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Sydney Morning Herald

<https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/calls-for-spending-audit-as-powerhouse-museum-discloses-true-costs-of-private-vip-dinner-20250516-p5lzxv.html>

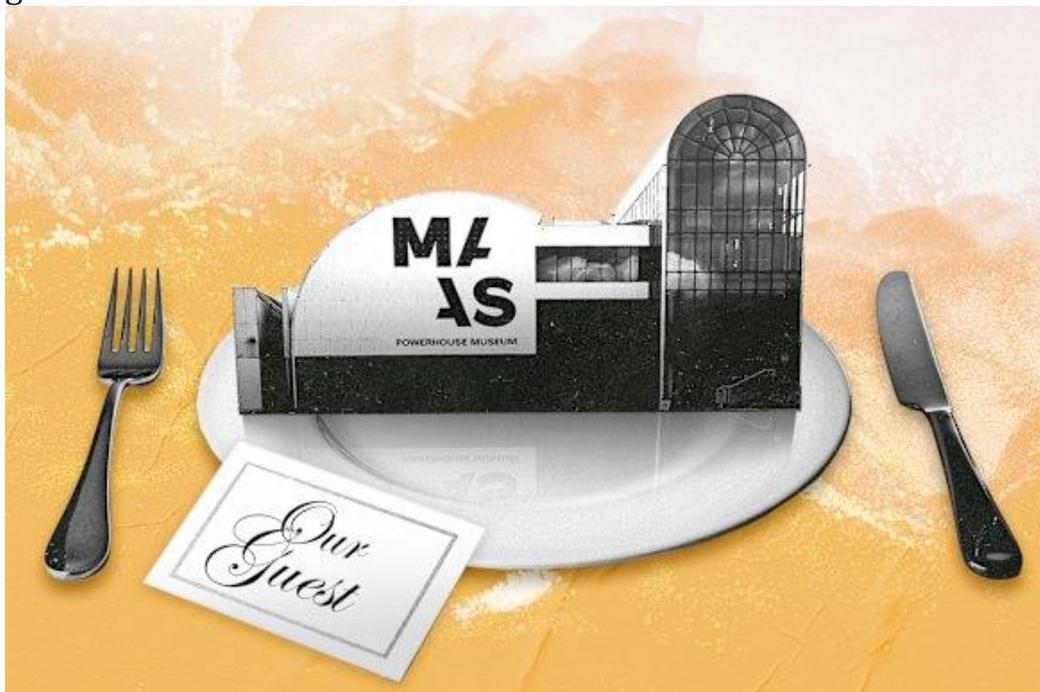
## Calls for spending audit as Powerhouse Museum discloses true costs of private VIP dinner



By [Linda Morris](#)

The Powerhouse Museum has been accused of “largesse” after internal documents revealed the cost of last year’s annual VIP dinner was significantly more than its reported price tag, amounting to more than \$510 a guest.

Invoices obtained by the *Herald* under freedom of information laws show the museum paid a caterer and wine supplier more than \$20,000 to stage its end-of-year trustee event at which Skull Island prawn salad, roast crown of chicken and a “folly of 10 different themes of pavlovas” were served to 36 guests.



The Powerhouse Museum staged three Christmas functions in 24 hours.

CREDIT:ARESNA VILLANUEVA

This exceeded the \$11,000 that Powerhouse chief executive Lisa Havilah assured state parliament on March 13 was the “correct” cost of the private annual dinner.

The December 3 dinner was the first of three end-of-year functions the museum staged back-to-back in 2024, necessitating the installation of a temporary commercial kitchen at its Ultimo workshops.

Sydney caterer John Wilson invoiced the museum \$26,960 for the night, excluding GST, on top of the \$26,350 he charged for the staff celebrations, at which Havilah personally chipped in \$5000 for a performance [carving of a whole yellowfin tuna](#).

Wilson, the museum’s part-time hospitality contractor until 2023 and a one-time restaurant co-owner at Carriageworks, additionally charged \$18,350 for the museum’s volunteers’ end-of-year lunch for 40 to 60 people. All up last year, Wilson invoiced the museum \$99,821 for events.

End-of-year functions for staff, volunteers and trustees are staged by most cultural institutions of differing scale, ranging from sandwich lunches to dinners and cocktails, to reward time and effort. They are separate to gala fundraisers at which philanthropy is the sole objective.

But the level of spending from the museum’s self-generated revenue has sparked calls by Troy Wright, assistant general secretary of the Public Service Association of NSW, for an audit of Powerhouse expenses.

“No other cultural institution in NSW is operated in the manner the Powerhouse currently is, with this level of gratuitous and lavish corporate largesse,” he said. “It is a model that the union does not believe gives the taxpayers of NSW either any value for money nor any confidence in the accessibility or financial sustainability of the Powerhouse, with its new Parramatta centre about to open.

“We have raised many issues with the minister, including the excessive use of external labour and consultants, and we would strongly support an independent financial audit of the spending and recruitment methods used by senior management at the Powerhouse.”

# Trust dinner hosted by the Powerhouse Museum on December 3, 2024

## Roast Chicken and Chocolate Cake

Phone: [REDACTED]  
ABN: 79 129 513 995

<b>Tax invoice</b>	<b>Purchase order no</b>	<b>Invoice number</b>	<b>Issue date</b>	<b>Due date</b>
	Trust Dinner   3 December	00000152	19/11/2024	23/11/2024

**Bill to**  
Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences

Description	Tax	Amount (\$) <i>excluding tax</i>
Powerhouse Trust Dinner   3 December 2024		
Menu for 35 guests [REDACTED]	GST	[REDACTED]
Equipment Hire and Event Styling	GST	[REDACTED]
Staff	GST	[REDACTED]
Management and Production	GST	[REDACTED]
	Subtotal ( <i>exc. tax</i> )	\$26,960.00
	Tax	\$2,696.00
	<b>Total Amount (<i>inc. tax</i>)</b>	<b>\$29,656.00</b>
	Total paid	\$0.00
	<b>Balance due</b>	<b>\$29,656.00</b>

### View your invoice online

**How to pay** Due date: 23/11/2024

#### View your invoice online

Scan the QR code or click the link above to view this invoice online.



#### Bank deposit via EFT

**Bank** [REDACTED]  
**Name** [REDACTED]  
**BSB** [REDACTED]  
**AC#** [REDACTED]  
**Ref#** [REDACTED]

The disclosures come amid growing apprehension among the state’s cultural institutions about their ability to manage rising operating costs after NSW Treasurer Daniel Mookhey this week signalled a tight state budget on June 24. The Powerhouse’s trustee evening was itself billed as a chance to acknowledge “another fantastic year” for the museum, in which its Castle Hill storehouse had opened, work was proceeding on its \$915 million Parramatta headquarters, and it was about to start on its \$300 million Ultimo renovations, a ministerial briefing paper said.

Among the select dinner guests were Arts Minister John Graham, two staffers, donors and the museums’ campaign team leading a \$75 million philanthropy drive for its new Parramatta building, opening in late 2026.

Ahead of the celebrations, \$1878 worth of white, red and sparkling wine was purchased to replenish the museum’s stocks.

Places for 36 people were set for dinner with “floristry” and table centrepieces supplied by the caterer, not the events team, the December 3 event run-sheet shows. Name cards were scrolled by a commercial calligrapher for 36 people at an undisclosed cost. Table legs were especially powder-coated.

Asked to account for the differences between costs reported to parliament and those disclosed in invoices for the dinner, the Powerhouse at first attributed it to shared costs of equipment hire, styling, production and management between the dinner and the two other events.

When the *Herald* pointed out that staff and production costs were separately itemised on the invoices for both the staff and trust dinner, it pointed to the \$11,000 cost of a temporary commercial kitchen complete with oven, freezer and fridges, a commercial-grade mixer, deep fryers, plate warmers and stainless-steel benches installed for the three events.

Under pressure from the *Herald* to disclose its redacted itemised costs, the museum revealed it had paid the caterer \$5600 for meals, \$15,200 for equipment hire and event styling, \$5200 for staff, and \$900 for management and production on the night of December 3.

“Equipment hire costs listed on the invoice for the first of these three events was a cost shared across the three events,” the museum said in a statement. “The total cost of these events was \$66,660 (excluding GST) and was funded by the museum’s self-generated revenue. These events were held in the museum, rather than at a restaurant or function centre, to connect people with the museum.”

Based solely on disclosed catering and drinks costs, the invoices come to a minimum of \$515 for each of the 40 guests, not 36, the museum insists came to dinner that night.

NSW Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party MP Mark Banasiak called on the museum to correct or clarify the costs on the public record.

Asked if Graham believed spending on the trust dinner was justified, a NSW government spokesperson said:

“Collectively the Powerhouse Campaign Committee, Trust and donors have raised more than \$76 million for the Powerhouse Museums in Ultimo and Parramatta. We’re talking about people, including trustees, who volunteer their time, working unpaid across the year for the benefit of the people of NSW. These events were funded by self-generated revenue – not taxpayers.”