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# Berejiklian government ditches plans for Powerhouse river bridge

By [Linda Morris](#)

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The government has abandoned plans for a \$10 million art bridge over the Parramatta River, a central plank in the \$140 million Parramatta Powerhouse land deal [lauded by NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian](#) four years ago.

The disclosure comes as the Maritime Union of Australia announced it would enforce a green ban imposed by the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union's NSW branch to prevent any demolition of [the Italianate villa Willow Grove](#) on museum land.

The historic home, [a key site of women's history](#) for Parramatta, is to be relocated to make way for the new \$915 million museum. Originally the new museum was to anchor a vibrant arts and cultural precinct in Parramatta, which was to include a revamped Riverside Theatres connected to the museum by a new [footlink across the river](#).

[The Parramatta Powerhouse]

The government had envisioned the bridge would form one of the largest public art commissions in NSW, feeding into a precinct akin to London's Here East cultural precinct and Hong Kong's West Kowloon. In the international brief, architects were to plan for a north-south bridge but it's regarded as surplus to needs as the project managers seek to rein in costs.

Kate Foy, the Premier's Deputy Secretary, Community Engagement, said the government was no longer planning for the art bridge.

"The current scope of the Powerhouse does not incorporate a bridge," she told the budget estimates committee recently.

Greens MP David Shoebridge said the whole rationale for the original land deal seemed to have fallen through.

"Basically, the state government has walked away from the land deal," Mr Shoebridge said. "The revamped Riverside and cultural precinct can't be delivered with the funds the council has. The whole concept has unravelled, largely because

of the costs blowout and delays for the Powerhouse – such a tragic missed opportunity for Parramatta.”

In 2017, the NSW government [agreed to pay council](#) \$140 million for the riverbank site, known as the old David Jones carpark. A total of \$40 million was set aside to deliver council’s 20-year arts and culture plan with the contract or Heads of Agreement also referring to footlink works.

A further \$100 million was set aside to renovate the tired Riverside Theatres, with the government to take a 50 per cent share in the project. [The partnership stalled last year](#) after the government failed to meet project milestones and the council called in the land sale proceeds.

[Plans for the abandoned art bridge, taken from a government fact sheet in 2017.]



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Arts Minister Don Harwin said the rationale for putting the museum on its current site was unrelated to the Riverside Theatres, now that the new metro station in central Parramatta was a short distance away. The next step was to see if anything could be done to revive the Roxy Theatre given [growing community support](#). A City of Parramatta Council spokesperson said council remained committed to the redevelopment of Riverside Theatres as part of a new cultural precinct in Parramatta. While council might consider the construction of a footbridge as part of this cultural precinct, it had no current approved plan to do so.

The development comes as Powerhouse chief executive Lisa Havilah distanced herself from a document she authorised, showing accommodation within the Parramatta Powerhouse wings would be used for commercial purposes.

The November 2019 document, unearthed in an upper house call for papers, shows the single two-bedroom apartment, comprising a 20-seat dining table for VIP events, would be utilised commercially for parties, conference speakers, and developments for 44 weeks of the year. Self-contained premium one-bedroom apartments were to be “commercial” every week of the year and studios for three months of the year.

The document predated planning approval and the announcement of the winning architect and was no longer relevant, a spokesperson for the Powerhouse said.

“Like any museum anywhere in the world you need commercial activities on site, there will be revenue streams but not through commercialised or long-term leased

residencies. It will be universities or research partners who will pay the cost,” the spokesperson said.

Labor’s Walt Secord said the project was an apartment complex first and “it seems that the museum and cultural aspects of the Parramatta Powerhouse are afterthoughts”.

Ms Havilah did not say how much rent would be charged for the residences. Mr Harwin ruled out using the apartments and dormitory accommodation for anyone other than academics and rural students.

“You guarantee that these will never be commercially leased?” Labor MP Courtney Houssos asked.

“These are there for the use of the museum in order to achieve its objectives,” Mr Harwin said. “It is not like holiday accommodation, no. Yes, I can absolutely rule that out.”