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Forget the bridge and Bondi Beach: Culture at heart of new tourism plan

Also as: **Culture, not scenery, is NSW tourism's
new hot spot**



By [Linda Morris](#)

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Sydney's musicians, galleries, museums, restaurants and theatres will be at the forefront of a new national and global tourism rebrand as the Minns government takes its lead from federal Labor and commits to "bringing cultural vibrancy back to NSW".

The state's tourism pitch to international and interstate visitors will shift focus from the icons of the harbour, Bondi Beach and Sydney Opera House to experience-based tourism under the watch of incoming Arts and Tourism Minister John Graham.



New Arts and Tourism Minister John Graham says the new campaign is "going to be about the incredible experience you might have in Sydney". *CREDIT: RHETT WYMAN*

“As soon as you do that, tourism becomes an arts and culture story,” Graham told *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

NSW will also get its own arts and cultural policy by year’s end, similar to that launched by the Albanese government in January, with Graham declaring it one of his biggest priorities.

Graham, who also manages the roads’ portfolio, spearheaded a parliamentary inquiry into the state’s music and arts economy post-introduction of lockdown laws, and like federal minister, Tony Burke, is known as a strong advocate for live music.

Graham claims a wide-ranging taste in music, but says the most exciting music right now is coming out of the African Australian hip-hop scene – artists like Sampa the Great, Kwame, and Genesis Owusu.

“The fact that an amazing artist like Sampa the Great felt she had to leave Sydney for Melbourne to further her career is precisely the problem that we need to fix,” he said.



The new Minns government will put Sydney’s culture and nightlife at the heart of its new tourism push. *CREDIT: STEVEN SIEWERT*

Labor’s pre-election promises on arts and culture were relatively modest but targeted: matching \$160 million in funding to upgrade three western Sydney

arts venues, the [restoration of Parramatta's Roxy Theatre](#), and a pledge to spend [\\$103 million to double the number of suburban and regional live music venues in four years](#).

Graham has also flagged changes in priorities to the Powerhouse Museum at Parramatta and Ultimo, as Labor takes charge of the controversial museum project eight years after former Premier Mike Baird first took the idea to relocate the Ultimo museum to voters.

That decision was overturned in the face of public protests, with the Powerhouse to now operate across the two campuses.

The \$915 million Parramatta Powerhouse will be given a new name when the Minns government opens the building in the next two years. It will likely drop the use of the word Powerhouse altogether, so it can forge a separate identity from its sister museum.

"We want Parramatta to grow with its own identity, its own place, its own name over time," Graham said.

Labor will also abandon an unpopular split between fashion and design at Ultimo, and science and technology at Parramatta.

It has not [committed to the detail of the Coalition's \\$500 million redevelopment at Ultimo](#), now in its design phase, which calls for the demolition of the museum's 1988-built atrium extension to the heritage-listed buildings of the Ultimo Power Station and the old post office.



The Parramatta Powerhouse will be given a new name by the Minns government.
[Note: this is the design proposal for Ultimo, not Parramatta]

“I’m very conscious [Powerhouse Ultimo] is a big part of the Wran story,” he said. “[Former NSW Premier] Neville Wran supported the arts and that institution and I’m conscious the redevelopment is controversial and has been kept secret for eight years.

“We are going to be a lot more public about what’s going on there, what’s planned and I want to invite the public in on the conversation. I want a vibrant museum that is evolving over time, it’s got to be a museum, that’s not up for negotiation.”

The new minister met with the leaders of cultural institutions and Destination NSW, the government’s tourism agency, the day before Cabinet’s formal swearing-in last week. The state’s aspirations for arts and culture had been set too low, he said, and Labor would seek to broaden traditional definitions to include creative industries such as gaming, design, and architecture.

Graham said he had already spoken to Destination NSW about options to change the agency’s short-term mission from a focus on overnight stays.

“To deliver bed nights in the next weeks or month is too narrow to capture the reason why someone might come to NSW, have an incredible time and come back in six months’ time and tell all their friends they have to come too,” he said. “It’s going to be about the incredible experience you might have in Sydney, after dark, at a restaurant, go to the Opera House, then a small music or theatre venue.”

Western Sydney is likely to see more tourism dollars comes its way as a result. A region that helped deliver Labor minority government is poorly served by venues, and has received little marketing investment compared to the CBD, a situation Graham wants to reverse.

Also receiving ministerial scrutiny is the agency’s multimillion-dollar, five-year licensing deal to bring the global cultural juggernaut, South by Southwest, to the Sydney CBD. Graham said the music and talks festival import from Austin, Texas, was “consistent with the direction we want to head with the creative industries”.

“But I’m concerned that if it’s just a little bit of US culture dropped into Sydney, it won’t work,” he said. Asked if some of its events should be staged in western Sydney, he said: “Should it happen in the medium to longer term? Absolutely.”