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Planning Minister approves Powerhouse storage centre in Castle Hill

By [Linda Morris](#)

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A huge storage house for the priceless collection of the Powerhouse Museum has been approved for Sydney's north-west.

The Powerhouse's Museums Discovery Centre at Castle Hill is to double in size with the construction of the 8135sqm centre. It will be capable of housing aircraft, historic trains, and helicopters.



Powerhouse Museum artist impressions for the expansion of the Museums Discovery Centre in Castle Hill.

Building J, as it is known, is to be built on TAFE land and the site of the museum's eucalypt plantation established post-war to scientifically help with the commercial harvest of essential oils.

Planning Minister Rob Stokes approved the new facility on Thursday and said it would increase the museum's accessible storage space by 30 per cent, allowing for better community access to artefacts from the collections.

"This means the entire 500,000-piece Powerhouse collection will be housed and cared for on one site when not on display at Parramatta or Ultimo," Mr Stokes said.

But the expansion raises questions about what the government intends to do with the former Ultimo Tram Depot, known as The Harwood Building, which is the current collections' store for the Ultimo Powerhouse.

The Harwood Building's future use, including potential conversion to a lyric theatre, is currently subject to an undisclosed \$5 million government business case.

In its objection to the expansion, the Powerhouse Museum Alliance's Jennifer Sanders said funding for the new store would have been better spent updating Ultimo. No budget has been revealed for the Castle Hill project but early plans for a much smaller building were costed in 2017 at \$32 million.

"The real purpose of this extravagant and unnecessary project is to evict the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences collection from its purpose-designed conservation, research and collection store at the Powerhouse Museum so the museum can be redeveloped," Ms Sanders said in the submission.



Powerhouse Museum, chief executive officer Lisa Havilah outside the Harwood Building at Ultimo. *CREDIT: PETER BRAIG*

The Berejiklian government reversed its decision to close the Ultimo Powerhouse last July.

The government's expenditure review committee has been asked to fund a renewal of Ultimo, which includes plans to reorient the museum's bare Harris St entrance to Darling Harbour and Chinatown and introduce new ground-floor restaurant or retail options.

Arts Minister Don Harwin said the Castle Hill facilities would provide more opportunities for research and conservation work on the Powerhouse collection. Around 50 museum staff will be based there with access to new conservation laboratories, collection workspaces and a photography studio for digitisation.

Architect of the 1988 Ultimo Powerhouse redevelopment, Lionel Glendenning, was also among those to object to the Castle Hill expansion.

"It is not best practice to replace the functioning Ultimo support facility, with a distant store 38 km away in dense traffic," he said. "Collection handling – the safety and security of objects – is compromised and risks are increased. Critical staff access is disrupted to the point of dysfunction."

Former museum curator of transport and engineering Andrew Grant warned that the loss of engineering workshops would affect the museum's capacity to carry out any major conservation or restoration work on the very large objects in its collections.

The Department of Planning, however, concluded Building J was in the public interest, providing "significant public benefits by enhancing the [Museums Discovery Centre] as a cultural institution in north-western Sydney, increasing community access to the Powerhouse collection and supporting the Powerhouse Parramatta".

The building would allow the whole Powerhouse Collection to be stored on one site when not on display or loan, and greatly improve community access to the collection, it said, though it forecast no real increase in overall visitor numbers. Approval was conditional on the 337 felled eucalypts being replaced with other tree plantings.

Once built, Castle Hill would become a centre for the preservation, maintenance, conservation, and care of the Powerhouse collection, the museum's chief executive Lisa Havilah said.