

# POWERHOUSE ULTIMO RENEWAL



State Significant Development Application

Application No SSD-32927319

**NEW SOUTH WALES CHAPTER**

Submission date: 21 July 2022

## OVERVIEW

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Guided by our vision of ensuring that everyone benefits from good architecture, we represent over 13,000 members globally and are committed demonstrating the value of architecture to the public whilst strengthening our profession and the practice of architecture.

The Australian Institute of Architects (the Institute) and its members are dedicated to raising the quality of the built environment for people, and to the advancement of architecture. We seek to improve the enduring health and wellbeing of all Australians. The design of the built environment shapes the places where we live, work and meet.

The importance of heritage in our built environment is well established. A heritage item may be significant for aesthetic, historic, social, spiritual or technical reasons. Even where a building's heritage significance is recognised, the usefulness and long-term viability of the structure (physical and financial) remain important considerations.

The architectural profession has a responsibility to contribute to the conservation and understanding of the built environment. Creativity, allied with design skills and an appreciation of the original are required for successful conservation and adaptive re-use.



**Laura Cockburn**

PRESIDENT NSW CHAPTER



## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

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The Australian Institute of Architects (the Institute) is the peak body for the architectural profession in Australia. It is an independent, national member organisation with around 13,000 members across Australia and overseas.

The Institute exists to advance the interests of members, their professional standards and contemporary practice, and expand and advocate the value of architects and architecture to the sustainable growth of our communities, economy and culture.

The Institute actively works to maintain and improve the quality of our built environment by promoting better, responsible and environmental design.

## PURPOSE

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This submission is made by the Australian Institute of Architects (the Institute) to provide input on the Powerhouse Ultimo Renewal.

At the time of this submission the NSW Chapter President is Laura Cockburn, the NSW State Manager is Joanna McAndrew and the NSW Policy and Advocacy Manager is Lisa King.

## CONTACT DETAILS

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## POWERHOUSE ULTIMO RENEWAL

### POWERHOUSE EXISTING BUILDING SIGNIFICANCE

The Powerhouse Ultimo site, whilst being the home of significant heritage-listed buildings, is also the location for one of the most successful and renowned adaptive reuse projects in Australia, an international benchmark for a museum of this type and a fine example of NSW public architecture in the postmodern style.

Commissioned as a significant Bicentenary project and opened in 1988, the Powerhouse Museum has been a flagship science, technology and applied arts museum with widely acknowledged educational and tourism benefits for both Sydney and the state of New South Wales. It is the last remaining building which contributed to a public landscape of buildings and open spaces constructed by the NSW Government to celebrate Australia's colonial Bicentenary. The Darling Harbour project, once an inaccessible industrial landscape, was adapted to become a setting which valorised public use for all.

The adaptive reuse of the former Power House has great significance for the NSW architectural profession, firstly as an important work by the NSW Government Architect, and secondly, as a recipient of the Sir John Sulman Medal in 1988.

First awarded in 1932, the Sulman Medal is bestowed by the NSW Chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects for buildings of a significant public nature. The Sulman Medal is widely regarded as the premier award for Architecture in NSW. Sulman-winning buildings, together with the architects and organisations that design them, are of great importance to the architectural community and the public.

While the Institute welcomes the intent to revitalise the precinct, maintain its use for the public, and create the opportunity for new connections to both the Goods Line and nearby dining, entertaining and cultural precincts, we maintain the 1988 additions form an important part of the fabric and heritage of the Powerhouse.

With an incomplete heritage listing, the current development application opens the door to the demolition of this important part of NSW heritage.

The Australian Institute of Architects (the Institute) strongly advocates that the Heritage Impact Statement (see excerpt below) provided in this application fails to acknowledge the widely understood significance of the entire 1988 intervention, and as a result it places this award-winning project at risk of demolition or modification to the extent its value is lost.

#### **Heritage Impact Statement:**

*'While the construction of the Wran building was innovative for its adaptive reuse of the site at the time, it also impacted the visibility and legibility of the State Heritage listed buildings within the site, including the former Power House buildings, and the Ultimo Post Office.'* Curio Projects Heritage Impact Statement

## PLANNING SECRETARY'S ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT REQUIREMENTS: ISSUE AND ASSESSMENT REQUIREMENTS

### 4. Built Form and Urban Design

*Demonstrate how the proposal responds to Aboriginal cultural connections to Country, in accordance with the Draft Connecting with Country framework.*

*Explain and illustrate the proposed built form, including a detailed site and context analysis to justify the proposed site planning and design approach.*

*Demonstrate how the proposed built form (layout, height, bulk, scale, separation, setbacks, interface and articulation) addresses and responds to the context, site characteristics, streetscape and existing and future character of the locality.*

*Identify any change to the use and or layout of the existing building(s) and associated impacts on circulation movements, access and linkages.*

*Provide a breakdown of proposed land uses (including ancillary uses).*

*Assess how the development complies with the relevant accessibility requirements.*

By proposing a 'loose fit envelope' which is visually represented in this application as a 'box' over the site it is unclear how an adequate assessment of built form and urban design can be made. The reference design does not appear to address or engage with the existing building fabric on the site, and an understanding of the significance of the Wran building, Galleria and overall 1988 adaptive reuse of the Powerhouse precinct is not demonstrated.

In the Environmental Impact Statement provided, the Powerhouse Museum is not treated as a whole, or even as a cultural institution, but is seen as an empty building. It is broken into a heritage core and disposable elements that include the Wran building, Galleria and other adaptive reuse works. The Institute does not support this approach.

The Institute believes a masterplan is necessary to clearly assess impacts on public space, given this application seeks wide development approval for a large, bulky building envelope. The application seeks the approval of large buildings on both existing public spaces. This seems to be contrary to more than one of the design principles in the EIS section on urban design, including p.33 in the EIS *'to maintain or increase the quality or quantity of the public domain on the site, and reveal and celebrate heritage fabric and spaces to the wider public domain'*. Without the guidance of a masterplan it is difficult to visualise how these objectives can be sustained.

### 6. Visual Impact

*Provide a visual analysis of the development from key viewpoints, including photomontages or perspectives showing the proposed and likely future development.*

*Where the visual analysis has identified potential for significant visual impact, provide a visual impact assessment that assesses and justifies the impacts of the development on the existing catchment.*

Similarly, the Institute maintains, the absence of any clear proposed form or building detail makes assessing the visual impact unclear. Based on the images provided by the proponent, we believe the proposed building envelope substantially diminishes any view of the significant buildings which currently inhabit the site from every direction. In addition, the proposed building envelope suggests a deleterious addition to the Harris Street streetscape and urban form. See Figure 1.



Figure 19 View 1: Harris Street and William Henry Street – proposed view  
Source: Virtual Ideas

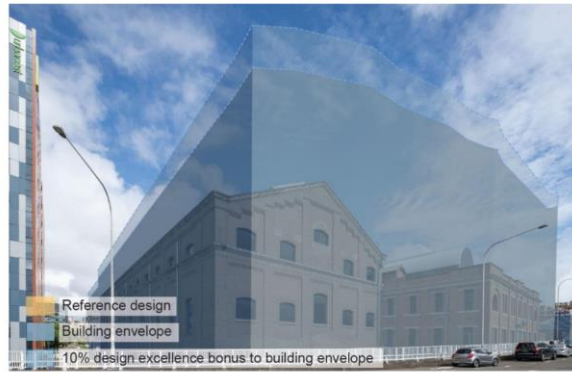


Figure 21 View 2: Pier Street – proposed view  
Source: Virtual Ideas



Figure 27 View 5: Harris Street and Macarthur Street – proposed view  
Source: Virtual Ideas

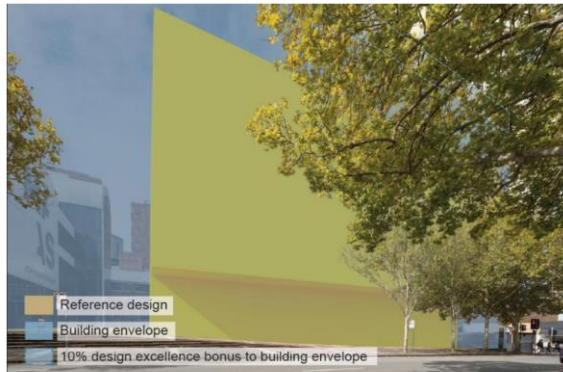


Figure 29 View 6: Harris Street – proposed view  
Source: Virtual Ideas

Figure 1. Proposed visual impact of new building envelope

## SUMMARY

1. The Institute asserts the high significance of the 1988 award-winning Wran building, Galleria and overall adaptive reuse of the precinct.
2. It is unclear how an application can meet requirements such as built form and visual impact when a 'loose fit envelope' only is provided. This implies that award-winning architectural fabric is permitted to be removed or substantially altered.
3. The reference design in the SSDA clearly demonstrates a detrimental visual impact to the important, existing buildings on the site.

## CONCLUSION

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The Institute is grateful for the opportunity to make comment on this development application. Whilst we are pleased that the Powerhouse Ultimo precinct will undergo revitalisation, and improvements to the connectivity with public spaces such as the Goods Line, we are concerned the significance of the current buildings on the site have not been adequately represented in the application. Additionally, it is unclear how an adequate assessment of the consequential impacts on the precinct can be made given the application's broad and non-specific approach to the proposed built form.

We welcome the opportunity to further engage with you on the development of this important site and we offer the Institute's support in assisting the assessment team to achieve a well-considered outcome for this significant public place.