

<https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/say-goodbye-powerhouse-museum-set-to-shut-its-doors-for-almost-three-years-20230510-p5d7fg.html>

Say goodbye: Powerhouse Museum set to shut its doors for almost three years



By [Linda Morris](#)

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The Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo would likely shut for almost three years to allow for the knock-down and rebuild of the museum's 35-year-old wing.

Management of Australia's leading science and technology museum will begin moving dozens of staff out of the Ultimo location from next month when an application for the site's redevelopment could be lodged.

A construction period of 30 months is estimated for the \$500 million redevelopment, which will upgrade exhibition and circulation spaces and reorient the museum's entrance towards the city. The museum was expected to close in December, with tenders to go out early next year, and in this scenario the rebuilt museum would not reopen until 2026.



Render of the new-look Powerhouse when it reopens in 2026.

The broad timetable for the redevelopment was disclosed for the first time in a briefing called by new arts minister John Graham, who has ordered transparency around the planned rebuild.

The museum's Boulton & Watt rotative steam engine, built in 1785 and a priceless relic of the steam age, would be dismantled and stored off-site, but the museum says it is yet to carry out a risk assessment to confirm it is safe to do so.

The iconic Locomotive No. 1, which once pulled the state's first train, and the Catalina flying boat could be crated up and transported to a regional gallery for display during the shutdown, Powerhouse chief executive Lisa Havilah confirmed.

"If we can find a location where the conditions are right and the objects are 100 per cent safe that would be the best outcome," Havilah said.

But the museum's founding director, Lindsay Sharp, has called for the government to halt the redevelopment and consider undertaking instead a less expensive but "radical evolution" of the 1988 campus that would be capable of "taking the museum far into the future".

It would be possible, he said, to renovate and extend the museum for about half the cost of the planned rebuild without shutting down the site entirely and having to rebuild audiences once it reopens.

This approach would also enable the museum to respond more immediately to the city's 24-hour nighttime economy and support the creative arts.

"As it stands, you are wasting money that has already been expended, and you're knocking down buildings that already have a carbon load built in," he said. "The government can get maximum, sustainable value for around half the cost. Truthfully, it would be a really exciting museum experience.

"We could take very large objects like the Boulton & Watt steam engine and the Locomotive No. 1 and completely retell the story of the world's steam, industrial, and transport revolutions using new technologies and interactives," said Sharp.

Graham, whose government will have the final say if the project should go ahead, said the government supported a museum of the highest excellence at the Ultimo site that had "a clear and distinct identity, and which built on its traditional focus on science, engineering, transport, design, the technical arts, and education". He added that the government remained "committed to the Wran legacy and transparency. We are working through the details of this significant project in an orderly manner, including upcoming community consultation in the coming weeks".

Detailed architectural plans by lead architect Durbach Block Jagers, which won the contract after a national design competition, will be lodged with the Department of Planning next month.

Project timelines were subject to the procurement of a construction partner and completion of the planning process, the arts agency Create NSW said. Infrastructure NSW said construction timing was subject to planning approvals, design, and procurement processes.



View of the Powerhouse. *CREDIT: JAMES ALCOCK*

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.

When finished, Havilah said, the new development would dramatically increase the size and quality of museum exhibition space and improve visitor experiences. The current Ultimo exhibition space of 15,318 sq/m was not fit for purpose and did not have the ability to secure international exhibitions.

"The challenge with that exhibition space is that it's not separated from circulation," she said. "It really impacts very negatively on the visitor experience."

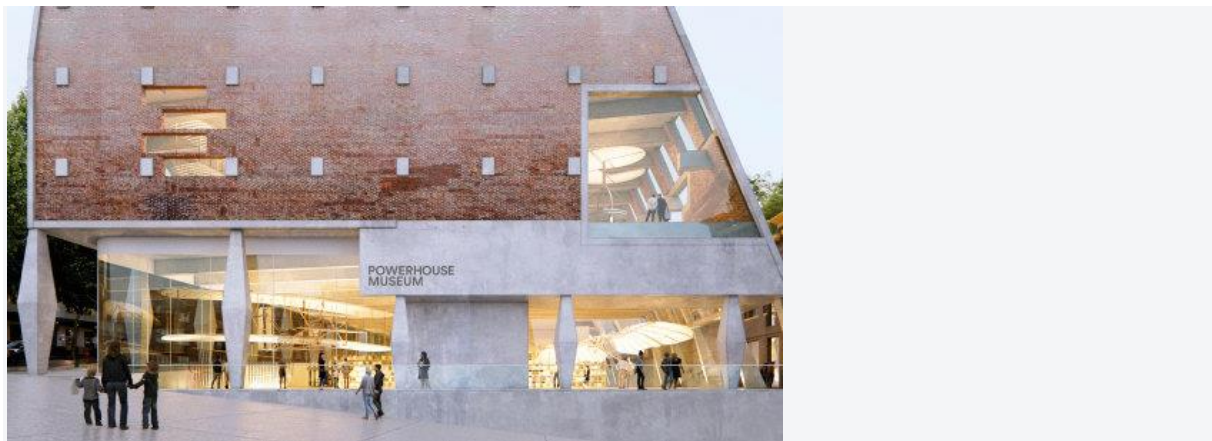
A total of 58 collection and curatorial staff will move to the Castle Hill site from June 20, to be followed three weeks later by another 76 staff who will shift to offices overlooking the riverside construction site of the Parramatta Powerhouse, the first NSW cultural institution to call western Sydney home.

Apart from high-value jewellery and armour, the Powerhouse's collection has already been substantially removed from basement storage at Ultimo and sent to its Castle Hill site, which has also been under renovation and is expected to open soon.

However, [a draft report by eminent heritage consultant Alan Croker surfaced last month to cast doubt over the Ultimo redevelopment.](#)

Croker, the author of the Sydney Opera House's conservation management plan, had supported heritage listing parts of the museum now slated for demolition. His firm's contract was terminated before he could officially deliver his final draft. Create NSW's chief executive Annette Pitman denied the relationship was severed as a result of any directive by the former Coalition government or because of its content.

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Croker's report found 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, and was unique as a former industrial precinct.