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POWERHOUSE MOVE

Full steam ahead, at \$645 million

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A new Broadway-style theatre and fashion and design museum will be built in Ultimo and Australia's largest planetarium in Parramatta as the state government defied its critics to push ahead with controversial plans to relocate the Powerhouse Museum to western Sydney.

Following Cabinet sign off Thursday and despite opposition from within her own backbench, NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian will announce today a new purpose-built museum said to be the largest in NSW and a rival to the London Science Museum and the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum.

The "net cost to government" for the relocation would be \$645 million, according to a government briefing paper, a figure expected to be predicated on the sale and redevelopment of at least part of the Ultimo site and the new riverside location, given the project's scale.

A residential tower as tall as 50 storeys is thought to be possible on the same site as the new museum at Parramatta with retail, bars and cafes spilling out to a riverside plaza.

The Parramatta museum is to include 18,000 square metres of exhibition and public spaces, more than the 15,708 square metres in Ultimo. Exhibition halls will host international travelling exhibitions and there will be dedicated play and learning spaces devoted to science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics.

An international design competition is to be held for the site at the end of this year with works to commence in 2019 and the new museum to open its doors in 2023.

The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences's other satellite centre, the Museums Discovery Centre at Castle Hill, is to be expanded and upgraded to provide labs, workshops and facilities to support conservation and collections management and built to "exacting international standards for temperature and humidity control".

At inner city-Ultimo, part of the existing museum site, likely to include the Harwood Building where the bulk of the collection is currently stored, is expected to be sold off with the remainder to be converted into a design and fashion museum showcasing the MAAS's collection.

A new 1500-seat Broadway-style theatre would fill a gap identified by local theatre producers for first-run touring musicals, live music and screenings.

This is to be built and run by a commercial operator through an “open competitive process”.

The priceless Boulton and Watt steam engine, the world’s oldest rotative steam engine in the world, and the Locomotive No.1 is to be transferred to Parramatta, despite curatorial concerns around their fragility.

It is planned the Powerhouse Museum will stay open for business for some time before relocation and will tour exhibitions regionally and nationally until the new museum opens.

Arts Minister Don Harwin is hoping his vision for a new Powerhouse Museum in a part of Sydney lacking a major cultural institutional drawcard will bring a new audience to the Powerhouse Museum.

But it is unlikely to silence the critics. A parliamentary inquiry has savaged the decision to relocate the Powerhouse Museum, originally announced by the former NSW premier, Mike Baird, in 2015 as an “act of vandalism”.

With the government stalling the release of the final business case to justify the relocation, opponents yesterday condemned the secrecy surrounding the museum’s eviction.

Mr Harwin had broken his undertaking to release the business case before making a decision on the fate of the Powerhouse Museum, the Powerhouse Museum Alliance said. The government’s refusal to release the business case all but confirmed that this was “a bad deal for NSW taxpayers and museum lovers”.

The Alliance drew attention to the 11,000 signatories to a petition presented to NSW Parliament in 2016 and the 133 submissions to the upper house inquiry that opposed the Powerhouse move.

“This is shameless asset stripping of award-winning, purpose-designed museum facilities that were built and endowed by previous generations of NSW taxpayers,” the statement released yesterday said. “The Powerhouse Museum is not a redundant asset or a development opportunity. It is a much-loved family museum that for the last 30 years has brought joy and wonder to millions of visitors from across Sydney, regional NSW, interstate and the overseas.”



Power play: an artist’s impression of the new planetarium at Parramatta, right; and, above, the proposed museum.