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# Powerhouse Parramatta deemed more entertainment centre than museum

By [Linda Morris](#)

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The Perrottet government's plans for the \$915 million Powerhouse Parramatta were more akin to an event and entertainment centre than a state significant museum, a parliamentary inquiry has found.

The final report of an Upper House inquiry into museum management tabled on Friday expressed concern that Powerhouse Parramatta had less exhibition space than Ultimo and was, in effect, "a multipurpose entertainment and events centre masquerading as a museum".



Bringing the house down: Willow Grove has been taken apart to be rebuilt elsewhere in Parramatta. *WOLTER PEETERS*

At Ultimo where the government is running a design competition for a \$500 million redevelopment, the decision to thematically focus on "a confused hotchpotch of fashion items" risked isolating some of the museum's most significant items of industrial heritage, the committee's chair Robert Borsak said.

And there remained a risk to fragile items of the museum's precious collection in relocating storage away from Parramatta and Ultimo.

But a government spokesperson said it was committed to forging ahead and delivering world-class art and cultural infrastructure, with the Parramatta museum due to open its doors in 2025. “The NSW government makes no apologies for investing in Western Sydney,” the spokesperson said.

The committee’s findings were supported by Labor and crossbench MPs, with three Liberal MPs issuing a dissenting report saying that the committee failed to make constructive recommendations and instead attempted to score cheap political points scoring and even delay the project through further red tape. When opened, they said the Parramatta Powerhouse would be the largest museum in NSW with more than 18,000 sqm of exhibition and public space.



The Parramatta Powerhouse Museum design *MOREAU KUSUNOKI + GENTON RIVERSIDE*.

The majority committee was, however, particularly critical of the removal of the 19th-century, riverside villa Willow Grove to make way for the new cultural institution at Parramatta. The mansion’s dismantling and relocation to a new site “robbed Parramatta of its rapidly dwindling heritage”.

Sydney had enough examples of facadism done poorly, and the government’s plans to reconstruct Willow Grove on a new site would “not be the same Willow Grove”, the majority report read. It recommended a heritage blue plaque be erected on its original site.

What’s more, the committee said it was “difficult to fathom why the NSW government would choose a flood-prone site to build one of the most significant pieces of cultural infrastructure – billed in evidence as the largest investment in cultural infrastructure since the Sydney Opera House – and then attempt to design their way around the inherent and very real flood risks”.

“The committee looked aghast as the project site was flooded on several occasions during the course of our inquiry.”



Jenny Kee modelling in the Iordanes Spyridon Gogos show at the Powerhouse during Afterpay Australian Fashion Week. *EDWINA PICKLES*

Borsak, from the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party, criticised the “infrastructure cash splash” on Powerhouse Parramatta, its expanded facilities at Castle Hill and Ultimo amounting to more than \$1.3 billion. The sum dwarfed funding for regional museums and galleries, which since the pandemic had been hit by a shrinking pool of volunteers, he said.

Borsak said it was impossible to ignore concerns that, far from being saved, there was no commitment to retain the Powerhouse at Ultimo in its recognisable, internationally renowned form as it had been operating for decades. The entire site should be placed on the State Heritage Register as a priority. The committee welcomed plans to adapt and reuse the heritage-listed St George’s Terrace, so far it is to be integrated within the new Powerhouse Parramatta in a way that was sympathetic to the story and significance of the buildings.

The government said it would formally respond to the committee’s findings in coming months.

“We are securing key partnerships and attracting significant private investment to deliver this important project for the local community,” a spokesperson said.

“Powerhouse Parramatta will create over 4100 direct and indirect jobs across the project lifespan, and over 400 ongoing jobs once it is operational.

“This important project will also deliver an important boost to Western Sydney businesses and the local economy.”