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PSA CALLS FOR “END-OF-YEAR FUNCTIONS” SPENDING AUDIT AT THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM

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Read Linda Morris in the Sydney Morning Herald, 16 June:

<https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/calls-for-spending-audit-as-powerhouse-museum-discloses-true-costs-of-private-vip-dinner-20250516-p5lzv.html>

A caterer charged the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS) nearly \$100,000 during 2024, including the cost of three “end-of-year functions.”

“According to disclosed catering and drinks costs”, a 40-guest VIP function alone cost more than \$20,000—over \$500 per person. Attendees included the Arts Minister, two staffers, donors, and the museum’s fundraising campaign team.

“This (greatly) 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.”

As Linda Morris previously reminded us in a 10 March article, “Havilah’s predecessor, Dolla Merrillees, resigned in 2018 after it was revealed that the museum’s fundraising ball cost taxpayers over \$200,000—while raising just \$70,000.”

<https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/live-sushi-making-prawns-and-pav-powerhouse-museum-defends-christmas-party-20250224-p5leqa.html>

A government spokesperson attempted to justify the spending by claiming the events were “funded by self-generated revenue – not taxpayers.” As if revenues generated by a public institution were surplus funds, free to be spent at the management’s discretion rather than part of its broader public-service budget!

Troy Wright, Assistant General Secretary of the Public Service Association of NSW (PSA), has now called for an audit of Powerhouse spending: “No other cultural institution in NSW is operated in the manner the Powerhouse currently is, with this level of **gratuitous and lavish corporate largesse.**” “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.”

Save the Powerhouse, too, looks forward to the NSW Auditor-General’s **Performance Audit of the “Powerhouse Museum Parramatta and Ultimo projects,”** scheduled for 2025–2027. This audit will examine “the **effectiveness of the planning, design and construction**” of the three projects <https://www.audit.nsw.gov.au/annual-work-program-2024-27>.

Referring to the function’s guests, a museum spokesperson said that “we’re talking about people, including trustees, who volunteer their time, working unpaid across the year.”

What about the many museum experts and community members who, over the past decade, gave their time to defend the Powerhouse from the destruction promised by Mike Baird—only to be treated with contempt?

The same spokesperson claimed: “These events were held in the museum, rather than at a restaurant or function centre, to connect people with the museum.”

And yet, **the broader community has been needlessly disconnected from its beloved museum for years.**

Linda Morris concludes that “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.”

Indeed, the **EXORBITANT \$1.5+ billion combined cost** of the Castle Hill, Parramatta and Ultimo projects—**and their ongoing operating costs**—will burden the NSW arts budget for decades.

As for the latest lavish event, the museum billed it as “a chance to acknowledge another fantastic year for the museum.”

The Oxford Dictionary defines **fantastic** as “**strange** and imaginary, or **NOT REASONABLE**”, an accurate qualification for Lisa Havilah’s past few years as CEO of the Museum!

Save the Powerhouse

