

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/500m-revamp-to-destroy-ultimo-powerhouse/news-story/1e4ee7ef3c17bf27df31be9f9875dd75>

The Australian

4 October, 2022

\$500m revamp to ‘destroy’ Ultimo Powerhouse



Allison and Nick Harders with Nora, 8, and Gavin, 5, enjoying an the interactive exhibit. Picture: Jane Dempster

[STEPHEN RICE](#)

NSW EDITOR [@riceyontheroad](#)

- 5:52PM OCTOBER 3, 2022
- [2 COMMENTS](#)

The controversial \$500m plan to convert the Ultimo Powerhouse from a science and technology museum into a fashion and design complex will destroy one of the world’s greatest international museums, the museum’s founding director says.

Lindsay Sharp, a world-recognised expert in museum construction and curation, slammed the Perrottet government’s move to break up the unique collection of industrial and scientific items as a “waffly kind of woke-ism”.

“You’re building this massive new edifice with no valid business case and you’re effectively destroying one of the great international museum expressions of the mid-to-late 20th century,” Dr Sharp told The Australian.

“You could wonderfully restore and revitalise the entire Powerhouse Museum campus for less than half the money.”

Five Australian architectural design teams have been short-listed to participate in a design competition to redevelop the site, including the likely demolition of the old tram sheds, at a cost of \$500m.

The government plans to name the winning team by December, a move that would lock a Labor government into the contract should it win office at the state election in March.

Only the iconic 1785 Boulton and Watt Steam Engine, the Catalina flying boat and the giant locomotive that hauled NSW’s first train in 1855 have been guaranteed to remain at Ultimo but Dr Sharp says that even if the promise is kept the three objects “will be sitting there with no context, no history, no background.”

Fashion items currently represent less than 2 per cent of the entire Powerhouse collection, former Powerhouse senior executive Jennifer Sanders has said.

A parliamentary committee last week blasted the NSW government’s management of the entire Powerhouse project which, with a new centre under construction in Parramatta and the expansion of a facility at Castle Hill, will cost at least \$1.34bn.

“Where there is currently a thematically coherent science and technology museum (at Ultimo) with a clear and distinct identity, there will be a confused hotchpotch of fashion items displayed alongside a handful of large items of industrial and transport heritage,” said inquiry chairman Robert Borsak, leader of the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party. “The original decision to relocate the Powerhouse Museum (to Parramatta) was a thought bubble that became official government policy without any real evidence base.”



A design concept for Powerhouse Parramatta.

Community groups have been incensed at a remark by NSW Arts Minister Ben Franklin who justified the planned moves saying: “Gone are the days when museums and galleries are big square rooms filled with glass cabinets.”

The Powerhouse Museum has gained an international reputation over three decades for its hands-on approach to exhibits, making it a popular destination for parents and children.

Dr Sharp, who was responsible for many of the early innovations offered by the museum, said: "It's almost as if he's been asleep, like Rip Van Winkle. The Powerhouse as it emerged in the 1980s was the antithesis of that."

For Nick and Allison Harders, introducing their children, Nora, 8, and Gavin, 5, to some of the interactive exhibits at the museum for the first time on Monday, news of the planned changes came as a shock.

"It was a wonderful day out ... with the kids being active and entertained but also learning something, so it's disappointing to hear they're going to be changing it," Mr Harders said. "I'm a bit of a science nerd and I really enjoy sharing that with the kids."