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7 July, 2020 (in print)
Sydney Morning Herald

EDITORIAL

Saving Powerhouse is welcome but big questions remain



[The Herald's View](#)

July 6, 2020 — 5.04pm

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian deserves credit for keeping open the Ultimo branch of the Powerhouse, but now that the decision has been made, many questions about the future of the city's museums remain.

Instead of closing the museum and transferring it to a new facility in Parramatta, Ms Berejiklian, her Treasurer Dom Perrottet and newly returned Arts Minister Don Harwin announced on Saturday the Ultimo site would remain open and share its extensive collection between both sites.

It certainly took guts for Ms Berejiklian to shelve the plan on which her government has already spent five years and \$46 million in consultants' fees. Some say the decline in the property market in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic was the main reason for the change of heart because it would have been harder to sell the Ultimo site to developers to pay for the new building.

But it's more likely that Ms Berejiklian has yielded to mounting popular opinion across the political spectrum against closing the much-loved complex, which includes the city's former powerhouse and tram sheds and was converted to a museum as a Bicentennial project in 1988.

That campaign picked up steam in recent weeks as the closure date loomed and problems inherent in the project became more obvious.

As a result of a call for papers by the ALP and the crossbenchers in the upper house of NSW Parliament, the public has learnt how much damage closing the

Powerhouse would have caused to Sydney's cultural landscape. The plan contemplated dispersing the unique science and technology collection – including steam trains, vintage race cars, planes and trams – to various specialist regional museums.

It emerged that the new Parramatta site might not be able to accommodate about 15 of the largest and best exhibits. Since the new museum will take at least four years to build, Sydney would have been left without a science museum until 2024.

Last week, building unions placed a green ban on the Parramatta site because the design involves demolishing the heritage-listed Willow Grove and a row of houses at St Georges Terrace. The noise around the project was a continuing distraction for the government. Yet while the *Herald* fully supports the decision to change course, it is clear the Berejiklian government still has work to do to explain where it is heading.

It is not clear how the collection will be spread between two competing museums. For example, there is a proposal to use the Ultimo site for the fashion and design exhibits, but that could clash with keeping the massive trams and trains there.

On the other hand, if Parramatta is not given its share of the best exhibits and a clear identity, it will defeat the whole point of this exercise, which is to give Western Sydney a premier cultural facility.

The government must also explain how it plans to find the cash to pay for two first-class museums instead of one, especially since it won't have the funds from selling Ultimo. Luckily it has saved some money by stopping the unnecessary reconstruction of ANZ Stadium in Homebush. Some of that money could be deployed to the city's cultural facilities.

The government might also have to reconsider the design for Parramatta in light of the changed circumstances. It could revisit the decision to demolish Willow Grove and St Georges Terrace.

The government is certainly doing the right thing by building a major cultural institution for the millions of people in the city's west. But it should use the breathing space it has gained by retaining Ultimo to develop a much more clearly focused strategy.