

Lisa Havilah's ambitious plans for Sydney's Powerhouse Museum

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Few cultural institutions in Australia have been as controversial as the high-profile museum project in Parramatta.

As chief executive of the Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences, Lisa Havilah has hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars at stake.

Lisa Havilah was only 21 years old when she opened her first art gallery. Growing up on a dairy farm in the southern NSW town of Berry, Havilah was, in her words, a failure at high school, disengaged and uninterested.

With no hope of gaining a place at university, she applied to the local art school and was immediately entranced.

Keen to display her work, she and her boyfriend (now husband), ceramicist and curator Glenn Barkley, approached a Wollongong gallery about holding an exhibition. When they were turned down they took matters into their own hands, convincing a local business to rebuild a disused kitchen warehouse for them.

With the help of a youth arts grant, Havilah and Barkley hosted their inaugural exhibition, attracting an impressive 2000 people. The Wollongong mayor then agreed to pitch in \$10,000 and connected them with BHP – owner of the nearby steelworks – which matched it.

By the time a local bottle shop committed to supplying free wine for exhibitions, the pair had created a viable, artist-run space that would ultimately operate for four years.

“It was pretty amazing, we were completely overwhelmed,” laughs Havilah today. “We really learnt that whole notion of how powerful a community can be in terms of supporting you.”

[A render of the new Powerhouse Museum building in Parramatta.]

Havilah, 48, now has more than her own interests on the line. As chief executive of the Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences (MAAS), she has hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars at stake.

Again she is seeking community support, this time from the population of greater western Sydney, for the most ambitious gamble of her career: overseeing the transportation of the Powerhouse from its historic site in inner-Sydney Ultimo to Parramatta.

For an arts administrator, getting one's hands on the reins of any state-backed arts institution is a plum job. Being put in charge of one that's on the cusp of a top-to-toe transformation is especially attractive.

Certainly the NSW state government, with a weather eye on the voters of western Sydney, is keen to tout the new Powerhouse as being its largest cultural investment since the Sydney Opera House.

Running the Powerhouse is also a controversy-prone job. Uprooting the museum has angered some powerful and influential figures, including [Cate Blanchett](#) and Andrew Upton, businessmen Geoff Cousins and Graeme Wood, former premier [Bob Carr](#), arts benefactor Penelope Seidler and [the late director](#) of the Art Gallery of NSW, [Edmund Capon](#).

Former Powerhouse board member, businessman and collector Trevor Kennedy describes the move as a “serious act of vandalism”.

Indeed the move, first mooted in 2014, caused so much anger that a NSW Upper House inquiry recommended the existing Powerhouse be revitalised and a new institution built in Parramatta.

Nevertheless, the current NSW Premier [Gladys Berejiklian](#), Arts Minister Don Harwin and his close ally Havilah are ploughing ahead towards an opening date of 2023.

We don't want to be a nine-to-five museum, we want it to be a platform for events ... a place that reflects that amazing cultural dynamic.

— Lisa Havilah

Before taking the helm of the Powerhouse in January 2019, Havilah was the highly respected director of the Carriageworks arts precinct in inner-Sydney Redfern. She now answers directly to the Arts Minister, manages 197 staff and is responsible for more than half a million significant objects from the diverse worlds of science and medicine, engineering, music and fashion.

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She and her team have been tasked with re-imagining what their institution should be about, 141 years after it was founded and about to be transposed into a radically different setting.

And it's a welcome occasion to reboot and rethink. Her appointment came on the back of a tumultuous period at the Powerhouse, climaxing in 2018 when a gala fashion fundraising ball that cost \$388,000 to stage raised just \$78,000.

Director Dolla Merrillees stepped down soon after. Havilah became the fourth MAAS leader in 5½ years, and plenty in the arts world called the job a poisoned chalice. However, there was also a consensus that if one person could pull it off, that person was Lisa Havilah.

In short, the woman is a powerhouse, if you'll pardon the pun. Outwardly modest, she has an iron-clad will to achieve her desired outcomes.

But success at the speed and magnitude Havilah insisted on at Carriageworks is rarely realised without ruffling a few feathers along the way.

In late December, Havilah stood by Minister Harwin for the long-awaited announcement of the architects of the new Powerhouse: Paris-based Moreau Kusunoki with Australian firm Genton, a consortium soon nicknamed MKG.

Their winning design will take shape on the Parramatta River, about 24 kilometres west of the Sydney CBD, and be central to the much-hyped Powerhouse Precinct, which local and state governments hope will transform Parramatta into a revitalised, 24-hour cultural hub.

Renders of the light-filled Powerhouse, where 70 per cent of the site is public space to accommodate performing arts festivals and community events.

A walkway will connect the museum to trains, a new underground metro, light rail, “eat street” and the river. The new Bankwest Stadium and proposed \$100 million redevelopment of the Riverside Theatres, as well as the Western Sydney Parklands, are all integral to the development and part of

Premier Berejiklian's "[30-minute cities](#)" concept: putting all Sydneysiders within 30 minutes by public transport of one of three CBDs.

"For Parramatta to have this major cultural institution at its heart is a very symbolic thing the government has done, in saying that access to culture is something that's important for western Sydney," says Havilah.

MKG was the unanimous choice of the international jury, led by business leader and philanthropist Naomi Milgrom, whose MPavilion program in Melbourne has attracted some of the world's top architects and designers.

[The shortlist of six international-Australian teams](#) included the likes of Amanda Levete's AL_A from the UK and Steven Holl Architects from the US.

Architects Hiroko Kusunoki, Nicolas Moreau and Steven Toia, the winning consortium to design the new Powerhouse Museum.

The jury praised MKG's winning proposal for its "standout, simple and elegant solution". NSW Labor arts spokesman Walt Secord called it "a monstrosity on stilts".

Neither Moreau Kusunoki nor Genton are household names, which might suggest the government has picked up-and-comers, as opposed to another Frank Gehry.

The married French-Japanese founders, Nicolas Moreau and Hiroko Kusunoki, have collectively worked with the studios of Kengo Kuma (who designed the 2020 Tokyo Olympic stadium) and the Pritzker Prize-winning SANAA (overseeing the Art Gallery of NSW's Sydney Modern expansion).

Their most lauded project – winning the 2015 international competition to design the Guggenheim Helsinki from a record 1715 entries – remains unrealised after a government funding dispute.

Moreau Kusunoki's winning, but as yet unrealised, design for the Guggenheim Helsinki.

The pair brought on Genton and its founding director Steven Toia as their Australian partner; Genton's most recent project was the revitalisation of Melbourne's Frankston rail precinct.

Since the 2018 competition was announced, the trio have visited the site of the new Powerhouse at least four times.

It is near midnight in Paris when Moreau and Kusunoki video-call into Genton's Sydney office for an exclusive interview with *The Australian Financial Review Magazine*. Their enthusiasm for the project is palpable.

"The strategy is to reduce the footprint of the building as much as possible," says Moreau. "The building only sits on 30 per cent of the site, 70 per cent is public space."

At 30,000 square metres, their design is light, spacious and adaptable, with plenty of green space. It comprises two buildings set back from the riverbank on parklands that will double as a buffer to the flood-prone river and as a space for retail and events.

"The first thing was to understand the place [because] it used to be a place for gathering, where saltwater meets the fresh," says Moreau, citing the area's Indigenous history. "So the idea was to create an urban landscape or river square to liberate the grounds for gathering."

One building has three levels and a rooftop garden terrace for multicultural and Indigenous plantings that will supply the catering and teaching kitchen.

The indoor-outdoor ground level and second-level presentation spaces are designed for heavy items such as the museum's Catalina flying boat and 1785 steam engine.

The adjacent building contains more large-scale spaces that can be configured to display the diverse collection and host visiting exhibitions and events. Kusunoki emphasises the design is about enhancing the collection, not the other way around.

The new Powerhouse will host performing arts festivals and community events.

“All the spaces face the river so every time you go out of a presentation space you’ll have the light and river. The museum exists in the context of Parramatta, which is very important, it doesn’t just exist inside a black box or a white box, as is the case of a classic museum.”

Much of the space has been deliberately left bare in line with the Japanese concept of ma – “in-between space” – that can be adapted for smaller exhibitions or left unadorned for visitors to simply sit and gaze at the river or read a book.

“We like to leave blank spaces because we feel if architects design everything there’s very little freedom for the user, but the use can change every year, every day,” says Kusunoki.

Specific to the 200-page brief given to the bidding architects, and of particular appeal to the MKG trio, was the demographic of western Sydney: almost one in four residents was born overseas.

There are large Indian, Chinese and Lebanese communities. There’s a high number of Indigenous Australians, and the population is younger than that of greater Sydney.

Havilah says this is important in terms of programming at the Powerhouse. “It’s interesting to think, not how we will change to meet the community but how the community will change our institution.”

[Inside the current Powerhouse Museum.]

It is also expected to play a role in enlivening the area. “We don’t want to be a nine-to-five museum, we want it to be a platform for large-scale events such as Diwali, with curated food and beverage retail, a place that reflects that amazing cultural dynamic,” says Havilah.

All of which appealed to the MKG trio. “The idea of a platform is metaphoric, to allow the incredible talent that’s already in western Sydney to be projected to the rest of the world; and to give MAAS the platform to attract some of the world’s best talent to the heart of western Sydney,” says Steven Toia.

A visit to the Powerhouse at Ultimo feels a little like the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Washington DC, and a lot like a primary school excursion. Planes and replica spacecraft fly above the first steam engine train to roll on rails in NSW – possibly the subject of more Grade 5 assignments than any other.

There’s the first Apple computer (a keyboard and cassette player jammed into a suitcase by [Steve Wozniak](#) in 1976), [Marc Newson](#)’s Lockheed lounge, a 1928 Bugatti racing car and, for design aficionados, an Ettore Sottsass “Valentine” typewriter for Olivetti.

As the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, its mission is to connect the public with industry and innovation, and that, says Havilah, is what’s guiding her and her team in retooling the museum for its rebirth.

She’s not looking to graft the performing or visual arts programming of Carriageworks onto the Powerhouse, but she does add that she is interpreting the word “industry” very broadly.

“A museum is no longer a group of static permanent exhibitions for the purpose of education or a place that’s just a repository for collections,” she says.

“It needs to have dynamic, changing programs with multiple pathways for communities and audiences to engage with ideas, to reflect history in dynamic ways. And it needs to give people experiences that impact on their lives.”

In a nod to the Powerhouse's historic role as a contributor to industry, the new design includes 60 apartments to house visiting scientists, researchers, engineers and artists; and potentially accommodate regional and Indigenous students attending education programs.

So. An attractive, inspiring design; a flexible, multipurpose space for local and international exhibitions and myriad collaborative projects. But will people come, and do western Sydneysiders even want the new Powerhouse? And what will become of the current Powerhouse and the valuable inner-city land on which it sits?

"We're ambitious about the future of this museum," says Arts Minister Don Harwin with Lisa Havilah. **Wolter Peeters**

The government estimates the full cost of the move to be \$1.17 billion, of which \$645 million will come from taxpayers. Another \$450 million will come from redeveloping the Ultimo site, which is the subject of a new business case to be released in April.

The remaining \$75 million is being sought from philanthropic sources. The arts minister, Don Harwin, admits that's "an ambitious target – but we are ambitious about the future of this museum".

Asked to justify its relocation, he cites the physical reality of where Sydneysiders live. "Parramatta is the geographic centre of Sydney and by the end of the decade more than half of Sydney's population will live to the west of it," he says.

The architects are aware how controversial this project is. "The most important thing is to make the project loved by the people, the real challenge is how to invite people to feel close to it," Kusunoki says.

Moreau, too, is cognisant of the project's significance. "It is natural that it creates a debate. We're a democracy and it's a sign of a healthy democratic debate. We're conscious of the importance of the investment and we're willing to work collectively to bring the best we can and hopefully contribute to the debate."

Those who argue so vehemently against the move don't begrudge western Sydney gaining a new museum but question why a portion of the cost – which some have pegged at \$1.5 billion – couldn't be spent on upgrading and maintaining the site at Ultimo.

The government has committed to keeping the old power station and turning the land into a "creative industries precinct" once the site is vacated by 2021, but its real future won't be known for a couple of months.

That's when Create Infrastructure, an arm of the NSW government, presents its business case to cabinet. Plenty of people are convinced the government will simply sell the land to developers.

Havilah won't be drawn. "The outcome of the business case will be known in April," she replies evenly.

Architects Clive Lucas and Penelope Seidler and former Powerhouse trustee Nick Pappas (in black), at the Powerhouse in 2016. They are among many opponents to the relocation. **Louise Kennerley**

Is Havilah the one to help do that? During her eight years at Carriageworks annual attendances soared from 110,000 to 1.4 million – an achievement that's given her serious clout.

Havilah is unapologetic about the need for the Powerhouse to be revitalised. "I ask people the question, 'When is the last time you visited?' They come as a child, they take their child, then they come as a grandparent. We need more than three visits in a lifetime, which is why we need a dynamic, changing program [and] because of the physical constraints of the building it's hard. Some of our permanent exhibitions have been permanent for 30 years," she says pointedly.

As to the question of whether Parramatta is too far away (the government has predicted an ambitious one million visitors per year), Havilah shoots back: "Too far from where? Parramatta is not

another country. It's a bigger principle that I deeply believe in, that people should have access to culture within their own community. There's no better way to do that than have one of Australia's most important cultural institutions located within one of our fastest-growing and dynamic communities, because its impact can be even greater from that context."

Havilah points to her experience working with locals and artists in Sydney's west, from her role as director of Campbelltown Arts Centre and before that assistant director of Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre.

From the outset she has championed cultural access and abhors cultural elitism. "All [Sydney's] cultural institutions are sandstone institutions that hug the harbour. What the Powerhouse in Parramatta does is subvert that, but in an interesting way, it rethinks the old hierarchies.

"You don't need to go to the harbour; you don't have to have one particular experience of the city – and that goes to how we sell Sydney, which is not only about our cultural identity but how we sell Sydney to the world."

Calling on her enviable Australian and international arts contacts, she secured blockbuster exhibitions from sought-after international artists and formed commercial partnerships with the likes of Mercedes-Benz [Fashion Week](#), [Sydney Contemporary](#) and [Vivid](#).

At the same time as she engaged the local community, she partnered with the corporate team who led the south Eveleigh development.

Lisa Havilah at Carriageworks in 2018. **Janie Barrett**

The former chairwoman of Carriageworks [Sam Mostyn](#), who worked closely with Havilah for six years, describes her as an "exceptional cultural leader", someone who has "the rare combination of possessing both unique creative intelligence and commercial and operational focus".

"The extraordinary change in Carriageworks over Lisa's tenure didn't just happen. Lisa is a perfectionist. She works hard and drives her team hard. She was often at Carriageworks seven days a week and many of her team were as well," says Mostyn.

"We were an activist and hard-working board and we worked closely with her over those years. Lisa hates failure and we knew that she worked best with positive leadership and encouragement from the board."

After Havilah's arrival at the Powerhouse, five departmental directors quit, in addition to some senior staff. "Unfortunately, the culture shifted significantly when Lisa arrived," says one. "I'm all for collaboration, creativity and communication, and those three things went out the window fairly quickly."

The president of the MAAS board of trustees and vice-chancellor of Western Sydney University, Barney Glover, argues there is nothing unusual about staff turnover following leadership change. "I don't think in this case it's anything other than normal practice and people moving to new roles," he says.

He adds the board of trustees has been "extraordinarily pleased" with the work Havilah has done to date in what he says has been one of the most complicated years for the director of any Australian cultural institution, let alone one going through so much change and transformation.

"To come into that environment would be a daunting task for any director, and Lisa has done it with style, grace and a strength of intellectual contribution."

Nevertheless, some former colleagues, while praising her achievements, have questioned her hierarchical management style. "She's a very complex person, someone who manages up not down," says one, noting she worked well with the board and state government. "A lot of the artists love her but as a leader she can be very divisive."

Another notes: “I have a huge admiration for what she achieved at Carriageworks and her work with artists is extraordinary. She’s incredibly driven, a hard worker and there’s no one she drives harder than herself. But I do think there’s a human cost, there wasn’t a natural sense of pastoral care to her leadership.”

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Havilah acknowledges she has a strong work ethic and high expectations of her team. Does that ever pose a problem for staff? She pauses before answering: “I hope those high expectations reward all of us through great outcomes ... It’s the unrelenting daily question of details. It’s not for everyone.”

If Havilah is to succeed in this new, vastly more complex role with its many stakeholders, she will need to surround herself with a strong team, experts in areas such as science and technology and, given the scale and risk of the move and size of the collection, finance.

She has already gathered some trusted advisers, including former Carriageworks director of programming Lisa Ffrench and former Create NSW partnerships and policy director Alex Bowen.

“One of the things I love about [MAAS] is the great depth of skills and knowledge, and I see it as my role over time to make that more visible,” says Havilah.

Given all the controversy, headlines, headaches and hurdles, her answer to what poses her biggest challenge speaks volumes. “I’m struggling to answer that,” she says.

“I’m not saying it’s not challenging but there’s something about this institution, its history, the level of resources and the opportunity for renewal [that means] I feel really lucky to be a part of it.

"I just try and keep focusing on doing everything I can to get the best outcome to honour that investment, because I think it’s a very special decision the government has made and I want to do the best I can. So it’s not really a challenge.”