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Going, going ... the cultural landmark disappearing before Sydney's eyes

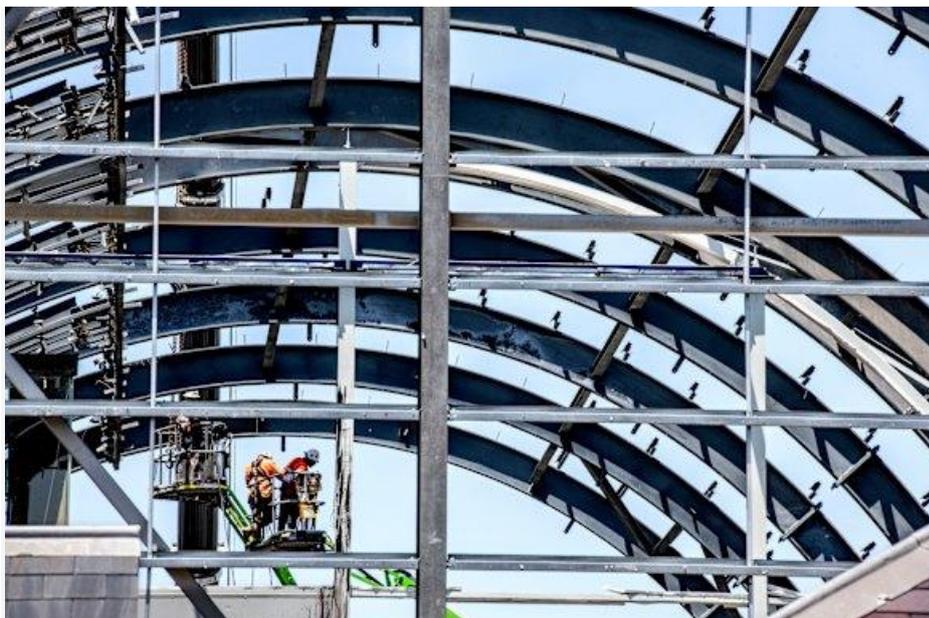


Linda Morris

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After nearly 40 years, the Powerhouse Museum's Wran Building at Ultimo is being slowly demolished as critics of the project mourn the loss of a cultural landmark the Minns government says needs to make way for a museum rebuilt for a new century.

Site clearing has already claimed much of the roof and some of the signature steel ribs that formed the backbone of the 1988 adaptation of the Ultimo Power Station, home of the Museum for Applied Arts and Sciences.



The steel ribs are exposed as the Wran Building is demolished. STEVEN SIEWERT

The original steel sheeting has been peeled away, exposing the arched structure. This week, many of the 17 steel ribs of the main wing and the 19 of the adjacent Galleria will be moved out.

Under the \$300 million redevelopment, internal walls, mezzanines, and staircases within the next door heritage-listed Boiler House and Turbine Hall will be removed at a net loss of dedicated exhibition space.

Bruno Zinghini, Infrastructure NSW's head of projects, said the intention had been to reline the steel framework of the Wran Building and galleria but during the tender process, construction firms warned that the 1988 steel ribs had reached the "end of their life".

"The heritage revitalisation will retain the iconic shape and form of the Wran and Galleria buildings while upgrading them for decades to come," Zinghini said.

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However, Jennifer Sanders, former deputy director and widow of the building's architect, Lionel Glendenning, disputes the necessity of the teardown. She argues that the building was constructed to the highest standards and that any recent disrepair was a result of "neglected maintenance" rather than structural failure – a fix she claims would have been far cheaper than a total rebuild and is a catastrophic burden on taxpayers.

The new vision for the site – led by construction giant Richard Crookes Constructions – reorients the museum toward the light rail line and introduces a “cloistered garden and learning centre on the forecourt, a subterranean theatre and green room.

Sanders fears the new brick-ended Galleria will stifle the original design’s skyward views, effectively turning a light-filled landmark into a “brick mausoleum”. Former trustee Kylie Winkworth warns that the site is being reduced to a form it never previously held, noting that “not even a paint scrape” will remain of the original 1988 fabric.

“The 1988 Sulman award-winning museum was built to the highest standards and regular maintenance kept those standards until the last few years when the current management allowed disrepair to take hold,” Sanders said. “However, neglected repair and maintenance would have been a straightforward fix and would have saved the costs of a rebuild.”

The museum shut abruptly two years ago to make way for the contentious and much-delayed \$300 million redevelopment. Originally slated for a 2027 reopening, the project is now tracking for completion late 2028 or early 2029. Final fitout will probably further delay its public opening.

The Wran Building was the original entrance to the museum. It was then converted to the touring hall in 2013 – the entrance relocated to the light filled galleria which also served as a showcase for the Locomotive No. 1 and the Boulton & Watt steam engine.

Under the redevelopment, the Galleria’s glass ends will be replaced with bricks, and the entrance reoriented toward the light rail line. The interior will serve as exhibition and circulation space. Staircases, internal walls and mezzanines will be

demolished within the heritage-listed Boiler House, Engine House, Power House and Turbine Hall. Artisan studios will be built along Harris Street.

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For those impatient for reopening, Zinghini noted that under a staged completion contract, certain spaces could commence fitout works before the building being completed.

NSW Treasury has not funded the new operational requirements of the Ultimo in its forward estimates. This has prompted internal worries that the scope of an Ultimo museum could shrink should there be a shortfall in the costs of running the \$1.1 billion Parramatta Powerhouse, due to open by December. Acoustic measurements taken for the redevelopment inside the museum have fuelled concerns the museum will be turned over to a Carriageworks model of a mix of exhibitions, live performance and concerts.

Arts Minister John Graham said heritage listing of the Ultimo site expressly stipulated it was to be used as museum for applied arts and sciences. “When it reopens, the Powerhouse Museum Ultimo will continue to deliver an applied arts and sciences program, presenting exhibitions that showcase the Powerhouse collection, international exhibitions and programs that support the creative industries.

“The community expectation for the Powerhouse Museum Ultimo is clear: they want a museum, not a nightclub. The government will respect that view.”