

**REPORT: ‘Government’s management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in New South Wales’  
September 2022**

On 30 September, Hon Robert Borsak MLC, distributed access to the report of the committee of which he was Chair, saying: ‘It is my pleasure to announce the release of the report of the Select Committee on the Government’s management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in New South Wales, entitled *Government’s management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in New South Wales*. The report was tabled with the Clerk of the Parliaments on Friday 30 September 2022.

The report is available on our [website](#) along with submissions, transcripts of evidence and other inquiry documents.

<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/listofcommittees/Pages/committee-details.aspx?pk=264#tab-reportsandgovernmentresponses>

On behalf of the committee, I take this opportunity to thank you for your contribution to the inquiry. The committee has been greatly assisted by these contributions and we appreciate the time and effort taken by all those who have helped us with this important inquiry.’

**Yours sincerely**

**Hon Robert Borsak MLC  
Committee Chair**

**Select Committee on the Government's management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in New South Wales**

Upper House Committees | Legislative Council

Parliament of New South Wales

**E** [museums@parliament.nsw.gov.au](mailto:museums@parliament.nsw.gov.au)

**A** Parliament House, Macquarie Street, Sydney NSW 2000

**THE REPORT: EXTRACTS** (made by Powerhouse Museum Alliance)

**‘Government’s management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in New South Wales’ September 2022**

**For full report, go to:**

<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/inquiries/2582/Powerhouse%20Museum%20and%20other%20museums%20and%20cultural%20projects%20in%20New%20South%20Wales.pdf>

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**Page vii: Chair's foreword:**

This select committee inquiry was established in response to Recommendation 6 of the 2019 Upper House inquiry into the State's museums and galleries sector. The 2019 inquiry raised serious concerns about the government's plans to relocate the Powerhouse Museum from its home in Ultimo to a flood prone site on the banks of the Parramatta River, including questions about the project's governance and the adequacy of the case for change. Such was the level of concern that a second inquiry was deemed necessary to maintain the spotlight of the Upper House on this problematic cultural infrastructure project. A thorough testing of all the evidence across two Upper House inquiries has done little to allay suspicions that the original decision to relocate the Powerhouse Museum was a thought bubble that became official government policy without any real evidence base, and with retrospective attempts to justify the project through carefully crafted cost benefit analyses and business cases. Efficient and prudent investment of public monies – such that the benefits of any given government initiative are greater than the costs – is a touchstone of responsible government. Whether the government's relocation project meets this important bar, or falls short, was difficult to ascertain given the project's shifting parameters and the prevailing secrecy surrounding many of the more recent business cases. Nevertheless, this inquiry brought to the fore so many compelling reasons why the government should have re-considered moving forward with this project. There has been a litany of issues that should give any government pause when embarking on an infrastructure project of the magnitude and cost of the one subject to this inquiry process. The government did in fact revisit and modify some of its plans as this inquiry unfolded – partly owing to the public pressure generated by the inquiry and the well-organised community opposition to relocating the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta. As a committee, our focus shifted as the government's plans and proposals evolved. Some of these changes in direction raised more questions than they solved. However, regrettably, the well-supported and well-researched project alternatives that were presented in evidence to our committee could not dent the government's steadfast resolve to build the Powerhouse 'facility' on a flood prone site in Parramatta and with significant impact on the site's heritage values. In fact, construction of the Powerhouse Parramatta was well underway at the time of writing. This followed the removal of Willow Grove from the site where it had stood with a commanding presence on Phillip Street from the late 19th Century – carried out in the face of vehement opposition from some community groups, First Nations peoples of the Parramatta area, and expert cultural heritage organisations. Remnants of Willow Grove now lie in storage in a western Sydney warehouse awaiting reconstruction at a yet-to-be-determined location. The irony of erasing an important part of Parramatta's history and heritage, to make way for a cultural institution that tells other stories about our past, was not lost on the committee. The committee has recommended that the memory of Willow Grove, at the very least, be honoured with a Blue Plaque on the site where it once stood. Understanding the flood risks to the Parramatta site and the adequacy of the government's design responses exercised a good deal of the committee's deliberations. The committee is indebted to the Powerhouse Museum Alliance whose members used their own funds to commission the flood risk analyses that should have been commissioned by the government. The risks and deficiencies laid bare by these reports were part of a process that led to important design modifications to the Powerhouse Parramatta to address public safety hazards to visitors in and around the future facility. While this public pressure led to considerable improvements to the facility's design, it is clear that further questions remain especially in relation to flood risks to the museum's objects and collections. It is troubling that it took three independently commissioned reports to prompt due consideration of the unique and precious nature of the future facility's contents. This is not just the usual furniture, devices and office equipment one might expect to find in a commercial or mix-used building. On the

contrary, the Parramatta facility will be home to extremely rare, historically significant artefacts and objects that, if damaged or destroyed, can never be replaced. All angles must therefore be considered and there can be no room for doubt in ensuring appropriate flood immunity and protections for the new facility. The government's plans for the museum's Ultimo site were similarly in flux throughout the inquiry. While the committee welcomed the 4 July decision to keep the Ultimo museum open – slated to operate from 'the Ultimo Power Station' alongside the new Parramatta facility once it is built – it was impossible to ignore concerns ventilated throughout the inquiry about the way the decision was carefully crafted and presented to the public, and the reality of what is actually being proposed for the Ultimo site. Clearly, there is no commitment to retain the Ultimo Powerhouse Museum in its recognisable, internationally-renowned form, and as it has been operating on that site for several decades. Where there is currently a thematically coherent science and technology museum with a clear and distinct identity, there will be, under the government's plans, a confused hotchpotch of fashion items displayed alongside a handful of large items of industrial and transport heritage devoid of their broader storytelling contexts and installations. Similarly, the 4 July announcement gave no guarantee about the assembly of buildings that support the Ultimo museum's existing operations, including the historically and functionally important Harwood Building. It is unfortunate that the pursuit of commercial returns and revenue-generating opportunities has become such a key driver in the renewal of the Ultimo Powerhouse, arguably at the expense of the government's and the Trust's mandate as custodian of the very significant Powerhouse collection. In recognition of its importance to the Ultimo museum, the committee has recommended that the Harwood Building be retained in its current form, continuing in its existing museum-related functions and uses. All told, the government's capital budget for the Powerhouse Parramatta, expansion of the Castle Hill Museums Discovery Centre and the renewal of the Ultimo Powerhouse is \$1.34 billion. This dwarfs the level of government funding for museums and galleries in regional New South Wales and underscores an unacceptable lack of parity and equity. The contrast could not be more stark. While the Powerhouse initiative is the beneficiary of this infrastructure cash splash, regional museums and galleries must survive on inadequate and piecemeal funding, often for one-off special projects or capital works, and with scant support for their ongoing operational and staffing expenses. The inquiry shone a light on the many challenges this sector continues to face, challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It gave a very real sense of how regional museums and galleries survive from funding round to funding round, with little long term certainty and a dwindling pool of volunteers. The committee makes a number of sensible recommendations to address some of these issues. Notably, we recommend that the NSW Government reviews current funding arrangements for regional galleries and museums, and that it develops a statewide strategy for the sector. Completion of the Powerhouse Parramatta is slated for 2024. For all our efforts and ruminations on this controversial project, time will be the true judge of whether this was a worthwhile project. I am sure many will look on with more than a passing interest to see if the project actually delivers on its publicly stated objectives, justifications and claims about public benefit. The committee owes its sincere thanks to the many stakeholders who took up the fight to save the Ultimo Museum and Willow Grove. The Powerhouse Museum Alliance, Save the Powerhouse Campaign, Pymont Action Incorporated and the North Parramatta Residents' Action Group deserve a special mention, but not to the exclusion of so many other individuals and organisations who contributed to this important inquiry. I also thank my committee colleagues for their thoughtful contributions – and the committee secretariat for their hard work and professionalism. I commend the report to the House.

**The Hon Robert Borsak MLC**  
**Committee Chair**

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**Pages xi-xii: Findings and Recommendations:**

**Details drawing on Inquiry submissions and presentations, and committee comments, are given in detail later in the report.**

**Findings** (go to identified page numbers in report for further details)

**Finding 1 41**

That the NSW Government's removal of Willow Grove from its original site has had a significant and cumulative heritage impact.

**Finding 2 41**

That, when or if the NSW Government reconstructs Willow Grove on its new site, the resulting structure will not be the same Willow Grove.

**Finding 3 43**

That the NSW Government's current plans for Powerhouse Parramatta are more akin to an events centre than a museum.

**Finding 4 63**

That the NSW Government's plan to break up the museum's collections and strip items of context will diminish their significance as collections and adversely impact their interpretation.

**Recommendations** (go to identified page numbers in report for further details)

**Recommendation 1 41**

That, given the removal of Willow Grove has already taken place despite widespread community opposition, the NSW Government commit to honouring the memory of Willow Grove by erecting a Blue Plaque on its former site.

**Recommendation 2 41**

That the NSW Government, in retaining and adaptively reusing St George's Terrace as part of Powerhouse Parramatta, commit to retaining their original internal separations as terraces and restoring their original features.

**Recommendation 3 42**

That, in implementing the flood-related conditions of consent issued as part of the State Significant Development Application determination, the NSW Government:

- address all outstanding flood-related issues and concerns highlighted by the detailed analyses submitted in evidence to this inquiry; and
- re-test the flood immunity of the Powerhouse Parramatta (both riverine and overland flooding) using the new City of Parramatta Council Parramatta River flood study based on the 2019 Australian Rainfall and Runoff guidelines.

**Recommendation 4 42**

That the NSW Government release the Powerhouse Parramatta Final Business Case 2020 and the Ultimo Creative Industries Precinct Final Business Case 2021, as well as any other business cases, conservation management plans, and precinct master plans for any aspect of the project (Parramatta, Ultimo and Castle Hill) that are not already in the public domain.

**Recommendation 5 43**

That the NSW Government publicly and specifically outline its strategy to minimise the risk of damage posed to large and fragile items by moving them from their existing location to Powerhouse Parramatta.

**Recommendation 6 64**

That the NSW Government, as part of the renewal of the Ultimo museum, commit to:

- retaining the Harwood Building in its current form with museum-related, noncommercial uses, and
- investigate the feasibility of adapting its storage spaces to better facilitate public access to collections in 'display storage' conditions.

**Recommendation 7 64**

That the NSW Government progress, on a priority basis, the National Trust of Australia nomination to list the entire Ultimo site on the State Heritage Register and make representations

to the Heritage Council of NSW to flag this as a government priority.

**Recommendation 8 83**

That the NSW Government review the current funding arrangements for regional museums and galleries, with consideration of:

- how to ensure greater certainty of funding for regional museums and galleries, and
- whether a library funding model would be an appropriate way to fund regional museums and galleries in New South Wales.

**Recommendation 9 84**

That the NSW Government develop a statewide museum and galleries strategy, which should include consideration of how to improve access to state collections by regional museums and galleries.