

30 May 2024

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By online portal

National Trust submission relating to the Powerhouse Ultimo Renewal (SSD – 32927319)

The National Trust (NSW) welcomes to opportunity to comment on the Powerhouse Ultimo Renewal. We have long advocated for the retention of this important public institution in Ultimo, and for its heritage conservation. The Trust are pleased to note the commitment to funding the renewal of this museum, however we remain concerned about the outcomes of this major public expenditure on both the short-term renewal and long-term operation of the Powerhouse Museum.

The final outcome of this renewal must simply be a better museum.

Our comments are made in the hope that this can still be achieved, and that the focus of the design team entrusted with this extremely important public project can be on this outcome.

The National Trust has assessed the development documents for the Powerhouse Ultimo Renewal, and notes three key areas of concern:

- **The heritage significance of the Powerhouse Museum is not properly understood.**
There is no Conservation Management Plan provided with the exhibited documents. The documents do not appropriately consider the place in the context of the proposed State Heritage Register curtilage expansion.
- **The detail of what is actually happening is not clear.**
There are thousands of pages of documentation, but not a single page outlining the exhibition and display areas and what they might be.
- **The function of the museum has not been addressed.**
There is little refence to the current collection beyond the retention of three key items. There is not a single illustration or description of any of the actual internal spaces (entry points, circulation spaces, permanent or flexible exhibition spaces) that actually form the basis of any major museum.

The first step to any heritage project is to assess the significance of the place. The first step in any museum project is to consider what will be on display. The Powerhouse Museum Renewal project needs to consider these two fundamental issues to ensure it is guided towards a successful outcome.

Surely, this is not too much to ask.



Heritage Significance of the Powerhouse Museum Precinct

National Trust heritage assessment

The National Trust has a very great interest in the Powerhouse Museum, dating back many years. In 1974, the Trust listed the *Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences and its Historical Collection* and has continued to advocate for this institution and its collection since that time. In 2015, we nominated the current Powerhouse Museum for inclusion on the State Heritage Register, and since that time have made countless submissions to various inquiries relating to the proposals to close the Powerhouse Museum site at Ultimo.

The significance of the Powerhouse Museum has been well established in numerous previous submissions by the National Trust, and most recently by the NSW Heritage Council *Notice of Intention to List Curtilage Extension Power House* which states (National Trust emphasis in bold):

*The Powerhouse Museum Complex is of potential State heritage significance for reflecting innovative approaches to both power generation and museology in the history of NSW. The 1899 Ultimo Power House is of State historic, aesthetic and technical heritage significance as the first large state-owned electricity generating station in NSW. This is complemented by **the potential historic, social and associative significance of the adaptive reuse of the site as the Powerhouse Museum in 1988, including the Wran and Harwood buildings.***

*The change in use to a major public museum has potential State historic significance as a central part of the major cultural projects of the 1988 Bicentenary, a significant event in NSW and Australian history which engaged much of NSW's population and ushered in a new sense of national self-confidence while raising important questions about Aboriginal rights. **The museum complex, as completed, was considered at the time to be a highly innovative design, producing a state-of-the-art museum by world standards.***

The conversion to a museum has potential State historic and technical significance for its role in the wider heritage conservation movement as a lauded, highly influential early example of adaptive reuse of industrial heritage, nationally and internationally. Ongoing upgrades of internal fabric and fixtures related to museum use in buildings such as the Harwood and Post Office buildings reflect the changing requirements of the museum function over time.

***The purpose-built 1988 Wran building contributes to the group's potential State historic and aesthetic significance for its landmark form, scale and spatial relationship with the other buildings.** The Wran building, together with the Powerhouse Museum Complex has potential State significance for its associations with notable political, design and museum figures including Neville Wran, Jack Ferguson, Lionel Glendenning, Richard Johnson, Lindsay Sharp and Norman Harwood.*

The complex has potential State social significance for people across Sydney, NSW and Australia, for whom it represents an important educational and cultural institution and tourist destination. The Powerhouse Museum Complex and its changing use from power station to cultural institution, offers a unique insight into the stages of technological change, development and urban renewal that occurred in NSW during the 20th century.

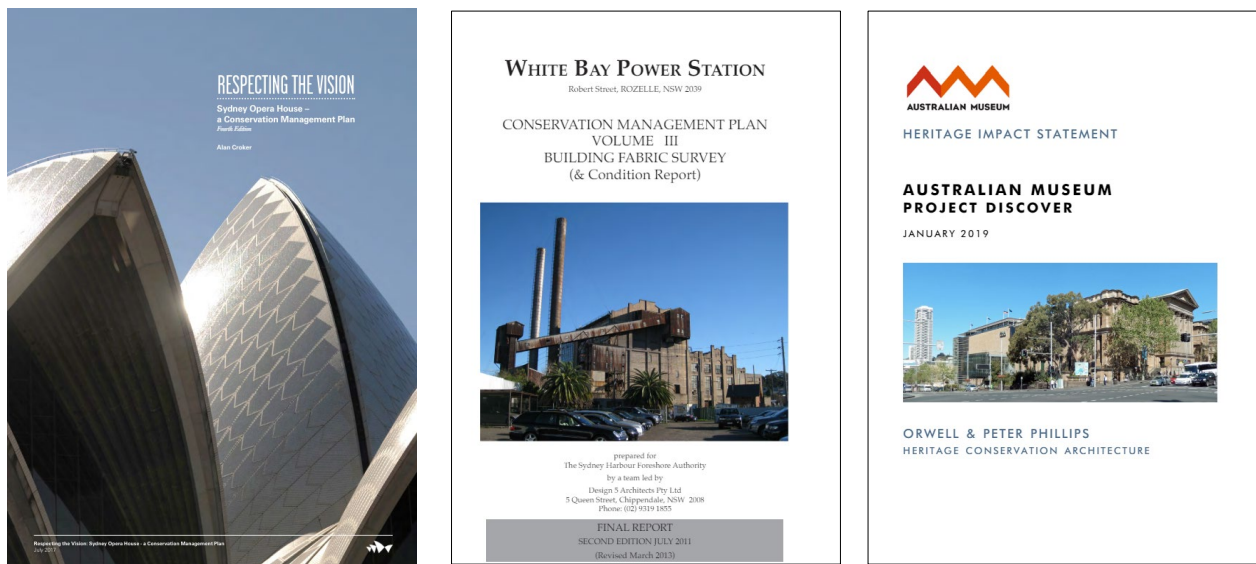


Conservation Guidance is required

A Conservation Management Plan was not exhibited with the development documents.

In September 2023, the NSW Government announced it would deliver on its election commitment to save the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo by undertaking a “heritage revitalisation” to “preserve the Wran legacy.”¹

A Conservation Management Plan (CMP) was not exhibited as part of the documentation for this State Significant Development Application. The National Trust maintains that for a heritage site of this level of significance, undergoing such a level of substantial change, an up-to-date CMP is fundamental to guide its conservation during the design process. Recent large-scale projects for the renewal of the Sydney Opera House, White Bay Power Station and Australian Museum have all been guided by a CMP. The Powerhouse cannot be an exception to this rule and the heritage renewal of this place needs to be guided by a Conservation Management Plan that includes its role and function as a museum since 1988.



L-R: Conservation Management Plans for the Sydney Opera House (Design 5 Architects), White Bay Power Station (Design 5 Architects), and Australian Museum (Orwell and Phillips Architects).

In the Heritage Impact Statement (HIS) for this development application, the previous (2003) CMP for the Powerhouse Museum is dismissed as outdated because, “*being more than 17 years old is no longer relevant in many key areas because it does not reflect any of the major changes to NSW heritage and planning legislation since 2003 and does not comply with current NSW Heritage guidelines for the management of heritage assets.*”

A revised CMP was finalised in 2022 and submitted as part of a Stage 1 Concept SSD for the powerhouse Museum. That document was assessed in previous submissions by the National Trust. Critically, that document did not provide any significance gradings for any component of the Wran Building (despite all other parts of the site being assessed in that way). This is a major shortcoming given that the Wran Building is now to be retained.

It is a great concern that the current design proposal has apparently not been guided by such a document.

¹ [The Powerhouse Museum Ultimo to show Sydney a new side in heritage overhaul](#), Press release by Minister for the Arts, 4 December 2023



National Trust Recommendation:

A revised and updated Conservation Management Plan must be prepared to guide the heritage renewal of the Ultimo Powerhouse Museum.

Such a document must assess the significance of all parts of the site, including the Wran Building, and consider the actual operation of the site as a world-class museum over a 35-year period.

State Heritage Register – Curtilage expansion of the Powerhouse Museum

The Heritage Council of NSW has recommended that the Heritage Minister approve the expansion of the Powerhouse Museum Complex to include the Harwood and Wran buildings. This is a welcome decision and has been supported by the National Trust.

The approval of this curtilage expansion would fundamentally change the heritage listing of the site, with further consideration and assessment needing to be given to these two buildings and their relationship to the whole museum site. The exhibited Heritage Impact Statement acknowledges the SHR assessment is underway, however only briefly considers the impact of this possible change. The Harwood Building is not given any major consideration in the HIS at all.

Pending approval, this HIS will be quickly made redundant, as it will not have adequately assessed either structure in the landscape of the whole SHR site.

National Trust Recommendation:

The revised State Heritage Register nomination must be resolved in a timely fashion so as to guide any heritage renewal of the Powerhouse Museum.

It will be too late to consider any significance if this listing process is undertaken after the renewal, not before it.

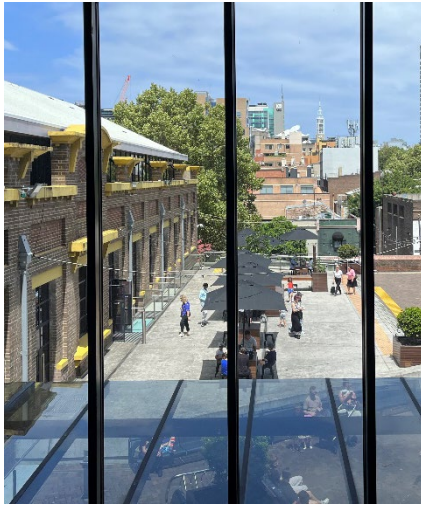
Heritage Considerations relating to the current proposal

The Wran Building is assessed in the HIS as only having moderate significance, and in its conclusion notes that *“the removal of fabric associated with the Wran Building, the retention of the Powerhouse Buildings, and the introduction of a new building along Harris Street, along with sensitive new internal display fitouts, reorientation of the main entry and the creation of new public domain experiences, is consistent with the original design intent of the museum”*. It is hard to understand how the removal of building fabric was an original design intention, when the whole basis of the original concept was adaptive re-use, and the rest of the site is supposedly focussed on retention of heritage fabric.

Concerningly, the HIS goes on to state (Table 5.1) that *“demolition/removal may be acceptable provided that there is no adverse impact on the significance of the place.”* This may be true, but the Trust would argue that now is the time to assess that impact.



The assessment of the built fabric, alongside the original design intentions, of the Wran Building need to be understood. Elements of the original building and its design concepts do still remain in place, and could be considered in any new design.



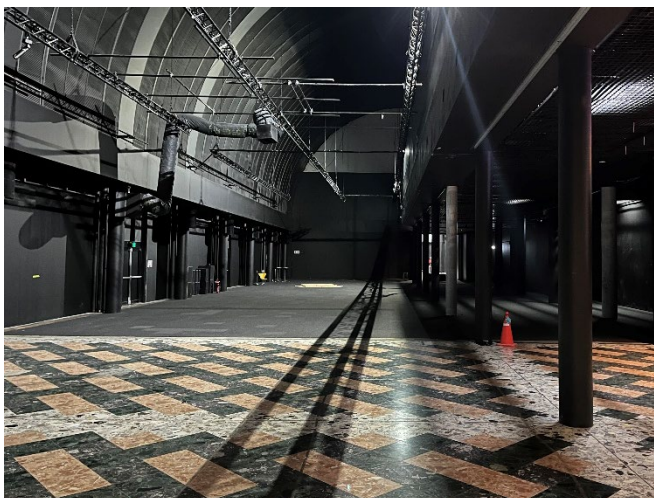
The visual connection from the Galleria to the outside, and the natural illumination of this critical internal space was a key original design consideration.

Th current design shows this space being completely bricked in at both ends. The Trust would strongly urge revision of this element of the proposal.



The original design intentions of the Powerhouse Museum (left) have been gradually and devastatingly eroded over time, however some of the original postmodern elements of the interiors (below), including flooring and fit-out, do remain and should be considered in any significance assessment.

There is always the possibility of retaining and/or reinstating original design elements, and these must be addressed in any updated CMP.





The unique Steam Revolution component of the Powerhouse Museum is slated for complete demolition. The National Trust urges reconsideration of this element of the proposal. As currently outlined on the Powerhouse Museum website (accessed May 2024):

*“**Steam Revolution** shows how steam has touched the lives of millions. For more than 200 years, steam did almost everything: it pumped water, powered factories, and drove ships across oceans and ploughs through fields. These days steam turbines still provide 90 per cent of our electricity.*

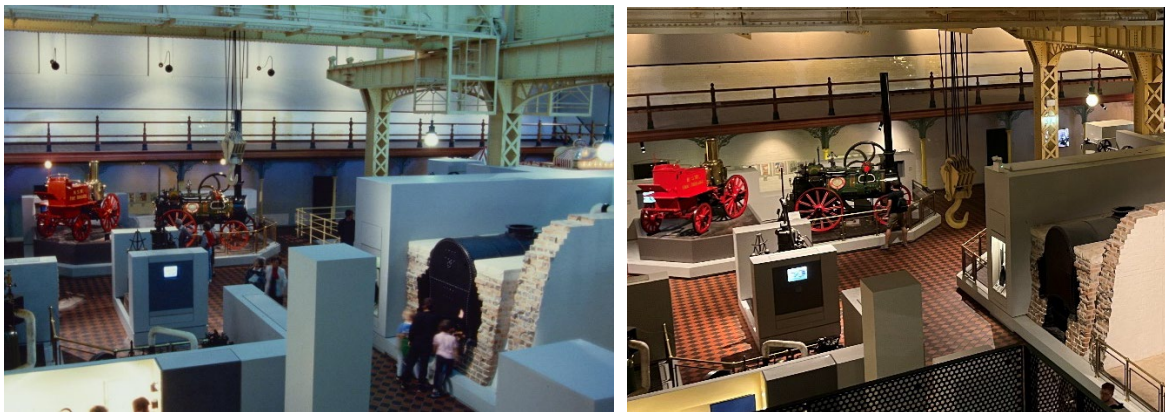
Learn how steam engines developed, what they did and how they changed the world in this exhibition featuring hands-on displays, old boilers, videos and 12 steam engines.”

This component of the Powerhouse Museum is one of its technically most outstanding features. It is the understanding of the Trust’s Industrial Heritage experts that this concrete floor was extensively engineered in order to cater for the extremely heavy loading of these museum components. The removal of this concrete floor would present an extremely expensive and difficult undertaking. It would also involve removing the very complex plumbing arrangements that are installed in this space – again at great cost.

The Steam Revolution section of the Powerhouse Museum remains one of its most significant elements – much like the operational cotton mill in the Manchester Science and Industry Museum in the UK and, more locally, the incredibly successful heritage steam operations at the NSW Rail Museum in Thirlmere.

Removing these engines and storing them in a stationary display area at Castle Hill should not be an outcome of any heritage renewal project.

Properly revitalised, this component of the Powerhouse Museum could again be a world-leading display of technological development – a core objective of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences under its Act of Parliament..



Steam Revolution display in 1988 (left) and in 2024 (right).

National Trust Recommendation:

The Steam Revolution display should not be removed from the Museum. This component of the building has been specifically engineered for this purpose.

Its removal will be extremely costly, and prevent a far more worthwhile expenditure of a limited budget on other key new components of the proposed design.



Unclear documentation and museum function

The National Trust have reviewed in detail the Development Application documentation and are of the opinion that, considering the heritage impact of the proposal, further detail needs to be provided, clearly indicating the extent of the changes to the place. We note that the current architectural documents are not explicit in their detail, and that the design intent cannot be fully understood.

The National Trust note that there are indeed a number of positive heritage outcomes that can be achieved by the new design:

- The continuing use of the Ultimo site as the Powerhouse Museum
- The exposing of the original elevations to the Switch House and Boiler House through the removal of later additions
- The engagement with the Goods Line and connection to Darling Harbour as a new public entry to the site that was not feasible at the time of the original construction
- The removal of the later pitched roof to the Switch House to reveal its original form
- Conservation of original structural elements associated with the former power station

The Trust are concerned with the following elements of the design:

- The complete lack of any dedicated, permanent, fit-for-purpose exhibition display areas
- The inconspicuous location and prominence of the new main entry point to the building, particularly when approached from the Goods Line (the main path of travel for most people) needs to be better resolved.
- The overly-elaborate landscaping treatment of the Museum Entry Terrace
- The creative commercial spaces (shopfronts) along Harris Street
- The “bricking in” of the Wran Building is something that may be reconsidered following heritage advice from an updated CMP.

Exhibition spaces

All of the four “exhibition spaces” shown in the documentation are simply large, cavernous areas, described in the Urban Design Report (p.21) as *“flexible exhibition spaces with efficient support infrastructure... designed to present a broad range of exhibitions, performances and events.”* The National Trust again calls for the Powerhouse Museum to have, at its core, dedicated museum display and exhibition areas to showcase the enormous diversity, scale, age and value of its collection. This does not mean a permanent display of the same objects without ever changing (as happened previously at the Powerhouse due to insufficient funding), but nor does it mean a total reliance on completely new curated spaces for every exhibition (a very costly exercise). What it means is that there should be an area set aside for continually showcasing the extraordinary collection and the themes that it encapsulates.

The total square meterage of the new exhibition spaces may exceed the current calculations for the museum, but the documentation does not acknowledge whether these spaces will be used for effective display. For the Boiler House to be truly considered as a large exhibition space, it needs to have more in it than simply Locomotive No.1 and a Catalina on display. Exhibition spaces need to also be provided for the thousands of smaller objects the Powerhouse Museum has, from telephones to teapots. Galleries and other devices could easily be installed in the Boiler House to provide such display areas, while at the same time allowing the spatial volume to be experienced in a different way.



Landscaping

The landscape plan for the main Museum Entry Terrace provides no actual space for public gathering. Every successful museum or cultural institution in the world has a clear and open courtyard space at its main approach, to allow groups to gather or events to occur. This proposal is entirely unsuited for this purpose and needs to be a simple public square. (Note also the ongoing maintenance costs that the proposed design would bring, which would of necessity reduce any future curatorial budget).

Harwood Building

The Harwood building has been excluded from the Powerhouse Ultimo Revitalisation project, despite being both of high heritage significance and a part of the Powerhouse Museum. It is the firm view of the Trust that the Harwood Building must be considered part of the Powerhouse Museum, and included in any “renewal” project.

There is a perceived threat that by not including this building within the renewal project, there is a desire by the NSW Government to offload or develop this site. This can easily be addressed by including it within the overall plans for renewal – even if expenditure on renewal of this building is proposed for a future project.

Wran Building

The project seeks to largely demolish the existing building, retaining only the form and volume of the space. These changes have been noted as being irreversible.

While the National Trust understands the need for changes and adaptation of the building, it has not been made explicit which elements are to be retained. The architectural drawings do not specify if the fabric will be removed entirely, or if there are sections that can be retained and adapted for the project. There is minimal discussion of the way in which the original design of the building has been altered since it was opened, what components may remain or still be recoverable, and how this may have impacted the significance of the building.

It would be wasteful to remove high quality, purpose built fabric that can be recovered or adapted into the new design. Extensive resources were readily poured into the creation of the Wran building, and it is not the best heritage or environmental outcome to entirely replace the fabric without first assessing what can and should be retained.

The proposed updated SHR listing notes: “The tall galleria (inspired by the museum’s progenitor, the 1879 Garden palace) and the Wran Building, whose large glazed walls and curved steel roofs contrast pleasingly with the old brick walls, were added to the western side and provide a wonderful entry experience”. The new design appears to ignore this focus on light entirely, and bricks up the windows at either end of the galleria, critical for retaining a light connective space. In particular, the Trust would urge that the Galleria space remain with window at each end to admit natural light and remain.

The creative commercial spaces (shopfronts) along Harris Street are also unconvincing as a concept, and will also have ongoing cost implications that will take away from the core function of the museum. The Trust cannot think of any other public institution that would allow its main street frontage to be uncontrolled in such a way, and fears that after enormous investment in just a few short years these windows will (like the current Harris Street frontage) be simply blocked out or covered over. This frontage is a key frontage for the museum and such activities would ultimately be more successful elsewhere. There are countless opportunities for the site. We agree with the CMP (p.82) that *“there are opportunities for unsympathetic modifications made to the Wran Building in 2003-2005 and 2011-2013 to be removed and the building’s original fabric and form reinstated or changed and adapted to complement the*



heritage-listed portion of the site's historic character and buildings, and to ensure the future success and sustainability of the cultural and museology functions of the precinct (site) on par with the International contemporary museum practice."

The Trust would also agree that there are "*Opportunities to celebrate and communicate design philosophies of the 1980s adaptive reuse through interpretation, adaptations or additions*" and that this should be encouraged.

National Trust Recommendation:

The National Trust urges that the proper exhibition layouts be clearly outlined, and that visual renderings of the interior spaces be prepared and made public to showcase the actual museum function of the Powerhouse Museum.

All of the renderings provided in this documentation package are focussed on the outside, not the inside of the museum.

Conclusion

The Powerhouse Museum Renewal is an opportunity to conserve and bring new life to the incredible heritage of the museum, its collection and its location.

We urge proper consideration of the significance of the collection and buildings as part of the design process. Reconsideration of some aspects of the proposal will, we feel, allow for a good outcome for a much loved institution and we urge consideration of the feedback received during this process to ensure the best expenditure of public funds and the best future for the Powerhouse Museum.