

# This Powerhouse 'backflip' is spin with double pike

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Has it really been "saved"? The Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo. Photo: James Alcock

Saturday July 4 was Independence Day and, while America's jettisoning of George III may not seem a cause for celebration just now, Sydney found another reason to get giddy. For July 4 was also the day of the famous Powerhouse "backflip". But was it actually a backflip? Or was it a pseudosomersault-with-designersmokescreen?

Everyone was over the moon. The word "backflip" leapt from every banner and tumbled from every lip. Activist groups welcomed this

huge victory after five years of strenuous lobbying. "How the Powerhouse was saved," crowed one blog. "A victory for cultural life," said another outlet. Major outlets including the ABC carried the backflip headline.

"Up and over she goes!" chortled Peter FitzSimons in *The Sun-Herald*. "For it was indeed an enormous backflip, in the pike position ..." *The Daily Mail Australia* screamed "Gladys Berejiklian in huge backflip as NSW Premier saves the original Powerhouse Museum after years of mounting controversy."

Strong on hype, short on info.

"The only thing we can say for certain," wrote FitzSimons, "is that the Premier has at least shown she will listen to reason." Weeks later this spirit of trusting triumphalism persisted, even among those for whom scepticism is essential PPE. Greens MP Jamie Parker put out a flyer: "Powerhouse Museum win: together we saved it."

But was this whole thing simply an exercise in misdirection? At 4pm on Friday July 3, hours before the "backflip", Don Harwin was re-sworn in as Arts Minister (his fine for going AWOL during lockdown having been quashed by the public prosecutor). Next day, flanking Treasurer Dominic Perrottet at the Powerhouse media conference, Harwin declared himself "delighted". But was it the Powerhouse's good fortune that quickened the minister's pulse? Or his own? After all, his salary had doubled overnight (from \$170,000 to \$345,000) while, inside all the smoke, the Powerhouse's future had scarcely changed.

The Premier's July 4 media release contained just one pertinent fact. "Sydney's Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo ... will remain open." That was it, the backflip. By the next day, it was understood that "open" meant a "fashion and design museum" on the site. But that had always been on the table – a fashion-museum-with-lyrictheatre bundle had been discussed for the Ultimo site since 2016 and officially costed in 2018 (at \$388 million) as the government's preferred option. So what had changed, if anything? Curious, I called the minister's office. The conversation, on July 10, went something like this: So I'm just wondering what, exactly, has changed for the Powerhouse between July 3 and now? Well, well, hmm, so, the government is undertaking a business case study to consider retention of the Ultimo site. Study? To consider? That doesn't sound like a decision, much less a backflip. The building will be refurbished. All of it? Hmmm. With the steam engines? I think so. We're keeping the VLOs. VLOs? Very large objects. So, will they be working? With steam? Hmmm, I think so. And we're not selling off the site for \$195 million. Which part of the site was that going to be? I don't know. Isn't there a drawing? It's a very precise figure, \$195 million. No, I don't think so. I'll check.

So how much of the building will be retained and refurbished? I'll have to ask the museum and get back to you. And Parramatta? Will the museum be built exactly as in the EIS? Yes, it's unchanged. With all of the heritage destruction implied? Yes, unfortunately. Poor old Willow Grove. And the flood plain issues .. . Yee-e-e es.

There were follow-up emails, naturally, offering fatuous out-takes from media releases dense with phrases like "world class" and win-win. But no facts then and no facts now. Yet – say staff – packing up the Powerhouse's priceless collection from the Harwood building continues apace. If it's not freeing the site for sale, what is it for? The minister's office fails to respond.

Fast-forward three weeks to July 27, first hearing day for the new parliamentary inquiry into the affair. (The previous one, you may recall, in February 2019, dismissed the government business case for the move as a political document, decried the failure to consider refurbishing the existing Powerhouse and recommended ditching the entire project forthwith.)

This time the minister appeared first, superlatives locked and loaded. "We are absolutely committed," he declared, "to establishing an iconic, vibrant, interactive, world-class cultural institution." But information was less abundant; just the repeated declaration of the government's decision to forego the \$195 million, as though not selling public land for development were some kind of big public favour.

That "extra" \$195 million takes the cost of the Parramatta building from \$645 million to \$840 million. It's a lot, for a building that really only has half a dozen significant spaces, just one of which – points out former assistant government architect Andrew Andersons – would accommodate the entire City Recital Hall with room to spare. Andersons notes that, with the Very Large Objects remaining in Ultimo, these vast spaces (up to an astonishing 25 metres high) could shrink by a third. This, he estimates, would save some \$200 million, thereby making refurbishment of the Ultimo museum (disgracefully neglected for years) effectively cost-neutral.

It would also obviate all the blather. We'd have two world class museums, one new, one old. No backflip, no somersault, no smoke.