

# Powerhouse Museum collection caught in version of beds-to-the-west

By Linda Morris

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In 1982, Laurie Brereton took on the thankless job of reorganising the state's health system, taking maternity beds from the eastern suburbs and inner city to Sydney's rapidly growing western and south-western region.

The NSW government has drawn a line under its own cultural version of beds to the west, announcing a dedicated science and innovation museum for the heart of Parramatta.



Peter Denham, the Powerhouse Museum's director of curatorial, collections and exhibitions in front of the Boulton and Watt steam engine in 2017. *Photo: Ben Rushton*

The decision is both an exercise in political pragmatism and answer to historic public funding inequities in western Sydney. A big vision, it is also surprisingly vague around the future of Ultimo where clarity is necessary to assess the true value and costs of such an ambitious project, iconic or not.

When the Sydney Opera House was commissioned in 1958, Sydney was a city of 1.8 million. Western Sydney's population passed that milestone in 2011 and will be closer to 3 million by 2031. Yet the region attracts a mere 1 per cent of Commonwealth arts program funding, 5.5 per cent of state funding. Five of the major cultural museums and galleries lie within five kilometres of the CBD, none in western Sydney.

That the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo was singled out three years ago to redress that neglect reflects Treasury's aversion to building and operating a new museum from scratch in Parramatta - even one in which some locals are keen to celebrate the city's Indigenous and migrant past.



NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian announces the Powerhouse Museum's Parramatta site during a press conference in Parramatta on Saturday. *Photo: Cole Bennetts*

The Powerhouse building has its limitations but the Art Gallery of NSW has its faults too, a sandstone pile on the edges of The Domain too small to display and celebrate the full story of Australian art, distant from train stations and equally reliant on international blockbusters. Whereas the Art Gallery is to receive \$244 million public money for a new wing to showcase contemporary art, the Powerhouse has lacked influential benefactors.

Surprisingly it has tended to undersell its veritable treasure trove of Australia's social history and industrial and transport heritage. And it is this - the sledges of Mawson and Scott, a priceless working Boulton and Watt steam engine, built into the museum itself, the wool samples of Samuel Marsden - that sits at the heart of these policy decisions.

Cabinet could well have opted to expand the flagship cultural institutions in western Sydney than go to the massive expense of relocating the Powerhouse. The Campbelltown Arts Centre is crying out and for a new 318-seat theatre, studios, rehearsal and workshop spaces. The Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre in Penrith could be expanded to include a Western Sydney Conservatorium.

As the University of NSW's Joanna Mendelsohn notes, these venues are lean, innovative and deeply connected to their audiences, producing programs of intellectual rigour that are massively popular and entertaining. Equally, they have developed independently around local councils, which have seeded them and so lack a broader state focus.

In this, the distribution of art and cultural resources in western Sydney reflect a region that is effectively four separate cities, where the extremes of rich and poor often live side-by-side in the same neighbourhoods.

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So it may take another generation or two before a homegrown millionaire philanthropist with the vision and deep pockets of David Walsh can establish a Museum of Old and New Art in the region.

Until then, arts and cultural leaders of western Sydney say the new museum is merely the start. They will be agitating for programs and resources that will provide a proper home for the city's creatives - the architects, designers and writers - and their audiences.

And the defenders of the Powerhouse Museum's collection will continue to remind the government that its cultural legacy is precious and should not be used as a political football.