

Exclusive Culture Books [City life](#)

This was published 2 years ago

'A very prestigious location': 350-seat auditorium to go under State Library reading room

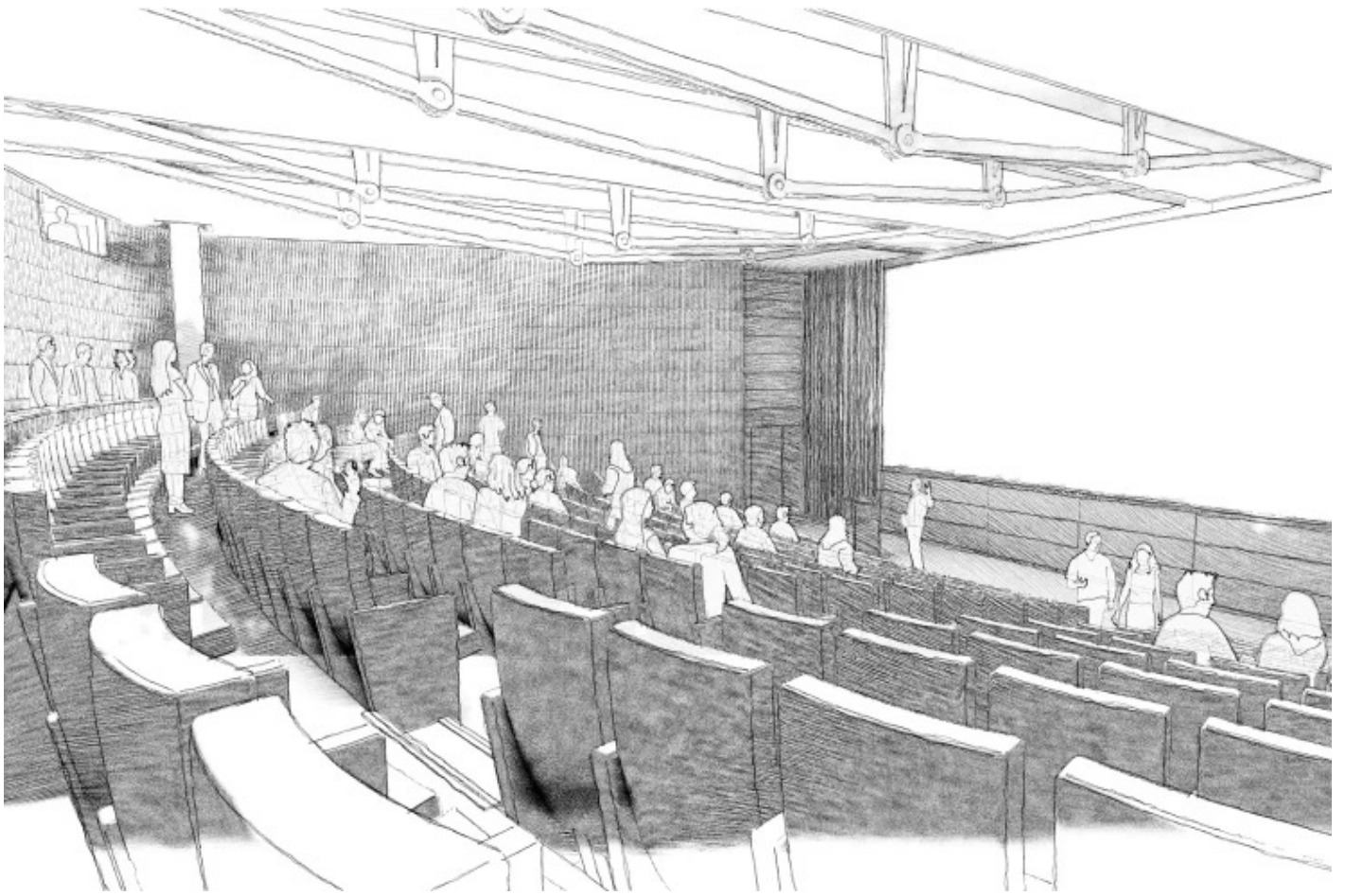


Linda Morris

May 9, 2021 – 12.00am

A new 350-seat auditorium and photography gallery is to be built beneath the historic reading room of Australia's oldest library as part of a \$24 million transformation announced by Arts Minister Don Harwin.

NSW Treasury set aside \$12.3 million in its November pandemic budget to make the library fully accessible to the public for the first time, refurbish the reading room and create a new bar on the roof of the older Mitchell building. The library has applied for a liquor licence for the rooftop bar for 120 patrons and expects to open to the public in a couple of months.



An artist's impression of the new auditorium to be built under the Mitchell Reading Room of Australia's oldest library.

A further \$12 million has now been allocated to excavate library stacks at basement level and turn it into a library auditorium, nearly tripling the 140-seat capacity of its existing venue.

“In the scheme of things, it's little more than a whiff of steam on the WestConnex porridge, but it's going to allow us to transform the services we give the public,” state librarian John Vallance state. Plans for the auditorium were approved by the City of Sydney last month, vastly expanding the diversity of events to be offered by the State Library of NSW and its capacity to draw visitors.

With night-time access from the Mitchell building, the auditorium would make a significant contribution to the cultural life of Sydney, Dr Vallance said, and become a new venue for chamber recitals, academic conferences, cinema showings and lectures.



The new auditorium will be built underneath the Reading Room. NICK MOIR

At its lowest level, the auditorium will be excavated some 1.5 metres below the existing floor level of reading stacks under the Mitchell Reading Room, which formed part of the 1940s extension and are poorly used. “This gives us an opportunity to rationalise our uses of the space,” Dr Vallance said.

In addition, a large, permanent underground gallery – set to open in mid-2022 – is to display highlights from the library’s vast photographic collection. It will follow the library’s new drawing and watercolour gallery that is to open later this year.

The library’s existing auditorium, seating 140, is to make way for an expanded bistro cafe and library book shop, trebled in size. “What we want in the end is to have Australia’s best Australiana book shop in the library, that’s the goal,” Dr Vallance said. “We want to be a platform for Australian publishers, small presses, specialist presses, where they can display their material in a very prestigious location.”

Mr Harwin said the State Library of NSW was a much-loved state institution and the additional investment of \$12 million would better enable access to its significant collections and open up new facilities to attract even more visitors to the historic building.

Dr Vallance said the renovations were not going to involve any visible external alterations to the library except at the northern entrance, where a new lift for disabled access is to be installed near the portico.

Labor's Walt Secord had been critical of earlier plans to commercialise the library's rooftop space for a restaurant and function centre.

Start your day informed

Our Morning Edition newsletter is a curated guide to the most important and interesting stories, analysis and insights. [Get it delivered to your inbox.](#)



Linda Morris is an arts writer at The Sydney Morning Herald. Connect via [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) or [email](#).
