

# Powerhouse Ultimo community consultations fall short with museum advocates

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*The Powerhouse Museum Ultimo has occupied inner-city site since 1988. Photo: Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences*

By ERIN MODARO

In a continuation of the push against the NSW government’s vision for the renewal of the Powerhouse Museum Ultimo, community members backing the ‘save the powerhouse’ movement have once again raised their concerns, after two public information seminars were held on May 16 and 18.

The seminars, carried out by state government consultant Ethos Urban, informed attendees about the direction of [Powerhouse Museum Ultimo’s transformation](#) and discussed a December 2021 [Scoping Report](#) put out by Ethos Urban.

Tom Lockley, who attended the information seminar, expressed that the meeting felt inauthentic, and said that “the recent consultations have been carried out as usual, just to tick the boxes.”

Lockley has been vocal in the community about preserving the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo for 7 years.

"I asked if they could provide details of any person with museum qualifications and or experience who had given input [into the scoping plan]... and this question was completely ignored."

Other Powerhouse Museum advocacy members in attendance at the meetings outlined how the direction of the museum to "focus on fashion and design", as detailed in the scoping report, was a concern.

### **Community opposed to 'trivialising' Powerhouse Ultimo: 'Save the Powerhouse' Group**

Patricia Johnson and Jean-Pierre Alexandre, who lead the Save the Powerhouse community group, said that the community as well as museum specialists, "are strongly opposed to trivialising the Powerhouse" through "turning it into a 'creative industries hub' with a 'focus on fashion.'"

Johnson and Alexandre say that the adoption of fashion and design as a focus for the museum is a "distortion" of the Powerhouse's original conception, and "far too limiting." They also express concerns that a fashion museum is not as exciting for children and younger people, and that fashion museums don't perform as well as those focused on science and technology.

Johnson and Alexandre say participants at the public information seminar were in favour of "the [Powerhouse Museum] continuing to represent science, technology, transport, engineering, applied arts, crafts, design and social history."

"We must now focus on overturning the ludicrous idea that our time-honored Powerhouse Museum can become a mere "fashion hub"" Johnson and Alexandre said.

Member of the Powerhouse Museum Alliance group, Grace Cochrane, attended the seminar and expressed similar concerns about the management of the renewal project.

Cochrane had questions during the seminar about the future of certain historic buildings such as the Wran Building, the Galleria and Hardwood Building. She stated that the current building plans had no "clear description of exactly what the content, scope and programs of the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo are intended to be."

[Create NSW](#), the state government's arts and cultural agency, says that while design and fashion will be the "forefront" of the renewal plan, "arts and sciences will continue to be an important focus."

In support of the move towards fashion and design, Create NSW said to *City Hub* that "with decorative arts comprising over 30 per cent of the Powerhouse collection, the new direction for Powerhouse Ultimo will enable greater access to these objects."

"The updated Powerhouse Ultimo will also provide new support to the NSW design and creative industries through skills development, pathways into employment and supported studios and workspaces."

### **Powerhouse Ultimo's history of uncertainty**

The future of the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo has been in public debate since the NSW Government announced in 2015 that the Powerhouse would be moved to Parramatta in a bid to bring an arts and culture focus to Western Sydney.

The plan to demolish the Ultimo location was then scrapped by former NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian in July of 2020, announcing that it would instead be [retained and renewed](#). Two Parliamentary inquiries into the state government's management of the Powerhouse Museum have since gone ahead, one in February of 2020, and another in March of this year.



An artist's impression of the Powerhouse Museum renewal. Photo: Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences

An investment of between \$480 and \$500 million was given to the renewal of the Ultimo Powerhouse in 2021. The current scoping plan states that this investment is to “establish a world-class museum that will significantly contribute to an important and developing part of Sydney.”

#### **Create NSW confirms community feedback will be addressed**

Create NSW responded to the discussion from the public consultations, stating that the feedback they received “included comments on the project's Concept SSDA” and questions about “operational elements relating to future exhibits or management of the site.”

“Consultation will continue with the community and feedback will be considered as part of the planning for the project” Create NSW said.

The Ethos Urban scoping report also included a section outlining community feedback that has “informed the project”, including the preference for Powerhouse Ultimo to “continue operating as a museum”, and the recognising the need for “community connection.”

Going forward, attendees at the public information seminars were told to expect that a draft conservation report would soon be going up for public exhibition, followed by an architectural competition for the design of the upgrades.