

April 28, 2025
Sydney Morning Herald

<https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/price-tag-for-opening-of-parramatta-powerhouse-edges-towards-50-million-20240920-p5kc9z.html>

Price tag for opening of Powerhouse Parramatta edges towards \$50 million



By [Linda Morris](#)

April 28, 2025 — 5.00am

A British stage designer associated with U2's Las Vegas concerts is set to build a multimillion-dollar "mirror maze" at the new Powerhouse Parramatta as the controversial cost of the museum's opening shows and program hits around \$50 million.

Esmeralda Devlin's art installation *Forest of Us* is to connect "the organic geometry of trees, from roots to branches, with the very vital organ, the lungs", according to its pitch to private supporters.



U2 perform during opening night at the Sphere, featuring the interior screen and Devlin's work.

CREDIT: GETTY

The project is one of five major exhibitions under development for western Sydney's first landmark cultural institution, which opens late next year. Together, the museum's first exhibitions are forecast to cost \$50 million. It needs to raise \$10 million in private donations, this masthead can reveal.

A closed tender for the construction and framing of Devlin's work is now open for bidding with specialised suppliers.

Powerhouse Parramatta will have no permanent collection display when it opens, its vast collection – numbering 500,000 objects dating back to the steam age – relocated to a new facility in Castle Hill.

Exhibits at Parramatta are to change every six to 24 months to drive repeat visitation and attract 2 million visitors from NSW, Australia and overseas.

The Devlin show points to an opening program big on digital screens and immersive experiences, as the Minns government aims to bring prestige exhibitions to the institution's gala opening.

Devlin helped to create some of the visual backdrops for U2's appearances at The Sphere, Las Vegas' 160,000-square-foot (14,800-square-metre) domed LED screen, and has designed concert billboards for singers Adele and Beyoncé.

But the programming decisions come against a background of rising tensions inside the museum over the scope of its final science, family and education offerings.

The Public Service Association has warned the government about a blowout in expenses and a shift in the direction of the museum, once touted as Australia's version of the Smithsonian, away from its "cultural roots".

This follows revelations by this masthead that the museum and its chief executive [funded a \\$30,000 Christmas Party](#). "The museum seems to be moving away from its roots as a traditional museum, focusing more on contemporary art, performance and even culinary experiences than offering up a traditional museum experience," PSA acting general secretary Troy Wright said.

The union said it feared the Powerhouse's public programs were being driven by costly external hires of artistic associates, including photographers, artists, fashion designers and chefs, and not experienced professional museum curators and program managers. The union has raised the matter with Arts Minister John Graham, who has committed to a museum focused on families. It is seeking a second meeting.

The museum said its program was only partly settled, and thousands of objects from the Powerhouse Collection would be showcased alongside national and international loans.

Programs will include Indigenous astronomy, private space exploration, transport, agriculture and food science and will also offer student residencies.



The \$915 million Powerhouse Museum going up on the Parramatta riverside.

CREDIT: DEAN SEWELL

The museum also said final costs would compare favourably with the \$37.4 million spent on the museum’s inaugural exhibition program at Ultimo in 1988, which was equivalent to \$107 million in today’s money.

“Visitors will be able to view large and complex objects, from planes and spacecraft to the smallest and most intricate collection objects,” a spokesperson said.

Other overseas artists who have been approached include New Delhi-born sculptor Bharti Kher and American sculptor James Turrell.

Turrell is known for creating a space of optical effects at Tasmania’s Museum of Old and New Art, a show that is ticketed. It’s unclear if it and other art installations at the Powerhouse will also carry an entry fee.

The largest of the Powerhouse's opening exhibitions is *Task Eternal*. It will show the history of air travel and space exploration, including massive-sized loans from NASA and the Smithsonian, and is to be designed by the Chinese firm Open Architecture.



An artist's impression of Parramatta Powerhouse's 360-degree immersive screen space from 2020. CREDIT:

[The Mall is to be an exploration](#) of the psychology of the shopping centre and is the work of the Dutch Office for Metropolitan Architecture.

The Devlin work is destined for the western wing, where a 360-degree immersive screen space has been promised to NSW parliament to provide floor-to-ceiling immersive education experiences for students in science, astronomy and technology.

It's uncertain if the art installation will supersede that immersive 3D space.

In Print:

