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Powerhouse Museum shift to Parramatta defies all logic Western Sydney needs a museum but it shouldn't be this one

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Nicole Kidmans's wedding dress at Sydney's Powerhouse Museum. Picture: Dylan Robinson

Marc Newson is one of the world's best-known designers, recognised for his work on the Apple Watch and Qantas business-class beds, but he first came to notice in the 1980s with his radical reinventions of the chair.

His 1988 Embryo chair was commissioned by the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, which later purchased his earlier aluminium-clad Lockheed Lounge. The two pieces of furniture, so distinctive in their shape and imaginative use of materials, are defining objects of their era and identified Newson as an international talent.

If good design is based on the notion of rational analysis leading to optimal outcomes, then the NSW government's plans for the Powerhouse Museum must be the antithesis of design thinking. Its decision to remove the Powerhouse from its foundations in inner-city Ultimo and relocate to Parramatta appears costly and poorly thought through. Newson says the move would be a disaster. "I for one would never go," he says in a statement, adding his voice to the campaign to keep the Powerhouse at Ultimo. "I am happy to offer my support however I can — after all, they were my first benefactor."



Former NSW premier Mike Baird with Powerhouse director Dolla Merrillees at the proposed Parramatta site. Picture: Jonathan Ng

From the get-go, the government has pushed ahead with the Parramatta idea while community consultation and the business case remain incomplete. When former premier Mike Baird early last year announced the Parramatta site for the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, the move was presented as a fait accompli, with no indication of the costs involved or more than a vague artist's impression of the building.

The cost of moving the Powerhouse and its entire collection to Parramatta would be a hugely complex operation, estimated to be in the region of \$1 billion. Since Baird's resignation and the installation of Gladys Berejiklian as Premier, the government has been sending mixed messages. Earlier this year, Arts Minister Don Harwin indicated that while Parramatta would gain a world-class cultural institution, he was open to retaining "all or part of the Ultimo site as a cultural space". Then, last Monday, Berejiklian announced the government's deal with the City of Parramatta to secure the former David Jones carpark as the site for the new Powerhouse Museum. Ultimo would keep some sort of "arts and cultural presence" — but, no question about it, the Powerhouse was moving.



NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian has announced progress in plans to shift the museum. Picture: AAP

The timing of the Premier's announcement took many by surprise, because it happened hours before a community meeting was due to start at the Ultimo Powerhouse about the proposals. If the government is genuine about listening to the community, it did not wait until after the meeting to announce its latest plans.

Nor does it appear to have sought the input of its high-powered Arts & Culture Advisory Committee on the Powerhouse's future. The panel includes the chairmen of all the major arts institutions and was convened as a top-level sounding board about the state's cultural facilities.

The state government has also been too impatient to wait for the conclusion of an upper house inquiry into the state's museums, which has taken particular interest in the Powerhouse. The inquiry was due to report later this month but chairman Robert Borsak says he is considering an extension in order to get some clarity about what the government intends to do.

Political meddling with public art galleries and museums arouses strong emotions in the community, and with good reason. Museums are public assets held in trust; they are not the playthings of politicians or prizes to be offered to property developers. Witness the public outcry over the decision to close the

Castlemaine Art Museum, a fine institution in regional Victoria, because its business model had become “unsustainable”. The people of Castlemaine are not responsible for the museum’s management, but they and visitors to the town would be the losers. Fortunately the generosity of private donors, who have together pledged \$300,000, will keep the museum open.



World-renowned designer Marc Newson opposes the shift from Ultimo to Parramatta.

In Sydney, too, the debate over the Powerhouse has provoked vehement voices and media campaigns on both sides. People in western Sydney have very good reason to deplore the lack of cultural facilities in their area. Parramatta still does not have its own art gallery, unlike Penrith, Casula and Campbelltown. *The Daily Telegraph* has been fighting this corner, arguing that the entire Powerhouse should be moved to Parramatta despite the objections of an inner-city “clique”. Berejiklian’s announcement last Monday came with an additional \$40 million and plans to redevelop the city’s Riverside Theatre.

But there are very sound arguments for retaining the Powerhouse at Ultimo that have nothing to do with the city’s real or imagined cultural fault lines. The Powerhouse Museum has its origins in the Sydney International Exhibition of 1879 and its spirit of inquiry and technological innovation. For many years it occupied cramped quarters in Harris Street before the nearby Ultimo Power Station was identified as its new home. The museum opened there in 1988, with expanded premises. It houses valuable relics of the steam age and early transportation — including the 1785 Boulton and Watt steam engine and Locomotive 1243, the oldest surviving locomotive built in Australia — as well as collections of decorative arts, fashion, communications technology and musical instruments.

The museum belongs to the industrial heritage of Ultimo, with its long-time links to Sydney’s transportation networks, to technical and higher education, and to the pedestrian thoroughfare recently opened by the Goods Line. Heritage consultant Kylie Winkworth, a passionate critic of the Parramatta move, says the Powerhouse retains immense cultural value precisely because of its location. “The building and the collections are indivisible from the Ultimo context, the last great relic of Darling Harbour, which was the industrial powerhouse of NSW,” she says. “It’s ludicrous to think you can pull those trains and planes and carriages out of there and somehow have anything that’s meaningful in Parramatta.”

As is the case with many galleries and museums, the Powerhouse collection is too big to be displayed at any one time. An idea that at least deserves consideration is whether the Parramatta museum could be a dedicated

repository for key parts of the Powerhouse collection. Such a move would develop the Powerhouse as a multi-venue institution similar to the Smithsonian in Washington, with its museums of natural history, space exploration and so on. Another proposal is for Parramatta to gain a unique museum more closely tied to local history and stories. For example, there is still no museum to tell the story of indigenous people and culture, or the history of early settler contact with the original inhabitants.

Given the government's commitment to spend money on a significant cultural facility at Parramatta, there should be many options on the table for the most desirable outcome. What the Powerhouse's supporters will not countenance is a downgrading of the Ultimo museum or the selling off of land or air space to property developers. And the people of western Sydney will not settle for a compromise or anything that looks like a second-best museum.