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## Theatre plans up in the air as ‘legendary’ Harwin exits arts portfolio



By [Linda Morris](#)

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Weeks before former NSW arts minister Don Harwin announced his resignation from the NSW cabinet on Saturday, he finalised a strategy to increase the number of theatres and film studios in Sydney.

Harwin had worked most of the year on the proposal, which he believed would drive employment in the creative industries and help cement Sydney as the creative capital of the Asia-Pacific.



In the spotlight: Don Harwin has resigned as arts minister. *CREDIT: NICK MOIR*

That strategy will be presented to the expenditure review committee next year in his absence after he announced his departure from the ministry on Saturday and, at the end of this parliamentary term, his exit from politics.

Harwin had many detractors but none would begrudge the energy the lover of music, visual arts, and dance brought to his portfolio.

One of his last functions as minister was to officially open the Theatre Royal, which at one point was going to be turned into a food court.

Having convinced the owners to let the government to take out a 55-year lease on the theatre site, his office then went to an expression of interest and British impresario Howard Panter took on the theatre project. *Jagged Little Pill* opened there earlier this month.

*“He was a legendary arts minister. What he achieved during his five years will have lasting generational impact.”*

Powerhouse Museum chief executive Lisa Havilah

Harwin was a self-employed consultant on public affairs and politics before he was elected to State Parliament in 1999. Appointed in 2017 to the arts ministry, Harwin set about extending its reach to the regions and western Sydney.

Under former premier Gladys Berejiklian, arts had a seat at the centre table of government. As a Berejiklian loyalist, Harwin delivered record capital works spending for the Australian Museum (\$50.5 million), Powerhouse at Ultimo (\$480-\$500 million), Sydney Modern (\$240 million) and Walsh Bay Arts Precinct (\$370 million).

In the Perrottet cabinet, however, Harwin was an outsider who had lost some influence as a numbers man to Treasurer Matt Kean. His proximity to power was diminished. He chose to resign but in reality, he had no choice but to make way for the changing of the guard.

Powerhouse Museum chief executive Lisa Havilah was appointed by Harwin in 2019. “He was a legendary arts minister,” she said. “What he achieved during his five years will have lasting generational impact.

“He has really repositioned where arts and culture sits – he believed everyone had the right to access to world-class arts and culture whether living in a regional town or suburban Sydney.

“He had that strategic and expansive thinking that has come from a deep and personal passion joined by an extraordinary expertise to get outcomes in government. He loved the arts, he knew what to do to get it done.”

To this end, Harwin secured the home of the National Art School at the former Darlinghurst Goal, and ensured the school had guaranteed funding.

He lost political skin when he was discovered to have interfered in the awarding of arts funding grants in 2018. He briefly resigned his portfolio in April 2020, after being fined for non-essential travel during lockdown, and was reinstated when the fine was dismissed.

He misjudged the truculent opposition to his government's decision to relocate the Powerhouse Museum from Ultimo to Parramatta.

That decision was overturned by Berejiklian and the now-Premier at the 11th hour in July 2020.

The protests go on with Suzette Meade – representing those who opposed the demolition of the historic property of Willow Grove to be rebuilt elsewhere – calling on the Premier to use Harwin's departure to immediately review the Parramatta Powerhouse project. She said it lacked community support or even the "promise to deliver an actual museum".

In recent days, Harwin had denied he had been anything but supportive of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra when its departing CEO Emma Dunch [claimed she had been targeted by a "hit job"](#).

During lockdown Harwin had argued inside cabinet for substantial sums of COVID-19 rescue money to assist the struggling arts sector but, rightly or wrongly, many small to medium arts companies and independent artists still felt overlooked.

It is speculated now that the arts ministry will be rolled into a super department. Any downgrading of arts to junior ministry status will be watched closely.



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