



Powerhouse Museum Ultimo Revitalisation

Fact Sheet: Heritage

May 2024



Acknowledgement of Country

Infrastructure NSW and the Powerhouse pay respects to the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which Powerhouse Museum Ultimo stands.

We recognise their continuous connection to this place. We honour the clans, nations, families that have always been connected to this site, and respect the diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that now call this place home.

We recognise Aboriginal connections to this place as a cultural continuum – resilient, resistant, and responsive to emerging and receding industries. This has always been a place of story, ceremony and gathering, it is our responsibility that this continues to be a place for the broader community and reflects their stories.

Cover image: Ultimo Power Station, 1911
(Source: City of Sydney Archives, SRC14562)

Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)

The Powerhouse Museum Ultimo Revitalisation Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is on Public Exhibition until 30 May 2024.

The EIS assesses the expected construction and operational impacts of the project, including a range of environmental and social factors, the management of potential impacts to local heritage and archaeology, and the proposed construction program.

This fact sheet provides an overview of the proposed heritage impacts of the revitalisation. Information about the design scheme and a summary of the EIS are available separately.

This fact sheet is a summary document and does not contain all detail within the EIS. You are encouraged to read the complete EIS documentation on the NSW Planning Portal for more detailed information:

<https://www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/major-projects/projects/powerhouse-ultimo-revitalisation>

Where are we now

The Powerhouse Museum Ultimo site contains two heritage-listed buildings: the Ultimo Power House and the Ultimo Post Office, both of which are listed on the State Heritage Register (SHR) under the *NSW Heritage Act 1977*.

The SHR Ultimo Power House curtilage consists of the five main interconnected heritage listed buildings: Turbine Hall, Engine House, Boiler House, North Annex and Switch House.

In March 2024, the Heritage Council of NSW confirmed they will consider expanding the SHR curtilage to encompass the whole site which has been adaptively reused as the site of the Powerhouse Museum since 1988. This process is underway and is separate from the State Significant Development Application (SSDA) process for the museum revitalisation. A decision from the Heritage Council of NSW is expected before the SSDA determination.



Figure 1: State Heritage Register listings (Source: Curio 2021)

How heritage has been assessed

As part of the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), Infrastructure NSW has commissioned three independent reports to assess Aboriginal and European Cultural Heritage within the site of Powerhouse Museum Ultimo and its surrounding areas:

- 1 Heritage Impact Statement** to assess potential impacts that the project's construction and operations may have on the significance of heritage items, archaeology and any heritage items surrounding the site.
- 2 Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Assessment Report** to outline the process of investigating, consulting and assessing Aboriginal cultural heritage and Aboriginal archaeology within the site. It provides several recommendations to manage Aboriginal cultural heritage during project planning.
- 3 Historical Archaeological Assessment Report** to guide site investigations to determine the nature and extent of any non-Aboriginal archaeological remains.

Risks and mitigations

The Heritage Impact Statement and associated reports outlines that, consistent with most construction projects in urban environments, the project may present risks to archaeology and heritage. Risks that cannot be avoided would be carefully mitigated.

Aboriginal archaeology

Significance

Sydney Harbour and its surrounds are highly significant to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people as the location of first contact between local Aboriginal groups and Europeans. Areas such as the Pyrmont Peninsula are recognised for their archaeological and cultural significance to contemporary Aboriginal communities, as they provide tangible and intangible connections to the Aboriginal past. The area assessed for this project includes the original western shoreline of Darling Harbour/ Cockle Bay, which would have served as a location for fishing, resource gathering and other activities.

The project site and surrounds are of high social and cultural significance to local Aboriginal communities. This includes both Gadigal people as well as Aboriginal people from other Nations who live in the area.

Impacts and mitigations

The project would involve excavation of some areas within the project site. These areas, which may potentially contain artefacts with moderate archaeological significance, are:

- beneath the existing Harris Street forecourt and Wran building
- beneath the courtyard adjacent to the Boiler House, Turbine Hall and Switch House.

There is potential for construction works to impact possible archaeological deposits and relics. Further investigation is required to understand the nature and extent of any archaeological remains.

Measures to mitigate the potential impact on Aboriginal archaeological and cultural heritage would include:

- An archaeological investigation following demolition of structures to understand the nature and extent of any subsurface items
- An Aboriginal Heritage Interpretation Plan that would preserve the culture, history and stories within Powerhouse Museum Ultimo for generations to come. This would celebrate the history and cultural heritage of the local Gadigal people and wider local Aboriginal communities of Greater Sydney and NSW.

Historical archaeology

Significance

The Powerhouse site and its surrounding inner-city suburbs have an important and strong legacy of Aboriginal connections. More than a thousand generations of Aboriginal people have lived in the Sydney region through numerous climatic changes that have shaped Australia and its landscape to what it is today. The Pyrmont Peninsula appears to form part of the boundary between the Wangal and Gadigal clans. The Wangal boundary extended from Tumbalong (Darling Harbour), westward to Rose Hill to the area later named Parramatta, while the Gadigal occupied the land from the entrance of the harbour, extending along the southern shoreline towards Tumbalong.

- Early 19th Century: sandstone quarrying activities occurred along Harris Street
- 1840s – early 20th Century: the site, along with 137 William Henry Street, 517 Pyrmont Street and 554-556 Harris Street, was used as residential premises
- 1890s – 1960s: Ultimo Power House and associated structures made up the largest electricity generating station in the state, until it was decommissioned in 1963.

Impacts and mitigations

Archaeological remains associated with the site's early history and occupation will likely have been subject to high levels of disturbance across the museum's footprint and basement levels.

During construction of the basements for the Engine House, Turbine Hall and Boiler House, substantial bulk excavation of the site occurred. While there was disturbance to the site, it is unlikely that all historical artefacts and relics would have been removed.

There is a moderate to high potential for the discovery of archaeological resources of local significance to be present within the site. These archaeological resources have the potential to be associated with both the 19th Century residential structures and evolution of the Powerhouse Museum in the 20th Century.

To mitigate potential impacts to historical archaeological and cultural heritage, an archaeological investigation would be conducted after the demolition of structures to determine the presence and extent of any subsurface artefacts.

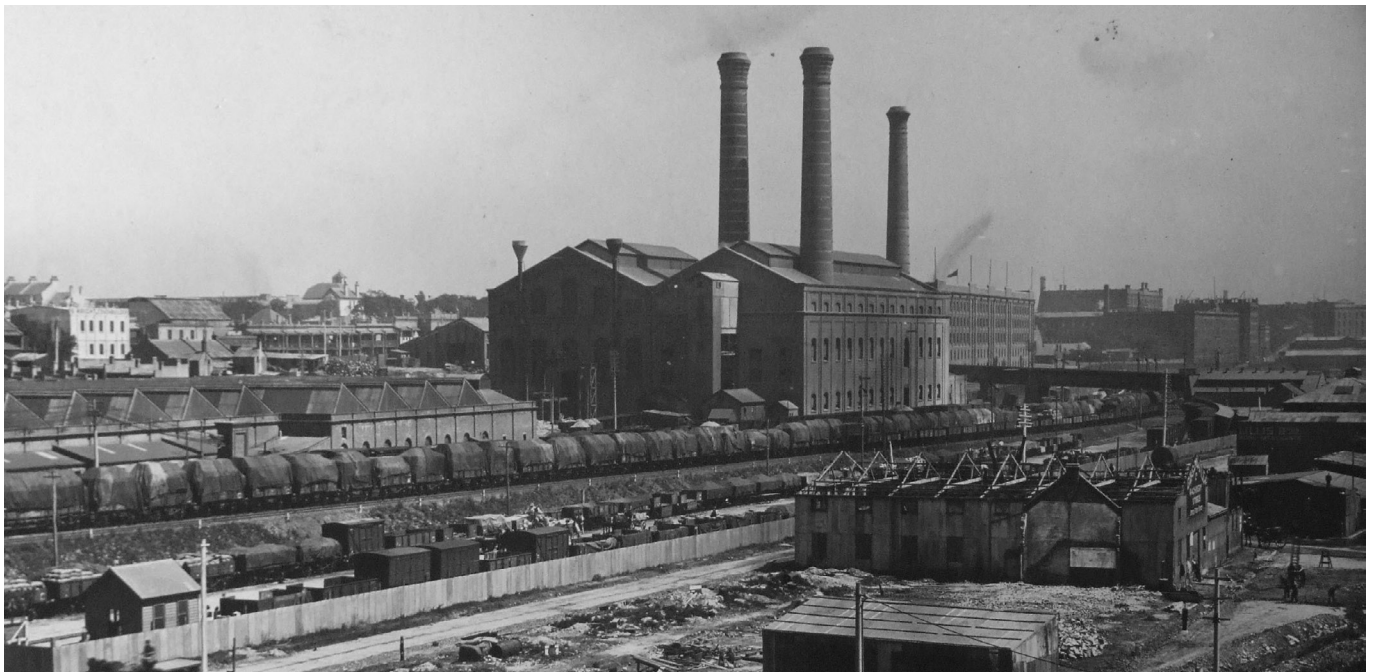


Figure 2: Ultimo Power Station, 1911
(Source: City of Sydney Archives, NSCA CRS 51/2525)

Built heritage

State and locally heritage listed items

There are two state heritage listed items within the project site that are also listed as heritage items on the City of Sydney's Sydney Local Environment Plan 2012:

- Ultimo Power House (c.1899–1905) as shown in Figure 3
- Ultimo Post Office (c.1901) as shown in Figure 4.

In October 2023, the Heritage Council of NSW made the following resolutions regarding the project site:

- Note the significance of the 1988 adaptive reuse of the entire site to create the Powerhouse Museum
- Investigate an increase of the current State Heritage Register curtilage to encompass the whole site of the Powerhouse Museum to recognise its social and historic significance
- Request Heritage NSW prepare a revised Statement of Significance based on the expanded curtilage for consideration at a future meeting
- Acknowledge the capacity for change with the Wran and Harwood buildings based on the revised Statement of Significance and the updated Conservation Management Plan
- Not proceed with further consideration of the listing of the Powerhouse Museum Collection noting that it is managed by an appropriate statutory body.

In March 2024 the Heritage Council formally commenced the process to consider revising the state heritage listing of the Powerhouse Museum Ultimo site. A decision is expected to be reached before determination of the State Significant Development Application for the Powerhouse Ultimo Museum Revitalisation.



Figure 3: Ultimo Power House, SHR Curtilage

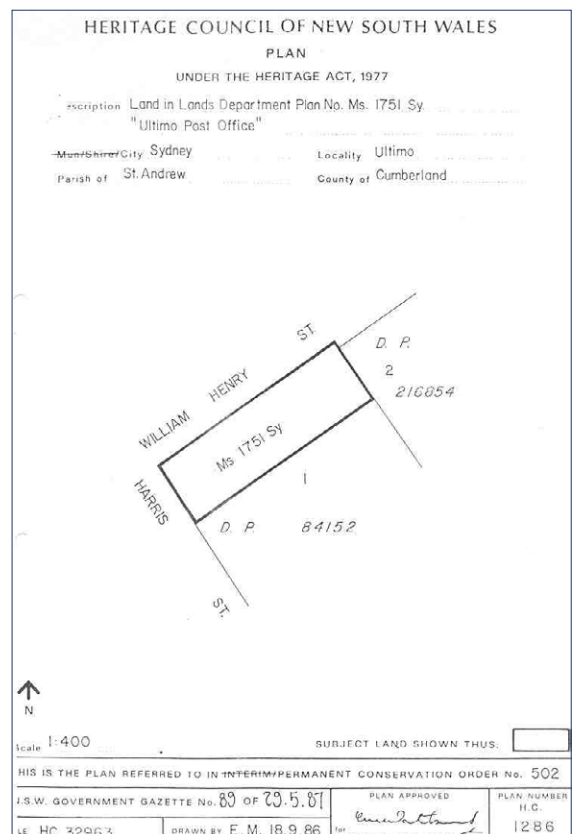


Figure 4: Ultimo Post Office SHR Listing

Heritage significance of buildings

The overall gradings of significance of buildings on the site is shown below in Figure 5.

Note the Harwood building is not included in the scope of the revitalisation but will continue to be used by the Powerhouse Museum.

While some buildings have heritage listings, not all components of the interiors of these buildings are of heritage significance. Within the design scheme for the revitalisation, priority has been given to 'exceptional' fabric for conservation and retention work, and to the removal of 'intrusive' fabric.

Impacts

The EIS identifies the key physical heritage impacts as follows:

- Removal of modern interior insertions of 'little' and 'intrusive' heritage significance within the Engine House, Turbine Hall, Boiler House, Switch House, Ultimo Post Office and North Annex
- Conservation of all internal fabric identified as having 'exceptional' significance
- Removal of the rooftop annex on the Switch House and all modern additions attached to the external facades of the Boiler House, Engine House and Switch House
- Relocation of key entry point from Harris Street to the eastern curtilage of the site, reinstating the physical connection between the heritage buildings and The Goods Line and CBD.



Figure 5: Gradings of Significance of Powerhouse Ultimo Site elements (Source: Curio 2024)

Note: Harwood Building is excluded from project scope

The EIS concludes that the proposed design demonstrates sensitivity to both the overall heritage significance of the site and to the significance of the specific heritage items. The rationale for reaching this conclusion includes:

- The design would enable greater visual access to, and reinstatement of, the former attributes of the heritage-listed 19th Century Powerhouse buildings
- The removal of 1988 additions in the south-east corner of the site would substantially increase visibility of, and access to, the Boiler House, Turbine Hall and Switch House
- The site integration with The Goods Line would re-establish this important historic link with Darling Harbour and the CBD
- The public domain spaces would enable greater community engagement with historic structures
- The new building would be easily read as a contemporary addition within the broader context and would offer interactive opportunities to view the historic buildings on site
- Existing views of the Switch House from Harris and Macarthur Streets would be impacted as a result of the new building however, once inside the museum, the opportunities to properly view and access the Switch House would be greatly improved
- Some of the fabric of the 1988 Wran building would be lost to allow for the new building, however this loss is balanced against the opportunity to achieve greater museum functionality
- The significance of the Wran building is interpreted using curved roof forms on the new building, and its historic and social significance would be celebrated through the museum's own interpretation and educational programs.

Protecting heritage throughout construction

Subject to planning approvals, a Construction Management Plan would be developed by the construction contractor. This plan would outline protocols for archaeology discoveries and procedures to ensure there is no physical impact to existing heritage buildings.

Heritage interpretation

The Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo is uniquely placed to undertake programmatic interpretation and engage audiences with the significance of the site's history.

The assessment recommends that a detailed Heritage Interpretation Plan for the site be developed to ensure that as part of the site's revitalisation, all the relevant tangible and intangible values can be celebrated, and should include strategies for:

- The significance of the adaptive reuse of the Ultimo Power Station for the Powerhouse Museum in the 1980s
- The significance of the site's Aboriginal history and use as the Ultimo Power Station.

Contact us

For planning related questions or feedback,
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