

Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure

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Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation

State Significant Development Assessment Report (SSD-67588459)

March 2025





Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure acknowledges that it stands on Aboriginal land. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land and show our respect for Elders past, present and emerging through thoughtful and collaborative approaches to our work, seeking to demonstrate our ongoing commitment to providing places in which Aboriginal people are included socially, culturally and economically.

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Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation (SSD-67588459) Assessment Report

Cover image: Perspective of the proposed Wran Building Harris Street entrance (top) and adaptation of the Core Buildings looking west across the Gathering Terrace (bottom)

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Preface

This assessment report provides a record of the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure's (the Department) assessment and evaluation of the State Significant Development (SSD) application for the Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation project. The site is located at 500 Harris Street, Ultimo and the SSD was lodged by Infrastructure NSW. This report includes:

- an explanation of why the project is considered SSD and who the consent authority is
- an assessment of the project against government policy and statutory requirements, including mandatory considerations
- a demonstration of how matters raised by the community and other stakeholders have been considered
- an explanation of any changes made to the project during the assessment process
- an assessment of the likely environmental, social and economic impacts of the project
- an evaluation which weighs up the likely impacts and benefits of the project, having regard to the proposed mitigations, offsets, community views and expert advice; and provides a view on whether the impacts are on balance, acceptable
- a recommendation to the decision-maker, along with the reasons for the recommendation, to assist them in making an informed decision about whether development approval for the project should be granted and any conditions that should be imposed.

Executive Summary

This report provides the Department's assessment of a State significant development (SSD) application (SSD-67588459) for the revitalisation of the Powerhouse Museum at 500 Harris Street, Ultimo. The application has been lodged by Infrastructure New South Wales (the Applicant).

Powerhouse Ultimo is an existing museum complex located west of Darling Harbour in the City of Sydney local government area. It spans approximately 2.4 hectares and contains a number of State significant heritage items, including the Powerhouse Core Buildings, the Wran Building and former Ultimo Post Office.

On 21 February 2023, the then Minister approved a concept proposal for the redevelopment of Powerhouse Ultimo, which included four building envelopes including the replacement of the Wran Building (Concept Approval). However, following design development, the Applicant decided not to pursue this proposal and has surrendered the consent.

The Applicant now proposes to reduce the scope of the proposal compared to the previous Concept Approval. This application seeks approval for the redevelopment and operation of the Powerhouse Ultimo comprising alteration and adaptive reuse of existing buildings, construction of new buildings, internal courtyards, public open spaces and associated landscaping.

The Minister for Planning and Public Spaces is the consent authority as the SSD application has been made by a public authority and more than 50 public submissions were received objecting to the proposal.

The Department exhibited the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) from 3 May 2024 to 30 May 2024 (28 days). During the exhibition period, the Department received advice from 11 government agencies, 124 public submissions (109 objections, seven comments and five in support) and comments from the City of Sydney Council (Council).

The key issues raised in the submissions are mainly related to heritage impacts, changes to museum operations, functions and collections, landscaping and open space, as well as project necessity and costs.

Following the conclusion of the EIS exhibition, the Powerhouse State Heritage Register (SHR) listing was updated on 12 July 2024 to incorporate the entire application site, including the Wran and Harwood Buildings. In response, the Applicant provided further assessment of the proposal's heritage impacts to reflect the expanded listing. Additional amendments to the application included changes to the building cladding and materials, reconfiguration of layouts, circulation and entrances, and amendments to the Switch House rooftop extension.

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Given the level of public interest, the revised heritage listing, and the proposed amendments, the Department re-notified the amended application from 10 September 2024 to 7 October 2024 (28 days). During this period, the Department received advice from five government agencies, 136 public submissions (91 unique submissions comprising 84 objections, three comments and four in support) and additional comments from Council.

The submissions reiterated the key issues raised in response to the EIS concerning heritage impacts, museum operations, and the need and cost of the development.

The Department has assessed the application in accordance with the requirements of the EP&A Act and has carefully considered the issues raised in submissions, along with the Applicant's response. The Department considers the proposal is acceptable for the following key reasons:

- it aligns with the Region Plan and Eastern City District Plan as it expands and improves an existing cultural facility, retains the heritage significance of the site, improves walkability, includes new open space and employment opportunities
- the revitalised Powerhouse Museum will offer a variety of exhibition space types and capacities, including large areas, within a contemporary facility designed to meet international standards. Additionally, the internal layout of the museum ensures a superior and improved circulation arrangement.
- the proposed design and layout of the buildings and resulting museum complex result in a high-quality development that achieves design excellence
- while the Department appreciates the concerns raised about the potential heritage impacts of the proposal, it considers the proposal acceptable for the following reasons:
 - the proposal retains the distinctive roof form and scale of the Wran Building, which is identified as being important to the site's heritage significance
 - the materiality/built fabric of the Wran building is not identified as being of heritage significance and its removal and replacement would not have an adverse heritage impact
 - the replacement materials for the Wran Building have been co-designed with Aboriginal stakeholders and are intended to complement, rather than compete with or detract from, the adjoining exceptional heritage items
 - retaining the Wran Building in its current form, either internally or externally, would not support the large volume, flexible and adaptable spaces required for an international standard museum
 - all other heritage buildings on the site would be retained, except for the post-1980s museum internal fit-out and additions, which are not identified as being of heritage significance. Their removal would reduce the physical and visual impacts on the heritage buildings, allowing these structures to be understood and appreciated in their original height, scale, and volume
 - subject to amendments providing for the removal of the rooftop annex and the retention of historic windows, the extension and alteration of the Switch House building would be acceptable
- it would expand and improve the existing cultural infrastructure of the Powerhouse and the wider Ultimo creative industries precinct and support the growth of creative industries in the 'innovation corridor'
- it would provide a more accessible, defined and engaging public realm that can be used for a range of programs and uses that activate the city, improve walkability within and around the site and better activate Harris Street and the Goods Line
- it would integrate best practice sustainability measures, including a 5-star Green Star Buildings rating.

Overall, the Department finds that the proposed development would align with government strategy to create a vibrant mixed-use precinct in Ultimo, while also revitalising the Powerhouse Museum complex. Furthermore, although the Department appreciates the concerns raised about the proposal, particularly regarding its potential impact on heritage fabric and significance, it is satisfied that these impacts are acceptable and have been appropriately addressed.

Consequently, the Department considers the application to be in the public interest and recommends that the Minister approves the application subject to the recommended conditions in **Appendix E**.

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1 Introduction

1.1 The proposal summary

This report provides an assessment of a state significant development (SSD) application for the redevelopment of Powerhouse Ultimo (SSD-67588459), within the City of Sydney (Council) local government area (LGA).

The application has been lodged by Infrastructure NSW (the Applicant) and proposes the detailed design, construction and operation of the refurbished Powerhouse Ultimo Museum. A detailed overview of the proposed development as amended is provided in **Section 2**.

The proposal has an estimated development cost (EDC) of \$297.8 million and would generate approximately 755 construction jobs and 40 additional operational jobs.

1.2 The site and surroundings

The site is located at 500 Harris Street, Ultimo at the northern end of The Goods Line from Central Station. The site contains the Powerhouse Ultimo, which is a significant existing museum complex located west of Darling Harbour in the City of Sydney local government area. It spans approximately 2.4 hectares and contains a number of State significant heritage items, including the Powerhouse Core Buildings, the Wran Building and former Ultimo Post Office.

Key characteristics of the site and surrounding area are summarised below in **Table 1** and shown at **Figure 1** and **Figure 2**.

Table 1 | Key characteristics of the site and surrounding area

Aspect	Description
Address and legal description	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 500 Harris Street, Ultimo.• Lot 1 DP 631345, Lot 1 DP 781732, Lot 3 DP 631345, Lot 37 DP 822345 and Lot 1 DP 770031.
Site area and boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The site is irregular in shape and has an area of 24,370 m².• The site is bound by William Henry Street to the north, Macarthur Street to the south, Darling Drive to the east and Harris Street to the west.
Existing development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The site contains several existing buildings (total GFA of 23,002 m²) and spaces, which comprise the Powerhouse Ultimo Museum, including the:<ul style="list-style-type: none">– 1988 Wran Building fronting Harris Street– Ultimo Powerhouse main buildings at Pier Street, including Boiler, Switch and Pump Houses, Turbine and Engine Halls and North Annex (Core Buildings)– café building, south of the Core Buildings and north of the Harwood Building– former Ultimo Post Office at the corner of Harris Street and Pier Street (fUPO)– Harwood Building within the southern portion of the site– Harris Street Forecourt, outdoor terraces and hard standing areas.

Aspect	Description
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Harwood Building (within the site boundary) does not form part of the application.
Heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The site is listed as a State heritage item on the State Heritage Register (SHR) under the <i>Heritage Act 1977</i> and Schedule 5 of the Sydney Local Environmental Plan 2012 (SLEP) identifies the Core Buildings and fUPO as local heritage items. The site is located in the vicinity of several locally listed heritage items including the Glasgow Arms Hotel, groups of terrace houses along Harris Street and Macarthur Street, the former Millinery House building, former National Cash Register building, and the former Technological Museum/Sydney Technical College building in Harris Street. The site also adjoins Harris Street Ultimo Conservation Area.
Vehicle access and servicing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vehicle access is primarily obtained from Macarthur and Mary Ann Streets. Secondary access is also provided from Pyrmont Street (beneath the Pier Street overpass). Loading and unloading occurs within the Harwood Buildings predominantly via the Macarthur Street access and occasionally from the Core Buildings. 40 existing staff parking spaces are provided to the east and south of the Harwood Building (outside the application site boundary) and accessed off Macarthur and Mary Ann Streets. Four coach parking spaces are located on Harris Street, outside the Harris Street Forecourt.
Public transport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The site is within walking distance of existing public transport services, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exhibition Centre light rail stop, 400 m walk from the site Central and Town Hall Stations, 850 m walk from the site Harris Street bus service routes run immediately adjacent to the site and the Railway Square bus terminus is 750 m walk from the site via the Goods Line. The site is also 900 m south of the Sydney Metro West project (future Pyrmont metro station), which is expected to connect the CBD to Parramatta by 2032.
Topography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The topography of the land falls 9 m from Harris Street in the west to the Goods Line in the east and there is a sharp drop from the eastern edge of the site towards Darling Park. Existing buildings step across the site in response to the slope of the land.
Flooding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The existing site (forecourt and vehicle areas) and adjoining roads experience minor inundation up to 0.5 m depth during the 1 in 100 annual exceedance probability (1% AEP) and 0.75 m depth during the probable maximum flood (PMF) events.
Soil and Water	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Soil/water samples from the site have been identified as containing metal contaminants at concentrations above recommended criteria.

Aspect	Description
Easements/covenants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Several existing easements apply to the site relating to access and maintenance of buildings. There are no restrictive covenants registered to the site.
Surrounding area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The surrounding area is generally characterised by a mixture of high to medium density commercial, residential, educational and recreational use, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> North: Ian Thorpe Aquatic Centre and Darling Harbour entertainment/tourist precinct South: the Goods Line pedestrianised park/walking track and University of Technology East: Urbanest student accommodation and the Darling Square mixed use development West: a mixture of medium density residential, educational and commercial uses.

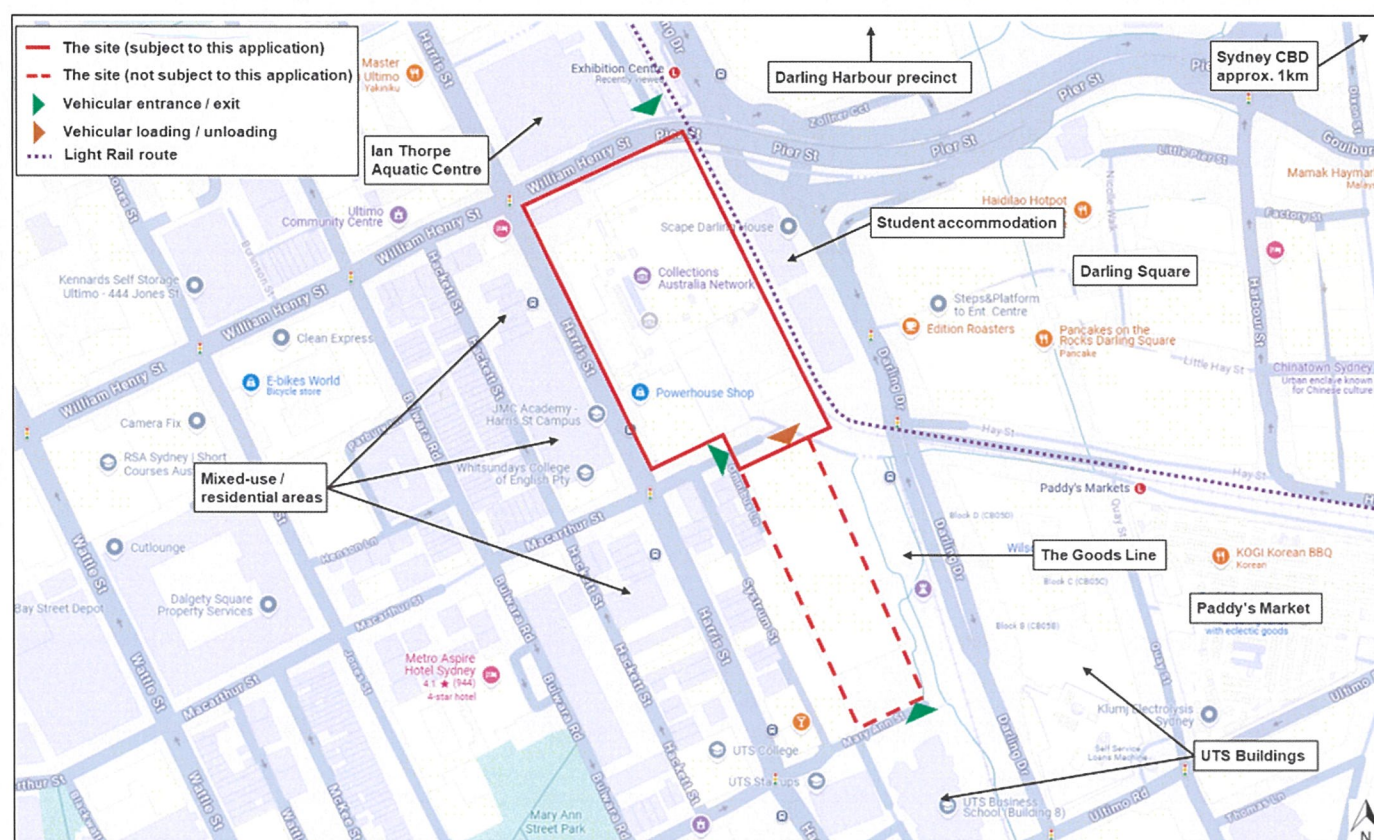


Figure 1 | The site location and context (Base source: Nearmap)

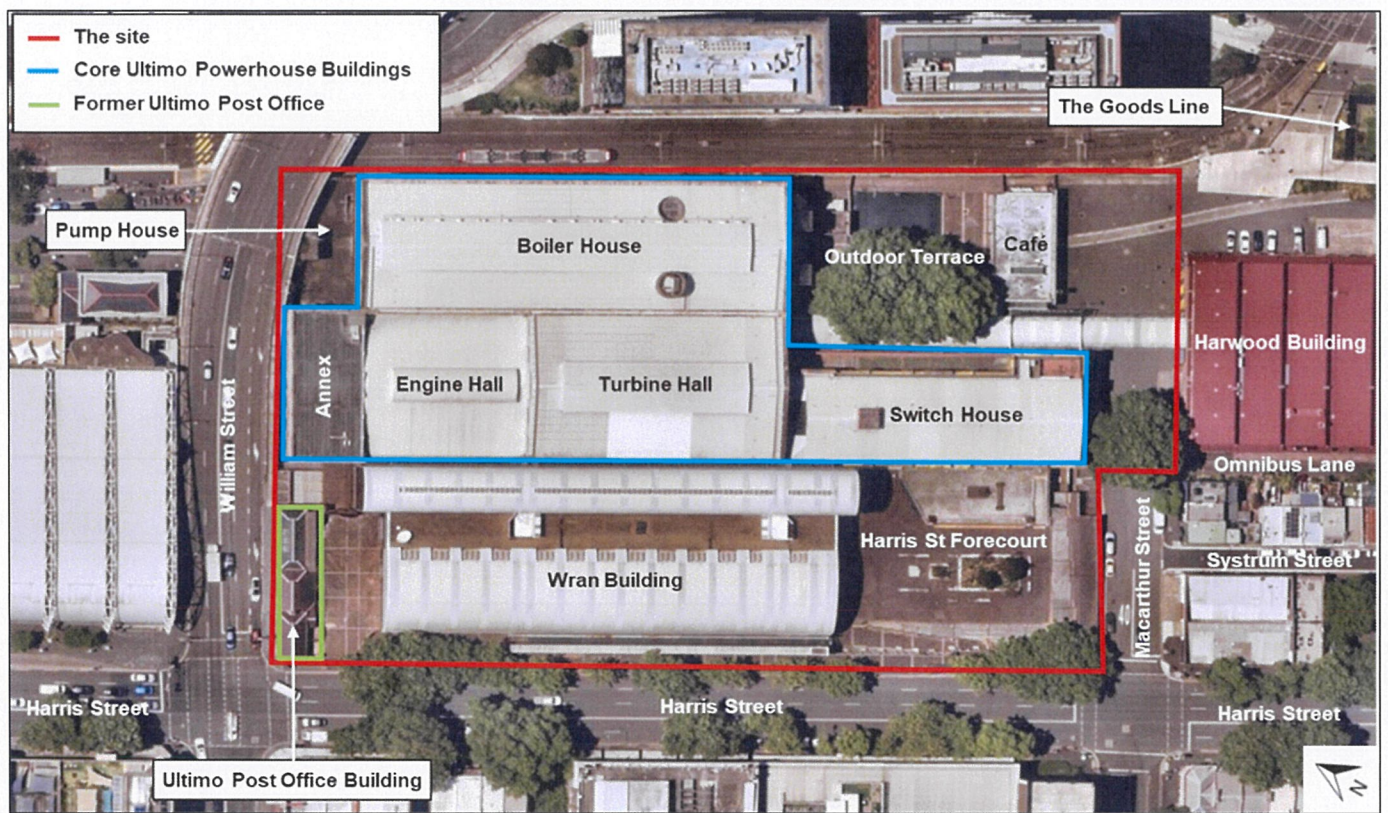


Figure 2 | Aerial view of the site and identification of existing buildings (Base source: Nearmap)

1.3 Related projects and works

1.3.1 Powerhouse Ultimo Concept Approval

On 21 February 2023, the then Minister for Planning approved an SSD concept proposal (SSD-32927319) for the renewal of the Powerhouse Ultimo (the Concept Approval), which allowed for (Figure 3):

- alterations and additions to existing buildings and four building envelopes for the redevelopment of the:
 - Wran Building and Harris Street forecourt, maximum height RL 43.88 (+10% subject to design excellence)
 - café and outdoor terrace maximum height RL 34.18 (+10% subject to design excellence)
 - Switch House, maximum height RL 27.88 (retention, adaptive reuse/roof addition only)
 - Pumphouse, maximum height RL 13.08
- maximum gross floor area (GFA) of up to 40,000 m² and use as a museum/information/education facility.

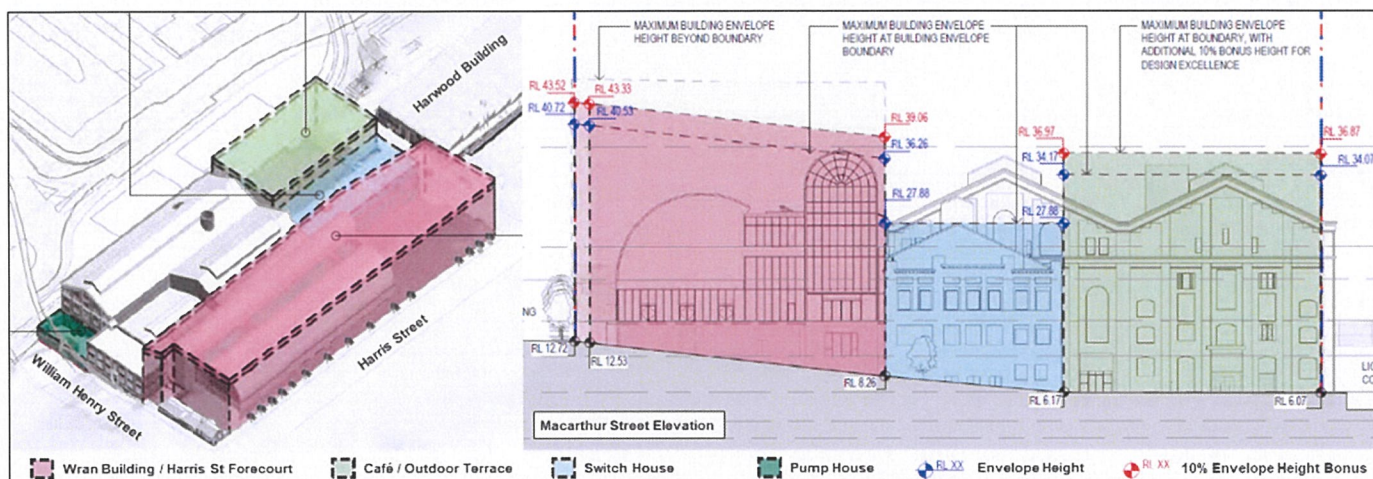


Figure 3 | Concept Approval building envelopes (Base source: SSD-32927319)

Under Section 4.24 of the EP&A Act, any detailed application in respect to the site cannot be inconsistent with a Concept Approval. However, the Applicant decided not to pursue the Concept Approval and surrendered the consent (SSD-32927319) in accordance with section 4.63 of the EP&A Act on 6 March 2025.

1.3.2 Heritage listing of the site

State Heritage Register listing

At the time the Application and EIS was lodged, only the Core Buildings and the fUPO were recognised as heritage items on the SHR. On 12 July 2024, the Minister for Environment and Heritage expanded the curtilage of the Powerhouse SHR listing to include the entire application site, incorporating the Wran and Harwood Buildings. This update came after the EIS exhibition concluded on 30 May 2024.

On 9 September 2024, the Applicant submitted its RtS, which included a further assessment of the proposal's heritage impacts in light of the revised listing. Additional amendments to the application included changes to the building cladding and materials, reconfiguration of layouts, circulation and entrances, and amendments to the Switch House rooftop extension.

The RtS was exhibited from 10 September to 7 October 2024, allowing the community, Council, and government agencies to provide feedback on the proposal within the context of the updated heritage listing.

The updated SHR Statement of Significance recognises the Powerhouse as being of State historic, aesthetic, technical and social heritage significance. Extracts of the SHR listing summarise its significance as follows:

"[it was] ...the first large state-owned electricity generating station in NSW ...its changing use from power station to cultural institution and ongoing evolution to support museum exhibition, programs and operations offers insights into technological change, development, and urban renewal in NSW ...its adaptive reuse as the Powerhouse Museum in 1981 and 1988... was considered at the time to be a highly innovative design, producing a state-of-the-art museum by world standards... [and was a] highly influential early example of adaptive reuse of industrial heritage, nationally and internationally.

The contribution of the purpose-built Wran Building, with its distinctive roof form (comprising two arches), and general scale, characterises the architectural influence of the 1988 museum redevelopment ...the site has Aboriginal cultural value as pre / early contact and a marker of 1980s protests by Aboriginal people.”

The expanded SHR listing also included exemptions from listing, among which were exemptions relating to museum exhibits, changes to internal layouts, fittings and furnishings, construction post 1980 and removal of the Switch House rooftop annex.



Figure 4 | Aerial view of the former Ultimo Power Station (left) and the Wran Building circa 1988 (right) (Base source: Applicant's RtS)

Sydney Local Environmental Plan 2012 local listing

The SLEP identifies the Core Buildings and the fUPO as local heritage items.

Council commissioned an independent assessment of the heritage significance of the Powerhouse Museum complex and prepared a draft Planning Proposal to extend the local heritage listing of the site to be consistent with the updated SHR listing. The draft Planning Proposal was reported to Council and on 16 December 2024 Council resolved to defer the extension of the local heritage listing.