

There was one clear winner in Sydney's battle of the museums

In print as:

Sharks help win bigger bite of visitor figures



By [Linda Morris](#)

November 28, 2022 — 5.00am

KEY POINTS

- A total of 168,741 visitors came to the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo in the 12 months to July.
- Australian Museum's *Jurassic World by Brickman* drew 213,750 visitors.
- The Art Gallery of NSW welcomed 524,845 to its Domain home.

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Visitor numbers to the Powerhouse Museum fell to their lowest levels in two decades as Sydney families flocked to the Australian Museum and helped it set a new attendance record.

More people attended the Australian Museum's four-month blockbuster – *Jurassic World by Brickman* (213,750) – than walked through the doors of the Ultimo museum in a year.

Newly renovated at a cost of \$57.5 million, the Australian Museum achieved record visitation in 2021-22, according to its [latest annual report](#). This was despite a COVID-19 outbreak shutting all museums for three months.

The Australian Museum drew 569,210 visitors over the year – a 23 per cent increase on the previous year – thanks to the lure of its new exhibition hall and family-friendly *Jurassic World*.



Crowds at the Australian Museum on Sunday . CREDIT: EDWINA PICKLES

With the opening in September of the [homegrown *Sharks* exhibition](#), 830,000 people have visited the Australian Museum this year. Chief executive Kim McKay predicts the museum is within weeks of welcoming its one millionth visitor in 2022, setting another record.

“During the two-week July school holiday period, we saw over 100,000 visitors, while in the October school holiday period when *Sharks* opened, we had over 80,000 visitors come through the doors. These numbers set a new benchmark in museum and gallery visitation nationally,” McKay said.

At the Art Gallery of NSW’s home in the Domain, admissions were slightly down on the previous year, but two million people are predicted to flock to its new wing from Saturday.

It was a gloomier picture for the Powerhouse Museum, a one-time mecca for families. As it prepares to close next December for a \$500 million renovation, visitation to the Harris Street site sank to its lowest level in at least 20 years.

Fewer than 180,000 visitors were welcomed at Ultimo (168,741) and the Museums Discovery Centre at Castle Hill (10,154) in 2021-22, a year in which the Sydney Observatory was closed.



The Zampatti Powerhouse exhibition is expected to revive visitation. *CREDIT: WIREIMAGE*

Visits to Ultimo were about half the 381,582 visits logged in 2013-14 when the Baird government first worried about its popularity and discussed shifting the Powerhouse to Parramatta, where a second museum is now under construction.

The decision to close Ultimo was reversed by the Berejiklian government in July 2020 but public uncertainty remains, much to the frustration of museum staff, said assistant secretary of the Public Service Association, Troy Wright.

Powerhouse chief executive Lisa Havilah blamed the low visitation figures on the timing of new blockbuster exhibitions falling outside the reporting year. COVID lockdowns also impacted on visitations, including its busiest months of December and January, when COVID cases peaked.

The low numbers underlined the need for learning spaces and improved internal circulation, she said, but Havilah says she is already seeing a rebound with the recent opening of *Unpopular*, *Zampatti Powerhouse*, and *Gucci Garden Archetypes*. “Over this last week, more than 15,000 people have visited the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo. The Powerhouse is on track to achieve over 700,000 visitors in this financial year.”

Former Powerhouse Museum trustee Kylie Winkworth said attendance figures were the lowest since the institution had opened at Ultimo in 1988. There had been a 73.8 per cent fall in the number of learners and teachers coming to Ultimo compared to 2018-19.

“This isn’t about COVID. These numbers denote an active indifference to attracting audiences and contempt for the museum’s education remit.”

Havilah has championed [a shift in museum experience](#) towards multiple visits, more rapid rotation of exhibitions, and late-night programming, including a controversial focus on fashion and design at Ultimo.

She denied the museum had abandoned families in its push for a younger audience, saying it had long-established school holiday programs and the permanent exhibition [Experimentations](#) was directed at children. “There are school children on-site at the Powerhouse every day,” she said. McKay said fact-based information presented in a creative way was a strong drawcard for Australian Museum audiences.

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[Linda Morris](#) is an arts writer at The Sydney Morning HeraldConnect via [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) or [email](#).