

‘Waratah rising from the fires’: Powerhouse funds get mixed reviews

(in print as ‘Avalanche of cash for Powerhouse restyling gets mixed reviews’)

By [Linda Morris](#)

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An emotional Jenny Kee has welcomed plans for a \$500 million overhaul of Ultimo’s Powerhouse Museum at a fashion event held on Tuesday to mark the government investment.

Next week’s NSW budget will commit \$4.8 million to a design competition, part of an overall [\\$480-500 million the Powerhouse Museum](#) says it has secured for a new entrance, public square and exhibition spaces.

[Designers, including Luke Sales, Camilla Franks and Jenny Kee, celebrate the Powerhouse Museum’s fashion focus on Tuesday. *CREDIT:NICK MOIR*]

“We were always on tenterhooks thinking this extraordinary institution might die, and be moved,” Kee, a designer who helped define a national fashion identity decades ago, said on Tuesday.

“Look, I get very emotional because I’m 74 now and I grew up in Chinatown. My father worked at the produce markets and I’ve been coming into this part of the world since I was a baby. To know that it is going to open its doors to this part of town that I have always loved, it’s like a dream come true.”

Fashion and design will be at the forefront of the refurbished museum, with its sister museum at Parramatta to focus on science and technology. Runway models paraded garments from the Powerhouse’s fashion collection for the official launch, joined on stage by Kee and designer Camilla Franks.

The renewal plans include subsidised studios and work spaces for Australian designers, some commercial premises and a teaching hub with residential accommodation for regional students and remote learners, similar to that planned for the Parramatta Powerhouse.

It's envisaged the Ultimo museum will shut for renovations once plans are approved, with the project taking five or six years to complete.

"She is the waratah rising out of the fires, this museum," Kee said. "To know it is going to have real money, real operational money, all the support it needs to be the great design museum in the country, it just doesn't get any better for the young Jennys of the world."

[An artist's impression of the new entrance and public square at the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo.]

But museum consultant and former trustee Kylie Winkworth said the government had broken its promise that the Ultimo Powerhouse Museum would retain its broad remit across technology, science, engineering and design.

"The government said the Powerhouse Museum was saved. Instead, the mission and facilities of the Powerhouse are being downsized without consultation, explanation or even a veneer of museum planning," Winkworth said.

"No thought has been given to the impact of turning the Powerhouse Museum into a fashion and design museum when it's traditionally attracted family and education audiences. The real waste is that we will have a hollowed-out Powerhouse, without the power and transport collections for which the museum was purpose-designed.

"What is the Powerhouse Museum without power and transport? I do think this is a form of cultural cleansing and that Sydney is at risk of turning into a mono-culture, all artist studios and function spaces."

Winkworth said it was difficult to justify spending \$500 million on a single cultural institution when there was no funding for museums in regional NSW, no funding for new museums in cities such as Campbelltown, Penrith and Wollongong, and no museum policy for NSW.

The Powerhouse Museum Alliance, which led public protests against closure, is seeking clarification around long-term annual operational funding for the museum at Ultimo and Parramatta.

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Designer Genevieve Smart, from Ginger & Smart, said fashion was a barometer of social change. "If you look down the ages, fashion is an expression of who we are."

Romance Was Born designer Luke Sales said he hoped the Powerhouse's focus on fashion and design might demonstrate the industry's intrinsic cultural value. Asked why fashion should be showcased at the museum at all, Sales said, "Why should there be football stadiums built for sport, it's just for sport?"

The Opposition gave the government its in-principle support, saying full credit should go to the community that had saved the museum.

"It also shows how [a costly thought bubble by a former premier](#) can have multi-billion dollar consequences," Labor's arts and heritage spokesperson Walt Secord said. "We are now creeping towards a cost of \$2 billion; that would have built a teaching hospital the size of Royal North Shore Hospital.

"Had the State Government sat down and properly done their sums from the very beginning, they would have gotten a better and fairer arrangement for Ultimo and western Sydney."