

Date: 24th May 2024

Infrastructure NSW

Re- project: Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalization

Docomomo Australia submits that the proposed “revitalization” of the Powerhouse complex at Ultimo actually constitutes a major demolition of the museum infrastructure that was opened in 1988 and is not an appropriate treatment of the SHR-listed former power station or the 1988 Wran Wing & Galleria that the March 2024 meeting of the Heritage Council of NSW identified as being “likely to be of State heritage significance.” This is highlighted by the Applicant’s demolition drawing A.DA704 Demolition Level 2 that indicates very little other than the structural ribs of the vaults of the Wran Wing and Galleria will be retained, and even then the south end of the Wran Wing is indicated for demolition and truncation in length.

Docomomo reiterates its earlier submission concerning the former proposal to demolish the 1988 buildings in toto that the Conservation Management Plan (CMP) commissioned by the NSW Government did not adequately address the architectural quality of the 1988 buildings as the CMP team was not led by a qualified heritage architect. This has led to the currently-amended CMP rating the 1988 buildings as being of Moderate Significance which is the lowest level of significance warranting retention.

The Statement of Heritage Impact (SOHI) has been prepared by Curio, the same author as the original CMP. DocomomoAustralia has already drawn attention of, in its opinion, the shortcomings of the original CMP, notably the absence of any expert architectural input into the final document. The SOHI has acknowledged the recommendation from the Heritage Council of NSW to investigate the expansion of the SHR listing to cover all the museum buildings on the site, including the 1988 museum buildings. However, in expanding the SOHI’s assessment to the 1988 buildings the SOHI authors have determined that the 1988 buildings and museum interventions are of only Moderate Significance and yet, the Harwood Building, a former tram depot building, is of High Significance. In the opinion of Docomomo this again demonstrates the lack of expert architectural input into the significance assessment process. There is no explanation as to why the 1988 buildings have been assessed as being of the lowest level of significance warranting retention. As a result of this assessed level of significance, the 1988 buildings and fitout will be severely impacted by this latest “revitalization” design.

It is the opinion of Docomomo that the Wran Wing and Galleria sections of the museum have suffered from an accumulation of alterations that have gradually eroded the original architectural quality of the buildings, such as the loss of the original external colour scheme, the loss of the south end of the colonnade, and the loss of the original entry with its Post-modern screen. The interior of the Wran Wing has been unsympathetically altered with the over-all black colour scheme (although the original blue and white cloud mural on the south end of the vault is extant). None of the alterations, however, are irreversible but the proposed major changes to the building design and use of these buildings will be irreversible and should be adequately assessed by experienced architects given the decision by the Heritage Council of NSW that the 1988 museum buildings are “likely to be of State Significance.”

Docomomo considers that the Wran Wing and Galleria are of High Significance and that restitution of original architectural features is warranted, or, at the very least what remains should be respected in the “revitalization” design. The Wran Wing and Galleria are lightweight buildings and provide a contrast to the brick buildings of the former tram power house. The current “revitalization” is attempting to destroy that architectural design by enveloping the lightweight buildings in brick. Moreover, whilst the Galleria is being proposed as a north-south through link through the building the appreciation of the void that currently exists over the train and fixed Boulton and Watt steam engine will be lost by the removal of the sinuous ramp on the east side of the Wran Wing that currently affords views of the Galleria space and its large exhibits. The removal of the ramp condemns those with mobility issues to use elevators as there will be no ramps within the altered complex.

Drawing A.DA704 Demolition Level 2 indicates that the 1988 museum fabric in the SHR-listed power house buildings as well as in the Wran Wing & Galleria, will be demolished.

The drawings indicates the following:

- Truncation of the Wran Wing and Galleria south sections amounting to approximately 2 bays that will be demolished (demolition drawing A.DA704 Demolition Level 2),
- Removal of the glazed ends of the Wran Wing and Galleria and their replacement with brick facades (Drawings A.DA2001 & 2003, Elevations),
- Demolition of the last remnant of the original Post-Modern colonnade along the Harris Street frontage and its replacement with a series of shopfronts with a tall brick pediment above (Drawing A.DA2000, West Elevation).

These major alterations ignore the architecture of the 1988 buildings and actively destroy most of the main architectural attributes of the lightweight, vaulted structures. The sense of space, light and we are to be removed.

The rendering of the elevations of the proposal indicates that the vaulted roofs themselves will be brick. Surely this is an error in rendering and the metal roofs of the buildings will be retained as metal.

The proposed “revitalization” is still based on the premise that the 1988 buildings and alterations to the other buildings are not of sufficient significance warranting respect in the new design, as all the 1988 interiors are being removed as well as the architectural quality of the vaulted buildings being totally altered by removing their glazing at the ends of the vaults and constructing the lifts at the south end of the buildings. The light-filled void of the Galleria will be lost through the loss of glazing and the construction of new levels within the void.

Docomomo submits that the current “revitalization” project should not proceed in its current form and that the assessment of significance should be carried out by architects of the requisite experience. The revitalization of the White Bay Power Station is an example of how “revitalization” should be undertaken; an appropriate understanding of the architectural quality of the place and following the Burra Charter maxim of doing “as much as necessary to care for the place and to make it useable, but otherwise change it as little as possible.”

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'H. Lewi', with a small dot at the end.

Professor Hannah Lewi
Vice President
Docomomo Australia