

Labor's Broken Promises on the Demolition of the Powerhouse Museum

The Powerhouse Museum is not saved. Labor's plans for the 'Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation' are a sham to hide the large-scale demolition of the Sulman award winning Powerhouse Museum that the Minns government promised to save.¹ The project is wasteful, destructive and devoid of any credible museum rationale or cultural purpose.

Not waiting for development approval, the management are now ripping out the last of the PHM's renowned transport and steam exhibitions, carting away the treasures of NSW under cover of darkness. These exhibitions are the focus of many objections to the current EIS, and nearly a decade of community protests to stop previous schemes to move, sell, empty, shrink, develop and repurpose the Powerhouse Museum. Labor's plans will de-industrialise the museum that was purpose designed to exhibit its internationally significant transport and power collections in the resonant spaces of the former power station. Creative industries, fashion and contemporary events will replace the PHM's connected histories of power, transport, technology, industry, innovation and design. Labor's big promise is that (only) three large objects will be returned to the former museum, marooned as party props in empty spaces and corridors.

The government's promised heritage revitalisation for the Powerhouse Museum is broken. Labor's plans will see the PHM gutted, emptied of its collections and demolished to the bare brick walls, erasing all trace of the 1988 museum. There is no attempt to repair, restore, conserve or renew any part of the actual Powerhouse Museum or its exhibitions. Instead of the government's promised \$250m heritage revitalisation, NSW taxpayers will be slugged more than \$400 million for a large-scale demolition project that destroys the PHM's heritage, design conception, exhibition capacity, education potential, museum assets, access to collections, and its appeal to schools and families.²

The PHM's exhibition space shrinks by 75%; from 25 flexible exhibition spaces to just three large empty spaces for unspecified 'contemporary' uses.³ 'Decluttering' the museum's spaces is code for collection eviction and the demolition of all the mezzanine exhibition galleries over five levels.⁴ If approved, the plans will destroy the PHM's interiors and 22 flexible exhibition spaces for applied arts, design, history, science, technology, transport, space, interactives and exhibitions for kids and families. Two floors of galleries in the Switch House used for decorative arts and international exhibitions will set be demolished, along with 2,000 sqm of education studios, and three flexible theatres; to be replaced by less than half the current education space and one theatre, improbably claimed as an exhibition space.

The plans also demolish all the 2011-13 revitalisation works, including new education spaces, the expansion of the Wran building's temporary exhibition space, the shop and café fronting the sunny Harris St forecourt, along with the new glass lift, the new amenities, and escalators over three levels. None of this demolition is necessary to create an entry from the Goods Line. Labor's deliberate waste of museum assets and the investment of generations in the Powerhouse Museum is staggering.

The Sulman award winning Wran building the government promised to save is extensively demolished and gutted inside and out, including all the mezzanines, the board room and the ramps that provide seamless access and views across four levels. The 1,800 sqm temporary exhibition gallery in the Wran building, built only 12 years ago, is partially demolished and reduced in size by 400 or 600sqm. The soaring Galleria, purpose designed to exhibit No.1 Locomotive, tender and

carriages, and the priceless 1785 Boulton and Watt steam engine, is turned into brick lined passageway, with the Boulton and Watt stuck up the back like an embarrassing relic of the lost museum. The plans destroy the Wran building's function, its landmark character and design integrity, for no cultural benefit or public purpose. Adding insult to injury, the roof form is altered, and the building clad in brick and hidden behind a row of shops. After 130 years as a cultural landmark on Harris St, the PHM is set to disappear from its prominent address on Harris St. Is there any great public museum hidden behind a row of shops? No.

The misnamed Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation project erases all trace of the 1988 Sulman award winning Powerhouse Museum and its heritage adaptation and contemporary design. There is no credible reason for the effective demolition of the museum that Labor promised to save. And there is no possible justification for the project cost of more than \$400 million. The government has not honoured its promises of transparency or released the secret documents behind the scheme to convert the Powerhouse Museum into a creative arts, events and venue hire facility.

Only last May the Arts Minister John Graham 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 said the government remained "committed to the Wran legacy and transparency".⁵ Not anymore. Now the government is doing the exact opposite. People should be asking why is the Minns government destroying the Wran legacy and demolishing the Powerhouse Museum that they promised to save?

Kylie Winkworth for the Powerhouse Museum Alliance

7 July 2024

¹ For Labor's promises on the Powerhouse Museum see John Graham Media Release 2 September 2023 <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/230902-Med-Rel-Minister-Graham-The-Powerhouse-Museum-Ultimo-revitalised.pdf> and Only Labor will save the Powerhouse Museum 22 March 2023 <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Labor-media-release-22-March-23.pdf> For the Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation plans and EIS see <https://www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/major-projects/projects/powerhouse-ultimo-revitalisation>

² The quantity surveyor in the EIS estimates the Powerhouse Ultimo development will cost \$350,418m + 15% = \$402,980m, with a list of further exclusions. This does not include fit out or exhibitions. The previous 'Ultimo Renewal' concept scheme on which the plans are based was costed at \$480-500 million. This is likely to be the real cost of Labor's covert museum demolition. By contrast this is close to double the \$244m cost to taxpayers of Sydney Modern.

See Powerhouse Ultimo EIS Appendix BB Ecologically Sustainable SSDA Report, Slattery p.25 and 27. <https://majorprojects.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/prweb/PRRestService/mp/01/getContent?AttachRef=SSD-67588459%2120240409T051320.066%20GMT>

³ For analysis of the demolition of museum exhibition spaces see Winkworth Powerhouse Museum Alliance Objection to the Powerhouse Ultimo EIS <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/PowerhouseMuseumAlliance-Winkworth.pdf> May 2024, p.14

⁴ For the government's misleading media release of 3 May 2024 announcing the plans to 'declutter' the PHM with more exhibition space see <https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/powerhouse-museum-ultimo-revitalisation-powers-along-community-feedback> The media release puts the cost at \$250m but this is not the cost in the EIS, see 2 above. Statements there will be more exhibition space are demonstrably false.

⁵ Linda Morris, 'Say Goodbye: Powerhouse Museum set to shut its doors for almost three years', 10 May 2023. <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> Despite Labor promises to release key documents about the project, there is no museum plan, no exhibition plan, no design brief, no masterplan, no business case and no transparency about the purpose or function of 'Powerhouse Ultimo'.