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Powerhouse seeks inspiration from community

EXCLUSIVE
Linda Morris



Some of the Powerhouse Museum's collection (above); the original power station seen in 1905, and after its conversion in 1988 (right); An 'O' Class tram from 1908 (left), seen in 1979, remains on display. Main photo: Dallas Kilponen



Two months after rallying to save it from shut down, Sydneysiders have been invited to contribute ideas for the Powerhouse Museum's renewal at Ultimo.

The museum's chief executive Lisa Havilah is asking for the public's perspective on a reimagined museum experience, including their thoughts on what might turn the museum into a lively cultural hub, drawing workers, tourists and students to the museum day and night.

Nothing is off the table, she said. Not the museum's opening hours, its shows, talks and workshops, children's events, the types of dining opportunities visitors might want – even improvements to public entry along Harris Street and its bare forecourt.

The museum's original framed entrance was altered in 2005 to make room for the touring hall. Staff and planners have long pointed out the opportunity to orient the museum so it faces Chinatown, while Darling Harbour brings visitors in from the CBD.

“I want the Powerhouse to be a museum that actively reflects that changing nature of the city around it, in a precinct that is open and vibrant across the day into the evening,” Ms Havilah said. “I imagine our local community leaving their office for the day and engaging with a modern museum experience that resonates with them.”

Inside the museum, Ms Havilah is looking at ways to refresh the display of the muchloved Boulton and Watt rotative steam engine and Locomotive No.1. One idea being explored was to showcase these icons of the industrial age next to modern innovations like the electric car or lithium battery technology and in the context of climate change.

While Australian stories would remain central to the museum's programs Ms Havilah wanted to hear how the museum could improve, from “how you enter, to how long you stay, and what exhibitions you move through”.

“If the museum was consistently open to 9 o'clock every night, I would be interested to know if people would come to engage with that. What's the opportunity in building and renewing the museum within a broader cultural precinct? And what that might look like?”

Consultations will take place with the community, staff, volunteers, City of Sydney council, and other stakeholders throughout September, via surveys and webinars.

Those consultations will run concurrently with a government business case that is costing options for the Harris Street museum and its collection storage building, known as the Harwood Building. The museum has suffered for its years in limbo, needing significant capital and operational investment for it to resume the mantle as a world-class destination, and to ensure the collection is properly managed.

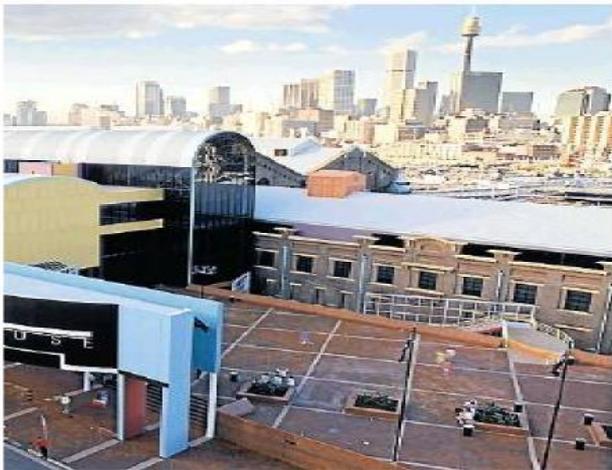
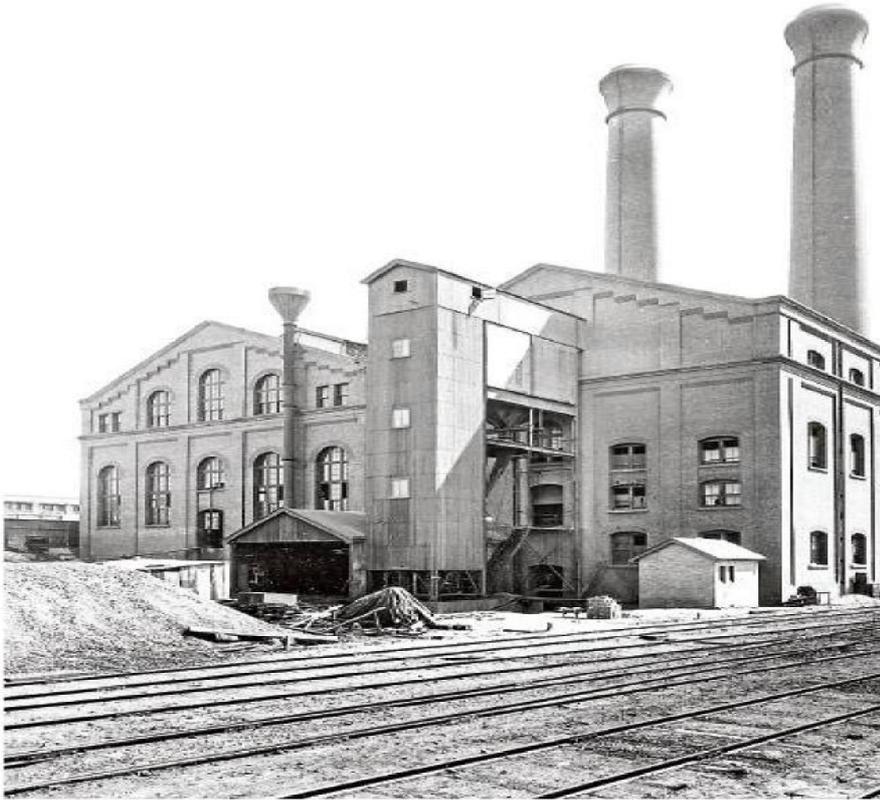
In 2014 the Powerhouse Trust signed off on a strategic plan that included a claim for \$350 million in funding for a “regeneration” of the Powerhouse's buildings. The plan sought approval to raise \$150 million from the sale or lease of air rights

over the Harwood Building, and a further \$200 million cash injection from the government.

Previous government business cases that costed a \$387 million fashion and design museum and revamped cultural precinct, anchored by a 1500-seat lyric theatre, required a partial sale of the museum site to minimise the government's contribution.

At a parliamentary hearing this week Annette Pitman, the head of Create Infrastructure, said of the current business case: "We're not canvassing any options that look at selling properties." Nevertheless, longtime museum campaigners remain worried for the fate of the Harwood Building, which was the first major tram shed in Sydney.

Ms Havilah said the community's vision for a worldclass museum would feed into the new business case and assist with long-term planning. She was keen to hear from all age groups, as well as loyal museum visitors and those who are not.



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