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Opinion (Editorial)

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(Editor: Bevan Shields)

Firm decisions crucial to future of Powerhouse

Online later as:

Powerhouse power down risks museum losing purpose

A\$500 million redevelopment of the Powerhouse Museum seems on hold as authorities return to their indecisive habits on what to do about the Ultimo institution.

The people of NSW are adamant they want a museum on the site but years of confused policy risks stripping the Powerhouse of purpose and turning it into a second-class attraction as other Sydney cultural institutions bloom.

Many offer such first-class experiences that people's expectations are much higher than those of previous generations. But should they visit Ultimo these days, those expectations are clearly not being met. The museum's fall from grace is reflected in attendance: a one-time mecca for families, visits in 2021-22 sank to their lowest level in at least 20 years, at 168,741. This compares with the 381,582 visits logged in 2012-14 when the Baird government first worried about its popularity and discussed shifting the Powerhouse to Parramatta. Ever since, confusion and vacillation have been the order of the day.

Then-premier Mike Baird decided in 2015 that the much-loved complex, which includes the city's former powerhouse and tram sheds and was converted to a museum as a Bicentennial project in 1988, would be relocated to a new \$915 million facility in Parramatta and the Ultimo site redeveloped. After considerable public outcry, the Berejiklian government reviewed Baird's decision in 2017 and determined it should stay put.

The following year it reversed the decision and suggested closing Ultimo sometime between 2020 and 2021. In July 2020, it went back on its word to close the site and relocate the collections. In 2021, the Berejiklian government allocated \$500 million to transform the Powerhouse precinct into a commercially oriented fashion and design hub.

The latest proposal has also been met with full-frontal attacks from conservationists, arts administrators and some who pushed for the museum's establishment in the 1980s. They want the

Ultimo site's partial heritage listing to be expanded to its entirety, as recommended by the National Trust.

Meanwhile, public confusion is being stoked by architects arguing the toss: one company that drafted a conservation management plan claimed the museum had low to moderate heritage significance; another architect, Alan Croker, said his pro-heritage listing report to the NSW government was buried because it would have scuppered the new development.

The plans call for the demolition of the 1988-built Wran building to make way for a new library annex along Harris Street, overnight accommodation for visiting regional students, six exhibition spaces and the reorientation of the museum's entrance to Haymarket.

For its part, NSW Labor in the approach to the March state election affirmed qualified support for Ultimo as a world-class museum but admitted concern over the shift in focus from a science and engineering museum to fashion and design.

The upshot is that the future of the Powerhouse Museum languishes in limbo. The idea that the Wran extension – a relatively modern steel and tin shed – should hold up a final decision on what to do is, frankly, ridiculous. *[Edited on line later as: The upshot is that the future of the Powerhouse Museum languishes in limbo. The Herald is particularly sceptical of calls for the heritage listing of the Wran building, a steel and tin extension barely 35 years old.]*

Certainly, the way through the current confusion will be fraught. The *Herald* is heartened by the network of galleries and collections across NSW that allow the community to experience art and technology. Perhaps the Powerhouse's rebuild cost of \$500 million can be revisited. After all, the cost of the Art Gallery of NSW's monumental new Sydney Modern wing was held to \$344 million and it is looking for 2 million visitors in its first year.

The people of Sydney said years ago they wanted a museum on the Ultimo site. The challenge facing the Minns government is to clear the confusion that now overhangs redevelopment of an increasingly stale part of Sydney.