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'Australia's very own Smithsonian': Powerhouse gets green light

By [Linda Morris](#)

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The \$840 million Parramatta Powerhouse project has been given the green light, heralding the imminent dismantling of a historic villa and a start to construction of the science and technology museum by year's end.

Planning Minister Rob Stokes made the announcement late Friday naming 188 conditions of planning consent.

[The smaller Parramatta Powerhouse redesign. *SUPPLIED*]

The North Parramatta Residents Action Group president Suzette Meade said the minister's decision was based on a flawed development application process and amounted to a declaration of war against the Parramatta community.

"The community is ready to fight for our heritage, and we'll chain ourselves to the fence beside the CFMEU to protect Willow Grove from the wrecking ball," Ms Meade said.

Key conditions relate to the government's plans to dismantle the 19th-century mansion known as Willow Grove and relocate it elsewhere in Parramatta – about which community opposition has galvanised. The riverside villa sits on land the museum is to occupy.

Retention of Willow Grove would "severely compromise" the development of the site and delivery of public benefits, a department of planning assessment of the project found.

Planning approval was granted pending careful selection of an "appropriate setting" that would allow the building to be reused and increase public access.

All works are to be supervised by a qualified heritage specialist subject to the preparation of a heritage interpretation plan, statement of heritage impact and conservation management plan.

Consent has been withheld for the fit-out and future use of the seven terraces known as St George's Terrace that are to be retained as part of the museum's Phillip Street frontage pending a new application.

Planning consent requires photographic archival recording and conservation management of both heritage buildings.

The Department of Planning has also barred all public access to the screened undercroft that is to collect floodwaters and which infrastructure NSW says will mitigate any risk of flooding on the riverside site.

Mr Stokes said the inclusion of green open space as part of the overall plans would benefit locals and visitors.

"One of the great outcomes of this project is that a car park on the foreshore is being replaced by a north-facing, green public space on the banks of the Parramatta River," he said.

"In addition to the new museum and arts and entertainment space, the plans include 1.5 hectares of provision of high-quality landscaping, open spaces and the retention and provision of trees."

Earlier yesterday, Parramatta councillor Donna Davis predicted "the devil will be in the detail, in those conditions of consent".

"If the government fails to retain Willow Grove and St Georges Terrace on Phillip St then it shows just how truly out of touch they are with what the people of Parramatta value," she said.

"Parramatta needs a vibrant arts and cultural precinct but not at the expense of Willow Grove ... Now the community and the CFMEU has no choice but to enact green bans to its full force."

The Italianate villa Willow Grove is to be dismantled and relocated nearby. *STEVEN SIEWERT*
A total of 1300 submissions were received during the exhibition of the project's environmental impact statement, the majority opposed to the demolition of the Italianate villa or raising concerns around design and flooding.

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The decision comes amid an upper house inquiry into the Powerhouse, with Arts Minister Don Harwin to appear before a hearing on Monday.

Now that planning consent has been secured, Mr Harwin said western Sydney would have the biggest and best museum in NSW and its first major cultural

institution, a new addition to the landscape welcomed by Parramatta's lord mayor Bob Dwyer.

Powerhouse's president of its board of trustees Peter Collins said the museum would be "our flagship museum and will sit alongside Ultimo, Castle Hill and Sydney Observatory to provide extraordinary cultural benefits for our communities - Australia's very own Smithsonian for our globally renowned collection".

A coalition of western Sydney business, arts, education and health groups have backed the case for the museum to proceed saying it would be transformative for the area, local industry and research.

Christopher Brown, chair of the Western Sydney Powerhouse Community Alliance said reaching final approval had been "a hard slog, but it will have been worth the effort when this state-of-the-art technology and creative arts museum opens in a few short years".

The demolition of Willow Grove and St George's Terrace [was assumed as part of business cases](#) prepared for the Parramatta Powerhouse but the government later said it would try to keep those buildings after considering the strength of community feedback.

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