

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/apr/25/revealed-the-buried-powerhouse-museum-report-that-could-have-stopped-500m-redevelopment>

Revealed: the 'buried' Powerhouse Museum report that could have stopped \$500m redevelopment

A prominent heritage architect alleges the NSW government terminated his contract and hired another company after he advised that the Ultimo site should be heritage listed

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The Powerhouse, formerly the Powerhouse Museum, in Ultimo, Sydney. Photograph: Ruben Ramos/Alamy

A heritage architect hired by the previous New South Wales government to consult on major redevelopments at Sydney's Powerhouse museum is alleging that his research was buried. He alleges this was because it would have scuppered controversial plans to demolish much of the beloved Sydney institution.

Alan Croker, who has previously consulted on architectural landmarks such as the Sydney Opera House, told Guardian Australia his company, Design 5, drafted a conservation management plan (CMP) for the heritage significance of the Ultimo site in October 2021.

However, his recommendation that the entire site be heritage listed threatened \$500m plans to turn the Powerhouse into a commercially-oriented fashion and design hub.

The final report from a second company was published under then premier Dominic Perrottet in mid-2022. It meant the government could demolish most or all of what was constructed at the Powerhouse in the 1980s, when the former power station was converted into Australia's largest science and technology museum.

The state government first announced in 2015 that the museum would be relocated to a new \$915m facility in Parramatta and the Ultimo site redeveloped. Two years later, after considerable public outcry, the plan was dropped. But a year later it was readopted by the Berejiklian government. In February this year the beloved institution dropped "museum" from its name altogether.



The winning design for the Powerhouse Ultimo redevelopment. Photograph: Durbach Block Jagers Architects

Proposed development plans and artists' impressions of the Ultimo redevelopment show that a third of the existing museum buildings could be demolished and the

remaining interiors potentially gutted, despite a warning from the National Trust that the plans are "intrusive and destructive" to the precinct's heritage.

Croker believes his CMP, a draft of which was handed to the government in April 2022, ended up "buried somewhere" because its findings were "not what the powers that be wanted to know".

His findings would have laid the groundwork to expand the heritage listing to the Ultimo site in its entirety, as per the recommendation of the National Trust.

"It's time somebody told the truth about what happened," Croker told the Guardian. "This ongoing silence is not right."

'The public deserves to know': Croker's research

Croker said he submitted his preliminary findings for his CMP to the government's cultural body, Create NSW, in December 2021, in the presence of the museum's chief executive, Lisa Havilah, and representatives of the state government.

His research found that the entire Ultimo site should have been placed on the state heritage register back in the 1980s, when the old Ultimo Power Station and Sydney tramsheds, dating back to 1899, were incorporated into the new museum precinct. Only the shell of the old power station was listed at the time.

To expand the heritage listing, as Croker's research recommended, would have thwarted any attempt to demolish the museum's galleria, where NSW's first train, Locomotive No. 1, is housed, as well as the entire Wran wing, the public face of the museum, which has won multiple awards including the Sir John Sulman Medal for architecture in 1988.

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Croker said communication with Create NSW stalled soon after he presented his findings in December 2021. He alleges that a series of public consultations, which were to be included in his report, were initially delayed, while requests for feedback to enable him and his staff to

proceed to the next stage were ignored." The silence from the Powerhouse Museum and the government became increasingly loud," Croker said.

On 28 March 2022, at a meeting with museum and Create NSW senior staff, Croker said he expressed concern that the government had appeared to have misrepresented a summary of the delayed public consultations, which took place in the weeks leading up to the meeting. The consultations were mandatory to enable the planning approval process to move ahead. Croker said he attended all the public meetings and briefings to stakeholders in February and March, during which opposition to the redevelopment was vocal. But in the summary presented to him by Create NSW in March, the public response appeared to be only positive.

Croker said there was overwhelming expert advice from conservation, architecture and museology experts urging against the demolition of the Powerhouse. "But we were expected to just tick the boxes so they could go ahead... we refused to do that," he said. "These are public buildings, effectively owned by the public. The public has the right to know."

The same day the government terminated his contract.

Both the former government and the Powerhouse deny the existence of Croker's CMP, which he alleges he handed to the government in April. In separate statements, both parties said Design 5 had only been commissioned to "develop heritage conservation research for the Ultimo site".

The CMP that was finally published was compiled by another company, Curio Projects, which Create NSW said "acknowledges the heritage conservation research undertaken by Design 5 Architects". That CMP was made public in May last year and categorised much of the museum as of low to moderate heritage significance. Croker said none of his CMP findings were in the Curio plan, only some preliminary research he had compiled for an earlier design principles document.

Curio declined to respond to requests for comment.

By September, knowledge of Croker's version of the CMP was widespread enough that the opposition and crossbench parties asked about its existence in budget estimates.



The proposed \$915m Powerhouse Parramatta museum. Photograph: Powerhouse Museum

On 5 September, Create NSW's chief executive, Annette Pitman, told estimates: "There's only one conservation management plan that we have produced. There's only one that was commissioned. There's only one that we have produced."

On 6 September, Create NSW paid Croker's company \$87,117.25 for an invoice titled "Conservation Management Plan".

A spokesperson for Create NSW told the Guardian Design 5's contract was terminated because Croker's company had failed to meet deadlines.

"Any inference that the contract was terminated due to the content of the research is false," the statement said.

The published report

The CMP published by the government in May 2022 was targeted on multiple fronts, including in written submissions to the government's 2022 concept plan for the Ultimo site from the City of Sydney and the National Trust, with

the latter concluding that the plan was "inadequate and does not comprehensively address the needs or values of the precinct".

The International Council of Museums' submission said the concept plan "looks to be the removal rather than the redevelopment of a museum" and "the idea of 'museum' is not reflected in the proposal".

The City of Sydney submission noted "inadequacies" in the CMP had consequently meant that "the statement of significance and the gradings of significance of individual spaces and components generally undervalues the heritage item".

The complaints were so prominent that the State Significant Development Assessment signed off by the planning minister, Anthony Roberts, in February this year included the note: "The Department acknowledges the criticisms and concerns about the structure, content and analysis provided by the CMP".

Of the 108 submissions the government received in 2022 relating to the Ultimo site redevelopment, 96 were against the project. Among them was one from the Powerhouse's former president and trustee and lawyer, Nick Pappas, who wrote the project was "a long and sorry story of public deceit and a wanton waste of public resources".

The Powerhouse's founding director, Dr Lindsay Sharp, said it was "inconceivable" and "completely flawed" that the Heritage Council of NSW had not heeded the National Trust's recommendation and listed the entire Ultimo site on the heritage register. "What I do know is that there was a CMP written by a very professional person and that person's report has disappeared," Sharp said.

The future of the Powerhouse

A spokesperson for Perrottet said that both the former premier and his ministerial staff "have no recollection of this matter".

In February, the International Committee on the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage wrote to Perrottet to express "profound concern about the current situation and future plans for the Powerhouse". The committee wanted to place on record its "emphatic objections" to the redevelopment plans, "which I note with concern," the committee's president, Dr Miles

Oglethorpe, from St Andrews University in Scotland wrote, "is no longer referred to as a `Museum'.

Before it was elected in March, Labor promised to "save" the Ultimo Powerhouse and end the secrecy still shrouding many of the plans for the site. The new arts minister, John Graham, attributed the lack of transparency to the previous government's "obsession with commercialisation and privatisation".

"We are going to be a lot more public about what's going on there ... it's got to be a museum, that's not up for negotiation," Graham said three days before the March election. On Tuesday the minister said the allegations raised were concerning.

"I've asked for advice [from various departments] on which of these documents can be made public," he said.