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Powerhouse to lower historic flying boat from the ceiling after 30 years



By [Tim Barlass](#)

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The Powerhouse's Catalina flying boat prize exhibit will be lowered from the ceiling after more than 30 years amid concerns about the redevelopment of the museum.

The museum has been enveloped in controversy since it was announced that a new site would be built in Parramatta and the Ultimo location transformed into a centre for art and design.



Susie Arnott, 80 the daughter of P G Taylor who piloted the Catalina sea plane Frigate Bird II. *CREDIT: OSCAR COLEMAN*

The Catalina, which has been suspended from the ceiling of the Boiler Hall since 1988, will be lowered for an exhibition opening in October. But beyond the exhibition it could be relocated out of the Boiler Hall, the museum's chief executive said.

In 1951, the Catalina completed the first return flight from Australia to South America, piloted by Sir P G [Patrick Gordon] Taylor. The two-week journey represented the first crossing of the South Pacific Ocean and the final link in the global aviation network. Departing from Sydney's Rose Bay, the aircraft made many stops including the Pacific Islands before reaching Chile.

Taylor donated the Catalina flying boat Frigate Bird II to Powerhouse in 1961. The aircraft was restored, and it has since been the centrepiece of the transport exhibition for more than 30 years.

Before a rethink, the museum in June 2020 announced the Catalina flying boat would feature "as part of curatorial programming at the new Museum in Parramatta".



Catalina Frigate Bird II in French Polynesia c.6-7 April 1951

One of Taylor's four daughters, Gai Taylor, said at the time that the aircraft would be "irreparably damaged" by moving to Parramatta. She said: "I think it shows an incredible lack of appreciation, understanding and love of our aviation history."

That proposal was later scrapped after public resistance, but Powerhouse chief executive Lisa Havilah told the *Herald* that the new plan to lower the aircraft would give visitors a different perspective. "It won't be touching the ground, but it will be more in eyesight." Following the exhibition, she added: "It will definitely be presented within the museum but where and how is subject to all of the design and development that will happen over the next couple of years. It might go somewhere else in the museum. We have over 400 very large objects that we will continue to display both in Ultimo and Parramatta when it opens."



P G Taylor talking to daughters Gennie and Sue and minister for air T W White before departure for South America, Rose Bay, 1950.

But Kylie Winkworth, a former trustee of the museum, said she couldn't see the point and expense of lowering it unless the intention was to move it out. "They have announced that they will continue to display technology, science engineering and design," she said. "But that's not true because we find out there will only be three objects permanently retained at the Powerhouse in Ultimo, the Catalina, the Boulton & Watt steam engine and Loco No 1 which is the first train of NSW."

Andrew Grant, former senior curator of transport at the Powerhouse questioned whether the three very large objects might just be turned into impressive objet d'art. "Decisions that are made, and made public, reveal more about knee-jerk reaction than they do about long-term planning," he said.

Susie Arnott, aged 80, another of Taylor's daughters, said that she had flown with her father in a Sunderland flying boat on a Pacific trip. "He was a very quiet person. I have got a friend that I ski with who is going to make a film of my father, and he has trouble getting the manuscript approved because people want my father to be some sort of crazy aviator which he wasn't at all."

At the start of August, the *Herald* reported that new \$500 million scoping plans for the Powerhouse had been criticised as an attempt to transform the museum into an entertainment centre by the overwhelming majority of public submissions.

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."