

<https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/deathtrap-warning-prompts-redesign-of-parramatta-powerhouse-20200821-p55o4o.html>

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Concerns were raised over possible flooding, as happened in February.

'Death trap' warning prompts redesign

PARRAMATTA POWERHOUSE

The Parramatta Powerhouse is undergoing a significant redesign to remove a publicly accessible undercroft deemed a death trap during downpours and floods. The

undercroft lifts the museum and its collection above the 1-in-100-year flood level, collecting rising floodwaters. In dry weather, it was to have been open to the public with sports courts and art displays suggested for the space.

The redesign is to be detailed in the government's formal response, which will argue for the development despite most of the 1300-plus public submissions opposing the demolition of two historic buildings.

Parramatta Council first sounded the alarm to the risk with flood management engineers while also warning that visitors risked drowning while sheltering or being evacuated from the museum during flash floods.

Children, the elderly and visitors with mobility challenges were in particular danger of being knocked off their feet while being evacuated from rising flood levels, a parliamentary hearing was told.

Without a redesign, Maurice Blackburn lawyers said government authorities would risk legal action if visitors suffered injury or death and the government had not heeded warnings of local authorities and field experts.

Any prior knowledge of potential risk would be an important consideration in deciding to mount any legal claim.

“In cases where people are injured in public places, prior warnings of a safety risk can be used to show a breach in the duty of care,” said Dimi Ioannou, the firm’s principal practising lawyer in public liability.

“Any expert advice or recommendations about the potential for risk to public safety should be taken very seriously.”

The danger would come, a parliamentary inquiry heard, during extreme rain events when visitors, being evacuated from a rising Parramatta River, would be confronted by high-velocity run-off converging on Phillip Street and running to the river.

“It would be like trying to walk up a creek which has got a fair amount of flow in it,” Steven Molino, environment and water hazards management consultant told an Upper House inquiry. “It is going to be shin to knee-deep or even higher with the sorts of velocities that could knock you off your feet.”

Molino Stewart was commissioned by the Powerhouse Museum Alliance, which campaigned to keep the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo, to independently review the Environment Impact Statement. The company is familiar with the site, having prepared most of the major flood policies and plans for Parramatta Council.

The flood vulnerability of the site was highlighted in February when the ground level of the multilevel car park on which the museum is to be built was flooded.

Engineers Arup maintain the original design of the proposed development did not present increased risk to public safety for people within the building, with all levels and main entrances above the recommended flood level.

Arts Minister Don Harwin said there would be ample time available – in the order of hours – during a flood for people to be moved to higher levels if required.

There was no intention to use the undercroft as an evacuation point and Arup had recommended an early warning system, using rainfall forecasts to determine if the undercroft should be opened.

This would form part of a daily procedure before opening the Powerhouse Parramatta and would be supported by on-site observations and permanent warning signs.

Infrastructure NSW confirmed design changes were being made. “As part of the detailed design process, design refinements are being made in response to submissions received from the public exhibition of the EIS, including council’s comments. These will be outlined in the Response to Submissions Report.”

Mr Harwin said keeping people and the Powerhouse Collection protected from flooding had been a key consideration.

The Premier’s Deputy Secretary Community Engagement, Kate Foy, says the construction contract will likely go to tender by Christmas.

This is despite CFMEU green bans on the two historic buildings – Willowgrove and St George’s Terrace – that will make way for the Moreau Kusonuki Genton designed museum. 2/2