

<https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/goodbye-powerhouse-museum-revised-shutdown-plans-revealed-20231201-p5eo9i.html>

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Goodbye, Powerhouse Museum: revised shutdown plans revealed

in print as 'Powering down: re-vamp to close museum in February'



By [Linda Morris](#)

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Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo will shut February 5, after the school holidays, for three years.

The Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo will close in nine weeks' time for up to three years for multimillion-dollar renovations to its 35-year home, the Minns government will announce on Monday.

After nine years of fractious debate about its future, the doors of the Powerhouse will shut to the public at the end of the school holidays on February 5.

The September budget scrapped a \$500 million rebuild of the museum, opting instead for a \$250 million "heritage revitalisation".



Powerhouse's new city-oriented entrance next to the Goods Line. *CREDIT: TYRRELL STUDIO*

New concept plans developed by architects Durbach Block Jagers show the smaller budget will spread to a new entrance oriented to the city, showing off the heritage facades of the original 1899 power station and the 1902 Turbine Hall, and a low-rise addition and cloistered public square along Harris Street.

The temporary closure will enable the protection of the collection and the most efficient delivery of the project, the government said, and have the least impact on the Powerhouse, communities and audiences.

A staged closure was ruled out as it would have only “amplified” the cost of the project, extended the disruption period and led to a compromised visitor experience over a prolonged period, it said.



The cloistered public square on the corner of Harris and Macarthur streets. *CREDIT: DURBACH BLOCK JAGGERS*

“When we close we will immediately begin decanting works in our collection on site, with care leading up to approvals and the letting of a construction contract so as not to delay the delivery of the project,” the museum’s chief executive Lisa Havilah said.

Subject to a detailed risk assessment, the priceless Boulton & Watt rotative steam engine will remain in situ through the building works. NSW’s first train, Locomotive No 1, and the Catalina flying boat are to be relocated to its Castle Hill store, a regional museum or museum standard storage when work gets underway, Havilah said.

Arts minister John Graham has guaranteed that all three of the museum’s iconic large objects will be back on show at Ultimo when the refurbished museum opens by 2026.

“After nine years of divided opinions of this site, we are hopeful that these new designs and a renewed focus on applied arts and sciences are more in line with the community’s expectations of this much-loved institution,” he said in a statement.



The exoskeleton of the new Parramatta Powerhouse going up riverside.

CREDIT: STEVEN SIEWERT

“The area around the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo has changed significantly in the last 30 years. The design plans will reorient the museum, and open onto the Goods Line. This will connect the museum to the city, including major public transport options.”

The closure leaves the museum without a permanent shopfront until late 2025 when the museum’s new \$915 million headquarters opens on the Parramatta riverside.

Havilah said the museum would deliver public programs including Sydney Design Week and Sydney Science Festival in partnership with University of Technology Sydney and Western Sydney University, and at Museum Discovery Centre at Castle Hill and the Sydney Observatory. “We want to be as active as we have ever been in terms of program, collection development, and research,” she said.



The new low-rise building along Harris Street. *CREDIT: DURBACH BLOCK JAGGERS*

The shutdown is not entirely unexpected, given the museum had no shows in development to fill its halls, once the [Leo Schofield curated 1001 Remarkable Objects](#) finishes.

Critics have warned that any closure before state planning approvals, community consultation and the letting of the construction contract would be entirely to save on the museum's operating costs.

"There is no heritage revitalisation," former Powerhouse trustee, Kylie Winkworth said. "The only renewal is the renewal of the secret plans to radically alter the Powerhouse's mission, downsize its exhibition spaces, remove the staff and collections to an inaccessible site at Castle Hill, and destroy the collection facilities and museum endowed by the Wran government and taxpayers of NSW. All this after just 35 years. It is an unprecedented cultural tragedy."

The Powerhouse is offering redundancies for 12 full-time visitor information officers and says it is helping casuals find other front-of-house opportunities in other cultural institutions. Conservation and curatorial positions are unaffected, it said.

But Public Service Association general secretary Stuart Little, said the union had received clear undertakings from the government that there would be no job losses, and any affected staff would be redeployed.

He said the union has expressed concern to the minister at how museum management will prioritise the collection and focus on Ultimo while it is focused on Parramatta.

"Given this is a significant investment by the state government and the Powerhouse is such an iconic institution, we want to make sure it receives adequate attention from senior management who are also tasked with implementing Parramatta."

The Powerhouse Museum is to raise \$50 million towards the project, giving it a total budget of \$300 million for the rebuild of which more than \$20 million has been spent on preliminary engineering and design works to date.

Havilah said the investment would be transformative and "enable the museum to move into the future, which enables it to not only showcase the collection but to give spaces back to the community" and for education purposes.

Under the latest plans, the museum's 1988-built galleria, where the Locomotive No. 1 is housed, and the Wran wing are to be retained. These were extensions to the heritage-listed buildings of the repurposed Ultimo Power Station.

Next to the Wran building, a two-storey building will be built running along Harris Street, extending across the forecourt entrance and wrapping back to create an enclosed square protected from the elements.

The building will house a new exhibition space, learning spaces and a research library, as well as workshops and studios for creatives and researchers in the field of science and technology.

Overnight dormitories for 60 students will be built in the old Powerhouse Switch House. The 1901 post office is to be restored for education and community use next to an expanded park at the museum's western corner.

"At the moment Harris Street forecourt is not a very inviting or usable space, it's hot, windy, and loud, and this development will create a beautifully cloistered green space that will connect to education, community and exhibitions spaces," Havilah said.



Linda Morris is an arts writer at The Sydney Morning Herald
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Comments are now closed

jls

19 HOURS AGO

If this PHM fiasco is 'the Light on the Hill', God help us whenever this Government makes decisions. The Powerhouse Museum is still being destroyed in a property deal. The Harwood Building - the former Ultimo Tram Depot - is central to the Museum's best practice operations but is left out, no doubt for developer machinations to realise gross overdevelopment of floor space on the remnant site, traducing all the people's aspirations for the Museum in Ultimo - a museum owned by the people of NSW. As for what might be left of the people's museum, star objects may survive marooned in function spaces but to what end? The iconic Steam Revolution exhibition will be destroyed as will the exhibitions beloved of students, families and kids. As to the 'heritage revitalisation' of the Powerhouse Museum - the building is being stripped out and will be engulfed in a brick showroom along the primary peninsula spine - Harris Street. To top it off, the public's forecourt is being stolen.

Another broken promise of this barely there Labor government. They had the chance to write the wrongs of the LNP's plans for the PHM's destruction and instead, have simply signed on the bottom line. Labor's legacy is disappearing fast.

RESPECT2

Reportflag

Ernie Dale

21 HOURS AGO

Stripped down to basics, this is about whether the museum should continue to be a private plaything for the inner city set, or the exhibits made properly accessible to the majority of citizens.

Fortunately for Greater Sydney the writing appears to be on the wall, and I'm very doubtful that the angst of entrenched Green and Teal voters at having their divine right to the state's cultural capital challenged will worry Labor or the Libs very much.

Well done Chris Minns, ignore the critics - let's get those container forklifts moving and the

b doubles loaded for Castle Hill and Parra!

RESPECT

Reportflag

NewsNitPicker

13 HOURS AGO

How is Parramatta more accessible?

RESPECT

Reportflag

Jack

8 HOURS AGO

I grew up in western Sydney. I loved coming to the Powerhouse when I was a kid, we always made a family day of it. I think the idea that we need to move stuff to Parramatta to make it 'accessible' is way overblown. This move is going to gut a great institution, turning the galleries into a bunch of conference rooms and 'performance spaces', and

pushing objects people want to see into storage. If anything it risks becoming more elitist, not less.

RESPECT

Reportflag

ceebee

21 HOURS AGO

what a shambles the LNP govt made a multimillion \$\$\$ shambles

RESPECT

Reportflag

Apollo Era

21 HOURS AGO

Loco No.1 stretches along most of the long, narrow Galleria (which is supposed to be staying), so why would you take it away and then bring it back ?

And the Catalina hangs neatly out of the way, so why move it ?

There's a lot that just doesn't make sense with this new plan.

RESPECT3

Reportflag

ausca

21 HOURS AGO

As a kid I loved the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences on Harris Street. I was impressed by the 1988 Powerhouse Museum which exhibit of the Boulton Watt engine and NSW steam Locomotive number 1. I always enjoyed going there.

I just came back from London including 3 days it took me to get through their incredible Science Museum. That's more the goal any 'restoration' should aspire to, not some sort of 'performance space'. I'm really concerned that despite the warm, fuzzy description, the Powerhouse is about to be dumbed down or worse. It's sitting on really valuable land.

RESPECT4

Reportflag

charlesp1900

22 HOURS AGO

Finally some hope for what was a dying museum a decade ago. Early days but anything that improves the unfriendly forecourt and creates a welcoming entrance has to be a plus.

RESPECT

Reportflag

DJ

22 HOURS AGO

It will take 18 months to redo the sidewalks on a 300m stretch of road in Artarmon.

So 3 years to refurbish the PowerHouse Museum seems a bit unrealistic.

RESPECT

Reportflag

nicholas.loveday

22 HOURS AGO

NB never, ever let accountants run a museum - they'll put what ,otters in storage, and only leave the de=regs on display.

This occurred at Greenwich, which has been reduced to the extent it's just a cafe for tourists and a few electronic games to amuse the kids. The things that really matter aren't on display.

RESPECT1

Reportflag

nicholas.loveday

22 HOURS AGO

Huge shutdowns and revamps are a fail, long-term.

This should have been done as incremental change, and ideally as a continuous evolution of the museum. Done correctly the whole prospect of the relocation to Paramatta would never have arisen. The fact that it did is a failure of long-term planning for the museum.

RESPECT3

Reportflag

Nietzsche

1 DAY AGO

"The September budget scrapped a \$500 million rebuild of the museum, opting instead for a \$250 million "heritage revitalisation". These seem like big numbers. Now keep in mind that the AUKUS submarines will cost about \$50 million a day. So, this difference is less than a week of the decades of submarine spending we are looking down because the American military needs our money. The can't really say what it's going to be used for because they just failed their 6 audit in a

row! <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/pentagon-fails-audit-sixth-year-row-2023-11-16/>

RESPECT

Reportflag

Marika

1 DAY AGO

The plans go from bad to worse- is this designed to end up in the hands of developers? No better than previous government

RESPECT2

Reportflag

Koel

1 DAY AGO

So the Minister 'guarantees that all three of the museum's iconic large objects will be on show at Ultimo when the museum reopens in 2026'. Promising big. Only three out of hundreds of iconic large objects that make up the museum's transport and steam galleries. You'd think John Graham might have improved on the LNP's offer of just three large objects left marooned in the soon to be empty exhibition galleries. It's still the same LNP museum demolition and downsizing scheme, shamefully delivered by the government that promised to save the Powerhouse Museum and the Wran legacy. The headline is right; the Powerhouse Museum is powering down, drained of its collections, staff and purpose. Once the doors close they will never return.

RESPECT7

Reportflag

artusj

1 DAY AGO

The Powerhouse alliance (<https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/>) is the expert group that stopped the government from destroying this amazing museum. Subscribe to their emails to get the good oil on what is going on. In the meantime, there is an amazing 1000 objects exhibition curated by Leo Schofield. One of the best exhibitions ever. Go there before the huns destroy the place. Expect reopening in 2050 the way things are done at 3 times the cost. If ever.

THANKS LINDA MORRIS FOR KEEPING US UPDATED, YOU ALWAYS DO A GOOD JOB.

RESPECT7

Reportflag

Aromamerinda

1 DAY AGO

Let's hope that the current Minister (and Government) will honour the Museum's history.

The previous Government had little interest in heritage and sold everything possible off to the private sector, so, Minister keep our heritage and our history and avoid the bad decisions of the previous government.

RESPECT4

Reportflag

City Dweller

1 DAY AGO

Great news, finally developer interests promoted by the previous government have been set aside and preservation of history has been prioritised. Looks great. Shame about Willow Grove.

RESPECT5

Reportflag

jls

22 HOURS AGO

Developer interests still hold sway as the Harwood building, the former Ultimo Tram Depot will no longer provide the best practice museum and collection facilities for which it was designed and, for which it was purchased by the trustees of the Museum in 1964. This is a trojan horse project to commercialise the Museum's spaces and facilities led by the same inept team who were ready to destroy the Museum. Don't hold your breath waiting to see the iconic Steam revolution exhibition back. And why is the Switch House - 3 floors of fantastic exhibition spaces being converted to dormitories for school kids who happily go to the YMCA now - and no doubt bars and.... This is the theft of our great Museum. Write to the Premier and tell him its NOT ON.

RESPECT

Reportflag

Brendan

1 DAY AGO

Up to 3 years closure ! why so long ?

NYC's 102 storey Empire State Building was built from the ground up in 1930 in just 14 months. Perhaps they plan to get the construction firms behind the George St Tramway to do the work

Look forward to the reopening in 2029

RESPECT7

Reportflag

Jack

1 DAY AGO

Curators today love to say things like "we're going to give spaces back to the community" but what does it mean? Museums are places to house and display objects of historical and cultural importance, not for functions and conferences. Leo Schofield's show was one of the best exhibitions I've seen in years. I went twice and both times it was packed. It should have been made a permanent install. I am really worried Australia's institutions are being gutted to serve some dull bureaucratic vision.

RESPECT7

Reportflag

artusj

1 DAY AGO

Great comment.

RESPECT1

Reportflag

Overlord

1 DAY AGO

Artists impression for the new 2 storey building facing Harris St looks anything but inspirational on Powerhouse website. Hopefully the total works will be OK.

Thankfully the LNP are no longer in Government - otherwise the entire site would now be a pile of rubble to be sold to the highest bidder. The Museum has dodged a political bullet.

RESPECT15

Reportflag

Phil R.

1 DAY AGO

'Visitor experience'. This ridiculous phrase is everywhere; can we please drop it NOW and use plain English.

RESPECT20

Reportflag

BinnaBurra

1 DAY AGO

This is good news. No longer going to be gifted to property developers.

RESPECT22

Reportflag

Mon61

1 DAY AGO

Three years! Why does everything take so long in New South Wales?

RESPECT12

Reportflag

Chopan

1 DAY AGO

Mon61. HVe you built a house on the last 5...10....15 years? I somehow doubt it if you expect a timeframe of 6 months etc.

RESPECT1

Reportflag

Rambalambalambada Man

1 DAY AGO

Just remember, the Sydney Observatory and the new installation at Castle Hill was supposed to be finished and open to the public by now, so you might want to double the

timeframe and add another 50-100 million to the cost if you want a more accurate timeline and budget

RESPECT2

Reportflag

PJG

1 DAY AGO

The rollout of the Rozelle interchange has been a disaster. Similarly it appears the Powerhouse Ultimo is heading in the same direction with its plain ugly interface to Harris Street. The 'Minister for Everything' comes across as a good guy. But he urgently needs to offload a couple of portfolios to help tackle what he's being feed.

RESPECT7

Reportflag

Tilting at Windmills

1 DAY AGO

It is closing for a refurbishment.

Reading the headline assumed it was closing for good.

RESPECT7

Reportflag

Thatguy 79

1 DAY AGO

Wouldn't you wait until the new one opens in Parramatta?

RESPECT16

Reportflag

Koel

1 DAY AGO

No because that way people might realise the emperor has no clothes and the vision is for an entertainment centre not an actual museum.

RESPECT6

Reportflag

Inner West Hound

1 DAY AGO

NSW's first train, Locomotive No 1, and the Catalina flying boat are to be relocated to its Castle Hill store. Arts minister John Graham has guaranteed that the objects will be back on show at Ultimo when the refurbished museum opens by 2026. Oh no, that's it. Won't be seen again.

RESPECT14

Reportflag

Phil R.

1 DAY AGO

The large chamber where they're displayed is being maintained so I think you'll find they'll be back...the government knows the kind of public outcry that would result if they weren't.

RESPECT6