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Arts Hub:

Powerhouse Ultimo is here to stay as design museum with \$480M investment

Biggest investment in the arts since the Sydney Opera House, NSW Government commits \$500 million to Powerhouse Ultimo, on top of the institution's move to Parramatta.



The current Powerhouse Ultimo site which is set for a dramatic refresh. Photo ArtsHub.



GINA FAIRLEY

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NSW Arts Minister Don Harwin, in a joint media call with MAAS (Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences) CEO Lisa Havilah, announced this morning a new investment of \$480-500 million to transform Powerhouse Ultimo into a dedicated museum to design and fashion.

Powerhouse Parramatta will focus on the intersections and histories of science, technology and creative industries. The investment – along with \$1.1 billion already committed to Powerhouse Parramatta – makes it the largest cultural investment NSW has made since the building of Sydney Opera House.

Minister Harwin said: 'This year's budget will cover the cost of a design competition and approval processes and the government expects when the museum is finished, that operational expenditure will have increased with 100 new jobs in the creative industries funded at the museum.'

Havilah added: 'They are putting a range on the amount \$480-500 as [they] still have to go through the process.'

'When the Ultimo project is finished we will not only have a new museum but a great new day and night precinct that will continue the activation of the Southern CBD. This area is focused on technology and design ... but it will also keep a nod to the past,' continued Minister Harwin.

Havilah told ArtsHub the role of people's voices played a significant role in bringing the museum's history forward. 'The government is investing in this museum because it is clear that it is very well loved. .. the community around the museum has played a huge role in that and us defining what the investment should be,' she said.

The investment will deliver renewed and expanded exhibition and public space, re-orientating the entry to the museum to the city, facing the Goods Line and linking to the technology belt of UTS, to form a more connected creative industries precinct.



Powerhouse Ultimo will focus on design and fashion. Photo ArtsHub.

THE DIFFERENCE A YEAR MAKES

Just over a year ago, the Ultimo site was slated to be sold to property developers to assist with the funding of the new Parramatta museum. The sale was expected to generate some \$195 million. But the plan has long been the subject of protests,

consistent lobbying by the [Powerhouse Museum Alliance](#), a Parliamentary Inquiry, and good old fashioned ‘people power’, which has seen that decision reversed.

Read: [In the face of green bans and protests, Powerhouse Museum rethinks future](#)

In early July – and a matter of days before the start of its proposed 30 June 2020 rolling closure – the government confirmed Powerhouse Ultimo would remain. How, and to what level, was still unknown.

Today’s news cements that future for the site, and clearly defines its own place as a world class museum.

Havilah said the catalyst was really the government’s announcement on 4 July that committed to two world class museums, that was the trigger point, ‘so our job as the museum was to work through the business case process – what does that actually mean, and how to think about the renewal of the museum in terms of defining how much investment it requires, that brings us to today.’

Havilah said they have gone through an extensive consultative process since that July decision to ascertain the value of the museum both from a financial, social and cultural perspective, and a case study for its future viability.

She continued: ‘But also to look at how we provide contemporary experience, and what a museum should be now, and future proof it – it has been a lot of work.’

‘What I am most excited about is that we are not only going to create these incredible exhibition spaces, but also create spaces that will support industry, that will keep creatives and designers in this precinct, while working to integrate the industry into our broader practices as an museum.’

More than 5,000 regional and remote students from across NSW will further their design and fashion education through The Academy offering immersive experience with residential accommodation.

It is expected that the current museum will close for a period of time to complete heritage works and renewed the building for the new museum.

Planning for a design competition led by Create Infrastructure and the Powerhouse Museum is now under way.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gina Fairley is ArtsHub's National Visual Arts Editor. For a decade she worked as a freelance writer and curator across Southeast Asia and was previously the Regional Contributing Editor for Hong Kong based magazines Asian Art News and World Sculpture News. Prior to writing she worked as an arts manager in America and Australia for 14 years, including the regional gallery, biennale and commercial sectors. She is based in Mittagong, regional NSW.

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