

Submission to NSW Government regarding Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation

I STRONGLY OBJECT to the misguided and uncalled for demolition of the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo. This is not a museum 'revitalisation' but the wilful destruction of a vital and beloved institution, a shocking act of vandalism. The cultural and educational loss to the people of New South Wales and beyond will be immeasurable and unforgivable.

It is hard to believe that these costly plans to demolish the Powerhouse Museum are supported by the Minns Labor government, which promised to keep the Museum open and to protect the award-winning Wran Building. Instead, the government is ignoring and betraying the investment by generations of NSW taxpayers in a very successful and widely respected museum, and turning it into yet another contemporary arts centre. This truly beggars belief.

This proposed 'revitalisation' lacks any recognisable museological purpose. It is not clever and it is not forward thinking. If approved, it will be a cultural catastrophe and a serious embarrassment for Sydney and NSW. The intentional demolition of an historic cultural institution and its state-of-the-art facilities is unparalleled anywhere in the civilised world. The Powerhouse Museum and its unique mission to explore creativity and the interplay of science, arts and people is threatened with extinction.

Waste of taxpayers' money

The proposed 'revitalisation' entails eye-watering financial as well as cultural costs, primarily the wasteful demolition of the Museum's facilities and unique character. The Museum and its facilities were designed and built to last 100 years and are now marked for removal after only 35 years. NSW taxpayers will be required to foot a bill of at least \$250 million for a demolition project that destroys flexible exhibition spaces, collection access, excellent facilities and the sheer functionality of the Powerhouse Museum. This is what the NSW Labor government promised to save.

Millions will also be wasted on building and operating a school boarding house in the Ultimo premises, when country schoolchildren are already well accommodated at the Central Sydney Youth Hostel, a short walk from the museum. There is no logic in this expensive thought bubble which cannot hide the disastrous collapse of participation in Museum education programs over the five years of the current CEO's tenure.

This is an unforgivable waste of taxpayers' money and an insult to the community which has, since the Powerhouse Museum's opening in 1988, supported and engaged with its collection and its immensely varied exhibition and education programs. The collection is now substantially inaccessible in expensive display storage at Castle Hill which, unlike the proximity of Ultimo to the hub of Central Station, is hard to get to, has no parking and very few places to sit and reflect.

Destruction of cultural heritage

All traces of the 1988 Sulman Award-winning Powerhouse Museum, its heritage adaptation, acclaimed landmark design and flexible exhibition spaces will be removed if this so-called revitalisation proceeds. The Museum as we have known and loved it will be emptied, stripped back to bare brick walls and reduced to cavernous, lifeless spaces.

All the mezzanines over five levels are marked for destruction, together with the Switch House galleries. The Wran Building and the soaring Galleria which the government promised to save will be gutted and the southern end demolished, thus destroying the iconic boardroom. The Museum's three theatres will be reduced to one, gone will be its expansive education studios and Learning Centre. Millions will be spent unnecessarily on a new loading dock and truck turntable to replace the Museum's existing and functional collection and exhibition handling facilities in the Harwood Building only 50 metres away. The hidden intention behind this wasteful scheme appears to be to separate off the Harwood Building so it can be sold.

The Museum's multiple, flexible exhibition spaces were designed and purpose-built to display its magnificent and quite extraordinarily diverse Australian and international collections. These collections are renowned for their outstanding breadth and depth across science and technology, decorative arts and design, First Nations cultures, social history, space, migration and heritage, photography, architecture and music.

The history of wide-ranging exhibitions and public programs presented by the Powerhouse Museum in the years following its opening in 1988 is well-documented. It included permanent, temporary and touring exhibitions developed in-house across all collection areas as well as international touring exhibitions. The hollow empty spaces of the proposed 'revitalisation' are not in any way suited to displaying the Museum's collection in all its stunning variety. Exhibition areas will be decreased by an astounding 75% and education spaces by 50%.

This profoundly misguided scheme entirely ignores the basic purpose of the Powerhouse Museum, which has always been to exhibit its collections. After spending \$250m of taxpayers money, visitors may gaze at the bare brick walls and vast empty spaces and mourn the pointless loss of a very fine museum in all our lives.

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