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Powerhouse saga is far from over at both sites

With the announcement of the winning design by Moreau Kusunoki and Genton, the Berejiklian government hopes to push the reset button on protests that have dogged the Powerhouse project at Parramatta since its inception. What it risks, however, is more political and budget headaches lasting until the 2023 election.

The international jurors have opted for form and function over the truly iconic. While the new building is not without ambition, it lacks the lyricism and quirkiness of, say, Guggenheim Bilbao.

The Powerhouse Museum design was partly defined by necessity. The ground level must be cavernous to be flood-proof and all exhibition spaces must be protected for the eventuality of a

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one-in-100 year flood while linking to a public performance space and a revived riverfront precinct that operates 24 hours a day. The museum needs open gallery suites for its diverse and rolling program – big enough to house its unique treasure-house collection including one hefty 26-tonne locomotive, and the fragile Bouton and Watt Rotative Steam Engine.

But it comes at a cost of two Victorian-era buildings, Willow Grove and St George's Terrace, at a time when Parramatta is losing its beloved Sydney Speedway. "We've never said it will go as part of the Powerhouse Museum," Premier

Gladys Berejiklian said in February of the historic buildings that will now be demolished.

What happens inside a museum, what international consultant Jasper Visser describes as architecture's blood and veins, counts most in a modern museum. A museum should allow for many different uses of the space – not just exhibitions, but talks, workshops, live music and civic events – but its ultimate master is its 500,000-plus collection and the stories it tells.

The 60 studio residences to be let to scientists and researchers with room to house overnight stays of school students from the regions will underpin the museum's education and research focus.

That it will stand without commercial or residential towers crowding its skyline is a testament to both its chief executive officer

Lisa Havilah and its chairman Professor Barney Glover, who argued rightly the museum should not be compromised by developer demands. That vision of a "people's" museum will be Havilah's calling card as she seeks to raise \$75 million towards the construction costs, and begins discussions with potential university and industry partners.

As the process of refining the architectural concept to a functional working museum also begins, Havilah and Glover will need to defend the integrity of their vision from the Treasury looking to spot any budget savings.

And there is still the wider story of what will be built at Ultimo, which will only become clear with the release of the new business case in April. Lionel Glendenning's award-winning Wran building goes as well as the pair of historic buildings.

The 1988 museum at Ultimo, inspired by the 1879 Garden Palace, was the inspiration for many industrial building renewals – Casula Powerhouse, Tamworth Power Station Museum and Carriageworks. The government still has to decide if the Powerhouse Museum will continue to have a presence in a redeveloped cultural precinct at Ultimo, as a fashion and design gallery.

Just how high will commercial and residential towers need to rise there to make the Parramatta Powerhouse a viable venture?

Will it opt to close the door on the Powerhouse Museum once and for all time at Ultimo?

These are questions that are yet to be answered.

Linda Morris is a *Herald* arts and books writer.