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## Power and the fashion: Pitch to turn Powerhouse Ultimo into design hub

By [Linda Morris](#)

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Sydney philanthropist Gene Sherman has called for the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo to become the state's first cultural institution dedicated to the display of design, decorative arts, and fashion, and has offered to seed it with a large donation from her family.

However the president of the Powerhouse trust, Peter Collins, said he did not support splitting the museum's collection.

[Gene Sherman at the SCCI Pavilion Centennial Park. *CREDIT: BROOK MITCHELL*]

A former Powerhouse trustee, Dr Sherman wants the Ultimo museum to focus on crowd-pleasing exhibitions of costume and designer fashion, ceramics, jewellery, furniture, and architecture, and leave the new Parramatta museum to focus on science and technology.

The future of the Ultimo museum is at a crossroads after the Berejiklian government decided last July to keep it open. The site requires critical maintenance and NSW Treasurer Dominic Perrottet is expected to outline funding for its renewal in the June budget.

Dr Sherman recently presented a two-site model to Mr Collins and Arts Minister Don Harwin. She has proposed two separate foundations and, possibly over time, two separate directors enabling more effective fundraising from private philanthropists and corporate sponsors. If considered appropriate, she has offered to chair the foundation at Ultimo, seeding it with a considerable donation from her own family.

Dr Sherman and husband Brian recently contributed \$1 million to the Australian Museum and \$1.5 million to the Sydney Modern project at the Art Gallery of NSW.

“Sydney has become a hugely sophisticated, increasingly global city attracting regional visitors, interstate travellers and world-wide attention,” Dr Sherman's submission states. “As such the city deserves in-depth focus on separate but linked disciplines.

“Science Technology and Innovation museums attract particular visitors and sponsors. Design and Applied Arts museums do the same. In my experience, it is uncommon for audiences, sponsors and donors to cross-pollinate.”

The Smithsonian has an encyclopedic collection, like the Powerhouse, but it has separate campuses and buildings for African American history, American art, American Indian History and Air and Space Exploration.

[Gene Sherman at a fashion class for kids taught by artist Sairi Yoshizawa at the SCCI Pavilion Centennial Park. *CREDIT: BROOK MITCHELL*]

Dr Sherman said that during her time as a trustee from 1992 to 2000 the Powerhouse struggled to market itself and raise sustainable long-term sponsorship from either private donors or the corporate sector. “A potpourri approach has not allowed the Museum to reach its full potential. Raising money was and, as far as I know, remains a Sisyphean battle,” she writes in her submission. “A boulder is pushed interminably uphill – with each effort needing to be repeated as different exhibition programmes speak to different sectors in the donor community.”

But Mr Collins said he wants to showcase the entirety of the Powerhouse collection across the three sites including the soon-to-be expanded Museum Discovery Centre in Castle Hill rather than siloing the museums.

“The Shermans have made a fantastic contribution to the Sydney arts scene in Sydney over 30 years for the institutions in which they have served, and in Gene’s case they are perfectly entitled to want to leave a legacy for their particular passions but I do not support the proposed splitting of exhibitions with fashion and design exclusive to Ultimo and science and technology to Parramatta,” Mr Collins said. “We want to see a blend of our collections across the three sites when fully operational.”

He expected the idea of splitting administrations and establishing micro museums would also have limited appeal to Treasury as COVID-19 stimulus money dried up. Asked about suggestions that the Powerhouse Museum could not draw international fashion exhibitions like that of Chanel without specialisation, Mr Collins said: “Let’s see about that. We are up to the challenge.”

[Gene Sherman with her grandson Cy at the SCCI Pavilion Centennial Park. *CREDIT: BROOK MITCHELL*]

Dr Sherman maintains “decorative art, fashion and design museums have real appeal for all ages”. “Exhibitions around teen streetwear, children’s fashion, shoes, accessories, jewellery and haute couture – as well as furniture, design, toys and architecture – if presented in visually-compelling ways, become star attractions.”

Anna Plunkett, founder of Romance was Born and a resident designer at the Powerhouse, said a cultural institution with focus on design, fashion and decorative arts was missing in Sydney. “Melbourne has that covered with the National Gallery of Victoria and Sydney seems so left behind. The Powerhouse has one of the largest collections of ceramics, tapestries and quilts, not to mention Asian decorative arts, shoes and garments going back to colonial times. “All the design schools educating future designers in the traditions are here in the Sydney CBD - University of Technology, TAFE and the National Arts School - it’s an obvious step to make.”

[The proposal would turn Powerhouse Ultimo into a dedicated space for design, decorative arts, and fashion. *CREDIT: LOUISE KENNERLEY*]

Fellow designer Jenny Kee said the Ultimo museum was perfectly positioned next to Chinatown to nurture the decorative arts and fashion alongside objects of the Industrial Age. "All those amazing things have been there since the beginning, you can't imagine them not being there either." Following the success of the Powerhouse's *Step into Paradise*, the first in-depth survey of the creative partnership of Kee and Linda Jackson, Kee's "dream" is for a small permanent replica exhibit of the historic Flamingo Park frock salon to be based on the Powerhouse campus.



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