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'Glorified function centre': Powerhouse plans condemned in public submissions



By [Linda Morris](#)

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New \$500 million scoping plans for the Powerhouse at Ultimo have been condemned as an attempt to transform the museum into an entertainment centre by the overwhelming majority of public submissions.

Only six of 104 public submissions backed the concept plans for the 2.4-hectare site that potentially allow for a new public square, entrance, and a multistorey annex on the museum's Harris Street forecourt.



The building envelope showing potential redevelopment scope of the Powerhouse at Ultimo. *CREDIT: DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING*

The International Council of Museums made one of the [91 objections lodged](#) with the Department of Planning: "This looks to be the removal rather than the redevelopment of a Museum," its vice chair Alex Marsden said.

Local community group Pyrmont Action said: "It is clear that the primary purpose of this so-called 'renewal' is for the Powerhouse at Ultimo to operate as a glorified function and exhibition centre – for hire."

But the Commissioner of the 24-Hour Economy, Michael Rodrigues, said the Powerhouse had played a significant role in promoting a vibrant and diverse nighttime economy and would do so in the future under such plans.

Museum chief executive Lisa Havilah said the planning framework would support bold ideas from Australian design teams to bring together the many layers of history, from First Nations to the museum's establishment on site in 1988.

"The renewal of the Powerhouse will expand the exhibition spaces and support the delivery of new exhibitions that will engage audiences with the Powerhouse collections in new ways. Not only will it be the Powerhouse, but it will be a better, expanded Powerhouse."

The museum's concept environmental impact statement has been released for public comment ahead of a national design competition, expected to be called this month, for the renewal of the home of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences.

Though not prescribing any specific proposal, the statement and accompanying documents show what's possible on the site in an approach similar to that adopted for the \$915 million Parramatta Powerhouse.

The site comprises a cluster of heritage-listed buildings that formed the Ultimo Power Station and the old post office united by an arched galleria on Harris Street, which went up in the same era as Darling Harbour and the National Maritime Museum.

[Design guidelines now on public exhibition](#) do not sufficiently protect the fabric of these additions, known collectively as the Wran Building, which have great significance for the NSW architectural profession, the NSW Chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects said.

The Institute said the 1988 redevelopment was one of the most successful and renowned adaptive reuse projects in Australia, an international benchmark for a museum of this type and a fine example of NSW public architecture in the post-modern style.

The City of Sydney supported the renewal of the Powerhouse as a world-class museum, and improved pedestrian access, but said utilisation of maximum heights could have a negative impact on the heritage significance of the Powerhouse Museum, its setting and views.



Artist's impression of the visual impact of the maximum building envelope proposed for architects scoping the Powerhouse Museum site at Ultimo. *CREDIT: FROM EIS, DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING*

Statements of heritage impacts and the Conservation Management Plan downplayed the architectural significance of the Wran Building. Indeed, there was so much confusion between heritage, urban design, and architectural guidelines that it was preferable that they should be redrafted and re-exhibited for public comment, City of Sydney planners said.

A three-metre setback of any new annex on the Harris Street forecourt, if not enforced on the upper levels, could result in an overhang, not in keeping with the existing streetscape, council said.

Kris Leveson and Karen Henoeh-Ryugo of another local community group, Ultimo Village Voice, said a reoriented Powerhouse with a public entrance facing Haymarket would turn its back on the people of Ultimo and the inner west, and rendered ideas of a highly walkable village "pie in the sky".

Supporting the renewal was the chief executive of the Sydney Living Museums, Adam Lindsay: "In our experience, adaptive reuse of built heritage and open forms can be done very successfully, and with care, creativity, and consultation."

But former president and Museum trustee Nicholas Pappas said the renewal project was “in its essence, nothing more than the unjustified and catastrophic destruction of a beloved and award-winning public edifice and cultural institution”.

Grace Cochrane for the Powerhouse Museum Alliance said the award-winning galleria and Wran Building appeared earmarked for demolition. “It appears that the Museum is heading for being an entertainment centre, with its collection being of minor importance, and some of its significant buildings being demolished,” she said.

The Department of Planning will consider public feedback before finalising project guidelines.



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