

30 July 2025

Thomas Piovesan
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By online portal

Dear Mr Piovesan,

National Trust submission relating to Powerhouse Ultimo Modification 1 (SSD-67588459-Mod-1)

The National Trust of Australia (NSW) has made multiple submissions over many years, advocating for not only the retention of the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo, but also for the conservation of its built fabric and the museum components of the site. In 2015 we nominated the current Powerhouse Museum for inclusion on the NSW State Heritage Register, and we supported the extension of the curtilage to include the components of the site that had been built specifically to facilitate its conversion to a museum.

We refer you to our previous submissions on this matter.

The National Trust is disappointed by the most recent application, which now proposes the complete demolition of the Wran Building – winner of the 1988 Sulman Medal for Architecture in NSW. We believe this is inconsistent with its reasons for listing on the NSW State Heritage Register, defeats the whole purpose of any heritage listing, and means that the project can no longer be considered an example of adaptive re-use.

Conservation Management Plan - still missing

Unlike any other noteworthy renewal and restoration project of a major public institution in NSW, there has been a complete lack of heritage guidance from the very commencement of the Powerhouse Museum project. Where the award-winning recent renovations of the Sydney Opera House, State Library of NSW, NSW Parliament House, Australian Museum and White Bay Power Station have all been led in recent times by robust Conservation Management Plans that have identified important fabric and recommended approaches to their conservation as part of any necessary upgrades, the Powerhouse Museum has consistently declined to prepare and/or utilise this standard heritage approach in any of its numerous proposals in Ultimo.

The Draft Conservation Management Plan (CMP) prepared by Curio Projects to accompany the 2022 SSD application was roundly criticised for dismissing the significance of the 1988 alterations to the site, including the Wran Building, and did not include one single image of the original interiors of the museum. That document offered no summary of significance, no grading of significant components, no views analysis and no significance grading for any part of the Wran Building. That lack of investigation and analysis has now led – at a very late stage – to this vital part of the site being completely misunderstood and proposed for demolition. There is still no CMP for the Powerhouse Museum.



Heritage Impact of this proposal

The National Trust cannot agree with the conclusion (p.54) of the Heritage Impact Statement prepared by NBRS & Partners Pty Ltd that *“the proposal to reconstruct the structural framing of the Wran Building will not have a detrimental effect on the significance of the Powerhouse Museum complex.”* Similarly, the Trust cannot agree with the argument (p.53) that *“the proposal will not adversely impact the heritage significance established by the SHR listing (and that) the statement of significance in the SHR listing of the Powerhouse Ultimo Complex will continue to apply unaltered.”*

The Statement of Significance in the SHR listing referred to above includes the following paragraph:

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. Together with the complex it has State significance for its associations with political, design and museum figures including Neville Wran, Jack Ferguson, Lionel Glendenning, Richard Johnson, Lindsay Sharp and Norman Harwood.

Given that this proposal involves the complete demolition of the Wran Building and Galleria and any last vestige of the design contributions of any of the design luminaries noted above, the National Trust cannot see how this element of the State Heritage Register listing can remain. Accordingly, the National Trust will now update our own listing of the Wran Building and Galleria to “demolished”.

Design process

In tandem with our previous concerns regarding the lack of a comprehensive Conservation Management Plan to assess the site and guide the design, it is somewhat alarming that the reason given for many of the changes (including the seismic performance of the original walls of the Switch House, and the buildability and safety in design considerations of the Wran Building) is that they were only picked up in the tender process by the builder, and even elements such as the steep gradient of Macarthur Street and the position of existing street trees have been given as reasons for the wholesale amendment of the loading dock location.

It is concerning that it took until after the tender stage to identify a number of these fairly major concerns.

Switch House

The National Trust is generally supportive of the proposed changes to the Switch house, including:

- the removal of the rooftop bar and terrace
- the removal of the loading dock entry ramp and associated impact on the south elevation
- the reduced demolition of floor slabs
- changes to utilise existing window openings

The Trust agree with the NBRS Heritage Impact Statement (p.36) that the *“removal of the loading dock will eliminate the required changes to the façade, including the need for a new vehicular entry to the building via Macarthur Street”* and that *“the relocation of the loading dock from the Switch House has a positive heritage impact through the reduced physical impact on fabric and the improved internal layout of the building”*.

Many of the previously proposed alterations to the Switch House did have a negative heritage impact (especially when considered cumulatively) and the current proposal is an improvement in this regard.



Alternatives

The late changes to the Wran Building and Galleria that form the subject of this modification are a result of “feedback from tenderers”. The resulting “reinstatement” of the steel frame and removal of the Galleria windows is in fact now a complete redesign of this element of the site, including not only the structural frame but every other component such as the windows, internal and external cladding.

A far simpler alternative would of course have been to retain the existing building and upgrade as necessary. This would not only save heritage fabric and the original spatial qualities (in some cases necessary of restoration) of the original design, but would undoubtedly have also saved time, money and environmental costs.

The resulting building must now be considered – especially for the cost that will be outlaid – a compromised work of architecture, based as it is on recreating a series of shapes, rather than being based on museum functionality and display. It is not a good heritage outcome.

The winning design competition proposal (not supported by the National Trust, as it involved the complete demolition of the Wran Building and Galleria) was promoted as *“an exemplar of adaptive heritage reuse which will deliver new and expanded spaces”* that would enable the Powerhouse Museum *“to present more exhibitions showcasing the museum’s significant collection”*.

The elements of both this design and the original Wran Building have continued to be whittled away to the point that has now been arrived at – in just the same way that the “retention” of the St Georges’ Terraces at Powerhouse Parramatta must be viewed as a compromise to the integrity of both the heritage building and the new design.

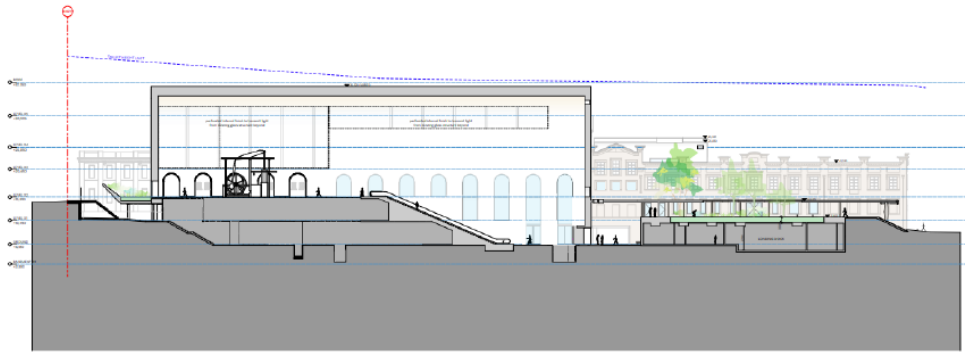


Winning design for the 2022 Powerhouse Museum Ultimo competition (Source: Architectus, Infrastructure NSW)

Conclusion

The National Trust believe that the current Powerhouse Ultimo Renewal, which now involves complete demolition of the Wran Building, can no longer be considered an example of appropriate heritage conservation in terms of adaptive re-use.

Our concern is therefore focussed on the actual nature of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences – how it will function and what it will display from its world-class collection. Despite our recommendations over many years that the actual functioning of the museum and its displays must form part of the design process, it still appears that the design of the actual museum display is of secondary consideration and not integrated with the architectural design.



It is only the above drawing that appears to indicate the position of the Boulton and Watt steam engine – now removed from the building. No other component of the internal design or the position of major collection items has been outlined in any proposal or document. Of the numerous computer-renders of the project that have been shared with the public, not a single rendering has been provided showing how any internal part of the actual museum will look or operate or items will be displayed.

It is chiefly for the above reasons that there has remained throughout this project a high level of uncertainty about the true future of the Powerhouse Museum – or more correctly the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, which is required under its Act of Parliament to:

effectively minister to the needs and demands of the community in any or all branches of applied science and art and the development of industry by—

- (i) the display of selected objects arranged to illustrate the industrial advance of civilisation and the development of inventions and manufactures,*
- (ii) the promotion of craftsmanship and artistic taste by illustrating the history and development of the applied arts,*
- (iii) lectures, broadcasts, films, publications and other educational means,*
- (iv) scientific research, or*
- (v) any other means necessary or desirable for the development of the natural resources and manufacturing industries of New South Wales.*

Until some level of certainty is provided that the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo will fulfil the above functions, the National Trust will continue to advocate for the heritage values of this museum and its collection.

Yours sincerely,

David Burdon
Director, Conservation