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Sydney Morning Herald, 15 June, 2021

Was the Powerhouse worth the angst, Mike Baird? (in print 15 June, as ‘Welcome to the parallel universe Mr Baird could not have imagined’)

By [Linda Morris](#)

June 14, 2021 — 11.59pm

It was in 2018 that Mike Baird, then pursuing a career in banking, [was summoned to a parliamentary inquiry](#) to defend his inflammatory decision as NSW premier to relocate the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta. He didn't take a backward step. Anyone who could not understand the obvious benefits, he said, [must be living in a parallel universe](#).

Four years earlier, the Powerhouse board signed off on a strategic plan that included [a claim for \\$350 million](#) in government funding for the regeneration of the museum's 30-year-old buildings, offset by the sale of adjoining land and development and air rights above its collection store. The museum badly needed a lifeline.

This touched off what critics later derided as Baird's pre-election “thought bubble”: [selling up the Powerhouse in Ultimo](#) to give western Sydney an iconic museum it deserved.

The state government's commitment to spend [\\$500 million to renovate the Ultimo Powerhouse](#) brings taxpayers almost full circle. The Powerhouse Ultimo gets the \$350 million it wanted, and then some.

[Artist impression of the new entrance and public square at the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo.]

Back in 2014, the board complained that the museum's exhibits were tired and facilities so substandard it could not attract overseas blockbuster exhibitions. In 2021, nothing has changed. The roof leaks, buckets collect the rainwater and online reviews are a mixed bag.

Now that it will be reoriented to face Darling Harbour, no longer will the Powerhouse be the loose hat down windswept Harris Street. The reconfigured museum can now stage international touring exhibitions that usually head to the National Gallery of Victoria.

As importantly, the NSW budget is likely to commit to annual funding for the curators, the research and the exhibitions at the Parramatta Powerhouse. Powerhouse chief executive Lisa Havilah and her curatorial team have the scope to create some breathtaking programs.

[Former Premier of NSW Mike Baird gives evidence at the Upper House inquiry into the Powerhouse Museum's proposed move to Parramatta. *CREDIT: JESSICA HROMAS*]

All up, the government's budget commitment will bring the capital cost of the two museums and Castle Hill expansion close to the \$1.5 billion that an Upper House Inquiry and the Powerhouse's founding director Lindsay Sharp warned would be the real cost to taxpayers of the relocation plan.

To put that figure into perspective, the Sydney Opera House refit is costing the government \$235 million, Sydney Modern \$244 million, the regional cultural fund \$100 million, [Walsh Bay arts precinct \\$347 million](#) and the [Australian Museum refit cost \\$50 million](#).

Mr Baird was right that western Sydney deserves a world-class cultural institution, the arts and cultural funding gap disadvantaging a region that one in 10 Australians call home. Had his government committed to the Powerhouse's renewal five years ago, however, it would have been one year from completion. It could have had its Parramatta Powerhouse or decided to share its largesse with the Campbelltown Arts Centre, Casula Powerhouse, Joan Sutherland Theatre, and other regional galleries.

The Berejiklian government would have avoided the headlines, the inquiries, and the public backlash over the planned closure of Ultimo, necessitating the decision's sudden reversal 12 months ago.

[Union green bans](#) remain in force to block the demolition of the historic home of Willow Grove at Parramatta, which is to be dismantled and rebuilt elsewhere. The Land and Environment Court hands down its judgment on Wednesday about the validity of the [planning process for the Parramatta Powerhouse](#). Whatever the outcome, it will go to appeal. Fans of the Powerhouse Ultimo will be grateful the museum got its lifeline in the end. But was the last five years worth all the angst, Mr Baird?