

Dr G Harper
8 St Vincents Road
Greenwich NSW 2065
29 May 2024

To: Secretary of the NSW Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure

RE: Letter of objection to Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation, SSD-67588459
www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/major-projects/projects/powerhouse-ultimo-revitalisation

Dear Ms Kiersten Fishburn

I have strong objections to the proposed alterations and additions to the Powerhouse Museum Ultimo at 500 Harris Street, Ultimo, submitted under State Significant Development, SSD-67588459.

It seems unnecessary to undertake such extensive work when the primary purpose of this Powerhouse Ultimo project is to “revitalise” a facility that is already operating to an international museum standard. Forming part of the NSW Government’s 1988 Bicentenary building program, the current Powerhouse Museum Ultimo was designed to provide a range of flexible and adaptable exhibition spaces for both internationally significant exhibitions and the Powerhouse’s own extensive collection. Prior to its deliberate closure in early 2024, this noteworthy museum represented a historic milestone in the provision of an important cultural institution within the global city of Sydney.

In a recent lecture given by Dr Daniel Ryan at the School of Architecture, Planning and Design at the University of Sydney, it was confirmed that the Powerhouse Museum Ultimo, opened in 1988 to coincide with Australia’s Bicentenary and the completion of Darling Harbour, was a highpoint in the development of post-modern architecture in Australia. Here, the Wran Building and other interventions, detailed to be both pragmatic and convey various meanings and historic allusions was undertaken by Lionel Glendenning, Principal of the NSW Government Architect’s Branch. This work clearly demonstrates how post-modernism was intellectualised in the adaption of a former industrial building for public use. As such, the Powerhouse Museum Ultimo, in its entirety, is recognised as having historic significance and is included on the registers of AIA (NSW Chapter), DOCOMOMO Australia and National Trust (Australia).

My concern with the proposal is noted by the following:

1. The proposal merely ‘trivialises’ the Wran Building. The vaulted roof form of this building is shown shortened to line up with south end of the Turbine Hall while the glazed walls are shown removed and replaced with face brickwork. Internally, the former Galleria, conceptualised as a celebrated entry space bathed in light to accentuate key items from the collection, is now a dimly lit space with a contorted circulation route. Such insensitivity clearly disregards the design intention, and heritage significance, of the Wran Building.
2. The design report is at times quite misleading. While the Harwood Building is shown excluded from the proposed development, it is, however, identified elsewhere in the document as forming part of the Powerhouse Museum Ultimo site. This ambiguity is made apparent by an absence of text, which does not confirm the future of this block.
3. The 3D images, peppered throughout the supporting documents, are fuzzy in appearance. These images, mainly of the southern elevations and likely to show the new ‘entries’ are difficult to discern. On closer inspection the entries are under scaled and hidden, located

either behind a swathe of grass or at the back of a shadowed courtyard, or even designated by a small gap within an oppressive and monumentalised colonnade shown facing Harris Street. Of concern is the lack of images. There are no images of the proposed revisions to the foyer space within the Wran Building, nor is there an image which confirms the relationship between the former Ultimo Post Office and the new colonnade when it terminates at the corner of Harris and William Henry Streets. Consequently, we are left wondering if the public domain of the project is really a pedestrian friendly “connected precinct”? With two outdoor spaces at the southern end of the site, both associated with an arrangement of under scaled entry points, it can only be assumed that the proposed outdoor spaces and reconfigured entry points offer little benefit to what is currently there.

4. The submission does not clearly demonstrate how the proposed exhibition spaces will accommodate the collection of the Powerhouse Museum or be arranged to accommodate an international exhibition. The schedule of areas only lists the proposed building areas and does not include the existing building areas for comparison. With so much demolition we are again left wondering if the rhetoric of the project, which is noted as “providing exhibition spaces that are flexible and adaptable to ensure that the museum is capable of showcasing the Powerhouse’s significant collection and attracting internationally significant exhibitions”, will in fact result in a substantial loss of much needed high quality exhibition space?
5. The Heritage Impact Statement has failed to properly assess the significance of the Wran Building. The document also does not assess the significance of all the 1988 interventions, including for example, the paired Rossi-like staircases positioned off the southern face of the Boiler House. Under Section 3.6 of the report, the text pays lip service to the design approach adopted by Glendenning. Information on this approach can easily be sourced, as he was interviewed about this project on many occasions during the 1980s. Furthermore, there is no comparative analysis which situates the Wran Building in the development of late modern/post-modern public buildings in Australia.

Much has escaped the attention of the designers as they have progressed their poorly conceptualised design. Consequently, I do not support the proposed alterations and additions to the Powerhouse Museum Ultimo in its current form.

Yours sincerely



Dr Glenn Harper, a very concerned citizen.