agreed to contribute the \$195 million it might have banked in more optimistic times towards the cost of the Parramatta museum. Taxpayers' net contribution to the development will now be in the order of \$840 million, with the museum to raise a further \$75 million in private funding.

That points to a project cost at Parramatta not that much short of \$1 billion. The ongoing costs of operating the Ultimo site are forecast to be about \$25 million per annum. The combined operating costs for Ultimo and Parramatta will depend on how the museums are used and the synergies from operating two sites.

Over a decade, those cumulative recurrent costs will not be inconsiderable.

Against that, there will be identified savings of \$45 million, perhaps far more, if the emblematic objects of the steam age are kept where they are.

The Powerhouse at Ultimo, too, is lacking more than a good lick of paint. On death row, its airconditioning system, critical to climate control, broke down numerous times. Exhibitions have not been renewed, prompting visitors to comment that it looks half empty, and some its partnership programs have fallen away.

Central to the government's arguments for relocation was that the Ultimo building was at the end of its useful life. It will need more than \$50 million to bring it up to standard.

Crucially, the decision potentially buys the government easier relations with the upper house crossbench. The Christian Democrats supported the relocation but the Greens, One Nation's Mark Latham and the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party were opposed.

None more so than the Shooters' Robert Borsak who stalked the case for relocation with all the patience and cunning of a big game hunter.

It was the upper house, led by Borsak and Greens MP David Shoebridge and backed by Labor, that ordered the release of sensitive documents revealing plans to

disperse the collection, and the blow-out in the construction timetable for the Parramatta Powerhouse.

The government's bill to freeze public sector wages ran aground on the rocky reef that was partly the disputed relocation plan.

The revived upper house inquiry into the Powerhouse project begins hearings on July 29, ready to tease out any devil in the detail.

Havilah needs to balance the demand for culture at Parramatta without turning that museum into an amusement park, and maintain Ultimo as a vibrant museum destination unto itself.

There are still worries about the flood design of the Parramatta Powerhouse and the fate of the two heritage buildings earmarked for demolition on the Parramatta riverside.

A green ban could potentially drive up the cost of the museum if major construction companies decline to tender to sidestep a row with union workers. All await the reappointed Minister for Arts Don Harwin - as if he had never left.