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# Hidden report puts \$500m project under a cloud

## POWERHOUSE MUSEUM

Linda Morris



A design for the new Powerhouse Museum by Durbach Block Jagers Architects.

A \$500 million redevelopment of the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo is under a cloud after a long-hidden report surfaced that recommended state heritage listing of parts of the museum now slated for demolition later this year.

Arts minister John Graham has called for the government arts agency to provide him with a copy of the draft report by heritage consultant Alan Croker, whose firm's contract ended shortly before he could officially deliver his final draft.

Croker found significant parts of the 1988 museum extensions deserved conservation and protection.

Croker's draft conservation management plan shows the site was of historical and exceptional cultural significance for its collection of 19<sup>th</sup>-century historic buildings on the site of the first power station constructed for Sydney's electric tram network, and its later adaptation in 1988 into a museum precinct.

These findings were not included in the planning documents used to justify the redevelopment of the Ultimo museum for a new main entrance, reoriented to the Goods Line and new public square, rooftop gardens and multistorey annex running the length of Harris Street across its forecourt.

The "renewal" plans are now being finalised by the winning architect team, Architectus, Durbach Block Jaggers Architects, Tyrrell Studio, Youssofzay + Hart, Finding Infinity and Arup.

The plans require the demolition of the arched galleria constructed when the former power station was converted into Australia's iconic science, applied arts and technology museums. Croker's firm Design 5 rates the galleria that references the Garden Palace, which burnt to the ground in 1882 and housed the museum's foundation collection, as being of exceptional significance; the half-arched building on Harris Street, less so.

Croker's contract was terminated by Create NSW days before finalising the report in April last year that confirmed the "Powerhouse Museum in its setting reaches the threshold for state significance".

A spokesperson for Create NSW characterised the work of Design 5 as research and said the contract was ended on March 28, 2022, due to missed project deadlines.

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

"The CMP compiled by Curio [Projects] includes a synthesis of heritage conservation research that was commissioned by Create NSW to be undertaken by Design 5 Architects, and contributions from a number of other consultants, which is appropriate practice for documents of this kind."

Croker said he presented an initial draft in December 2021 to Powerhouse executives and staff for formal comment, and his contract was ended abruptly without ever receiving that response. Current design plans, he said, were based on an "incomplete understanding of the importance of the buildings and the museum on the Powerhouse site".

Graham said he had raised questions about "a second CMP" on the Ultimo Renewal project in Budget Estimates in September.

"I have now begun being briefed on the matter," he said. "I have requested the relevant documents be delivered to my office."

The nature of the contract, the content of the work, and motivations for ending it are expected to be carefully examined by his office.

"I have also asked for advice as to what documents can be released publicly," he said.

"I have said all along that we will be transparent with regards to the Powerhouse Ultimo Renewal and that we will ensure that a world-class museum is delivered in line with the legitimate heritage and planning expectations of the local community and state."

Croker's report said the conversion of the former Power House and Tram Depot to designs by architect Lionel Glendenning was highly significant for setting new benchmarks for postmodern architecture, adaptive reuse, museology, museum standards, sustainability and heritage conservation.

And the museum was a marker of a period of reform and change to mark the Australian Bicentenary in NSW under the direction of former premier Neville Wran.

"The Powerhouse Museum is unique as a former industrial precinct," the draft report said. "The design philosophy for the museum is unique for celebrating the origins of the institution it would serve."

A Powerhouse spokesperson said the NSW Heritage Council reviewed all buildings within the Powerhouse Ultimo precinct and determined that the Wran building was not of state heritage significance.