

<https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/revealed-new-look-for-powerhouse-museum-at-ultimo-20240430-p5fnnj.html>

May 3, 2024

# ‘Quality space’: New look for Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo revealed



By [Linda Morris](#)

May 3, 2024 — 12.00am

## KEY POINTS

- New environmental impact statement shows latest departmental plans for the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo, shut three months ago for a \$300 million refurbishment.
- Multiple exhibition spaces will be created and reconfigured into four main galleries, three of which will be capable of hosting international shows of the calibre of *Ramses: Gold of the Pharaohs*.
- Infrastructure NSW insists there will be no diminution in exhibition space when the museum reopens in 2027.
- The public has until the end of May to post their feedback with construction contracts to be signed by year's end.

A NSW government agency is seeking permission to demolish the forecourt of the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo for a new library, learning centre and courtyard, and to strip out modern internal additions made to the museum.

Plans to be [lodged on Friday](#) by Infrastructure NSW for public comment show the removal of ramps, stairs and mezzanines used for smaller-scale exhibitions, education spaces or visitor view points to reveal original heritage features and the facade of its historic buildings.



Looking from Macarthur St to the internal courtyard. CREDIT: DURBACH BLOCK JAGGERS & ARCHITECTUS

Multiple exhibition spaces will be reconfigured into four main halls with greater scale and flexibility, the agency says.

The move comes three months after Australia's flagship science and technology museum controversially closed its doors in February, after nine years of political wrangling about its future.

Infrastructure NSW chief executive Tom Gellibrand said the revitalised Powerhouse Ultimo would result in more exhibition space overall, not less, and "vastly improved" spaces.

Three exhibition spaces will be capable of hosting touring international shows of importance such as *Ramses: Gold of the Pharaohs*, currently drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors to the Australian Museum.



CREDIT: ARTIST'S IMPRESSION

"The museum will feel the same in terms of people's memories of experiencing those spaces, but it will be an incredible increase in the quality of space," museum chief executive Lisa Havilah said. "The roof won't leak, it will be watertight."

Former Powerhouse executives and unions representing museum staff have long questioned the cost and need for the museum's closure. They argue the redevelopment will ultimately deliver less exhibition space dedicated to showcasing the museum's collection.

Former museum trustee, Kylie Winkworth, said the proposal was the same “recycled museum demolition scheme” as proposed by the previous government.

“The mezzanines in the Wran building are going, and in the Turbine Hall. These are an integral part of the museum’s design conception and visitor circulation, as well providing large flexible education studios,” she said.

“It is losing all the Switch House exhibition spaces suitable for decorative arts and the multiple exhibition spaces in the mezzanines which will be demolished, along with all the ramps and visitor infrastructure to turn the museum into a small version of Parramatta - empty volumes suitable for venue hire.”

The NSW government has set aside \$250 million for the refurbishment, with a further \$50 million to be raised by the museum from philanthropic sources. The budget allows for a new entrance reoriented to the Goods Line and Chinatown, an internal courtyard protected from the elements, overnight dormitories for visiting country school children, a new loading dock, library and eight workshops for creative workers that will open to Harris Street.

Summary documents show museum visitors will enter via the new entrance that will reveal the heritage facades of the original power station built in 1899, and the Turbine Hall constructed in 1902. The 1901-built Post Office building located on Harris Street is to be preserved within a new pocket park.



A computer-generated image of how the courtyard will look.



Inside the major exhibition space of the Boiler House – where the Flying Catalina is suspended – mezzanine floors are to be removed to reveal the full height of the building. Modern internal additions including ramps are also to be removed from the connecting exhibition space of the Turbine Hall and Engine House to reinstate original volumes.

Infrastructure NSW's proposal will be publicised on Friday alongside a request for the project to be deemed state-significant. The public will have one month to respond.

The agency said the project was a transformative investment to support culture and arts, improve the surrounding public domain, and would support 200 direct jobs and 140 indirect jobs and add \$34 million to the local economy.

Arts minister John Graham said the NSW government would carefully consider all submissions on the revitalised design to ensure the community's voice was actively incorporated into the future of the Powerhouse Museum.

"Importantly, in this modest revitalisation we are honouring the history of the museum by revealing the heritage elements of the original Ultimo Power Station buildings and refurbishing the Wran building to achieve greater museum functionality," Graham said.

The removal of museum objects from Ultimo is expected to be completed by August with most shifted to a newly opened storehouse at Castle Hill. Costings for their removal have yet to be released.

Meanwhile, the Heritage Council is considering expanding heritage protections at Ultimo to include the entire museum site, not just its important historic buildings. Its decision is likely to be made as early as next month, separate to the request for special planning approval.

## RELATED ARTICLE



[Historic plane may fly south as doors close on Powerhouse Museum](#)