

<https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/powerhouse-museum-builds-tower-to-stars-for-18-million-opening-show-20250917-p5mvs0.html>

Powerhouse Museum builds ‘tower to stars’ for \$18 million opening show



By [Linda Morris](#)

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A six-storey tower is being built inside the largest exhibition hall of the new Parramatta Powerhouse for a blockbuster show that will unpack humanity’s fascination with stars, flight and space.

Details of the most ambitious and expensive of the five shows planned for the museum’s September 2026 opening are to be announced at the launch of this year’s International Astronautical Congress 2025 on Monday morning.

Powerhouse opening show: Task Eternal

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OPEN Architecture principals Li Hu and Huang Wenjing visit the internal structure of what will become Task Eternal. Photo: Dominic Lorrimer

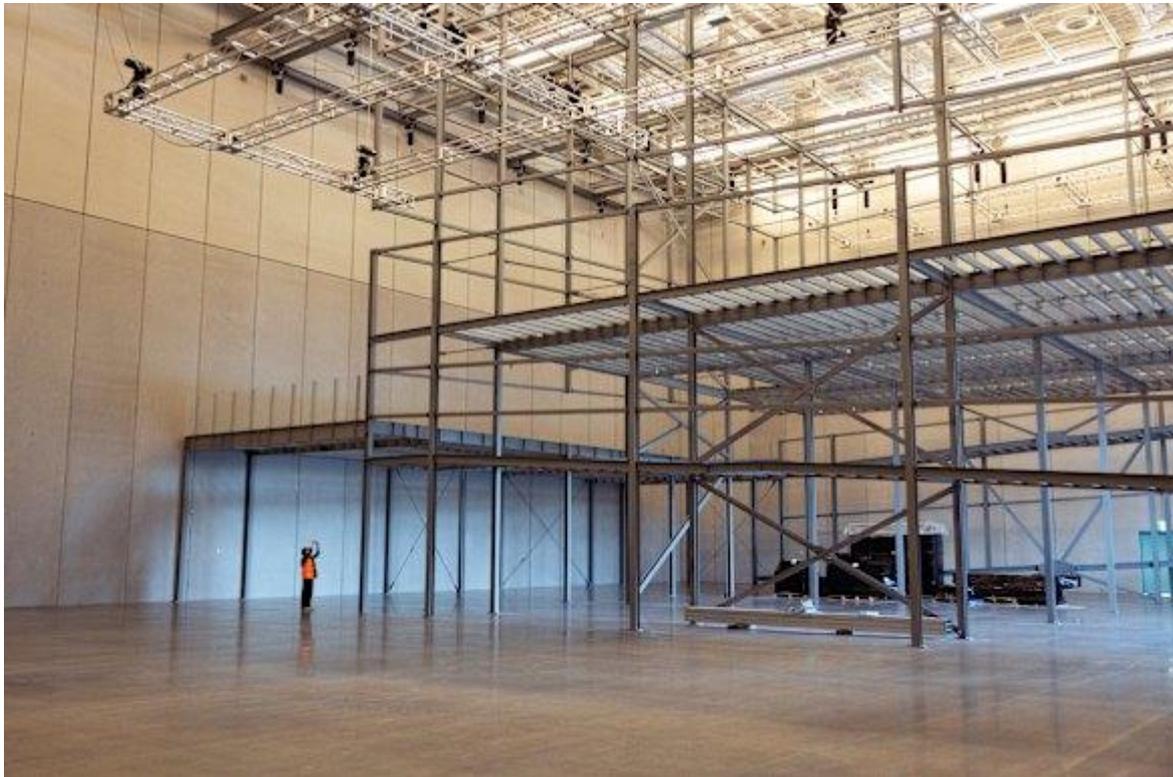
The big-budget *Task Eternal* will feature 290 loans from international science and cultural institutions, space agencies and start-ups across 12 countries, including some from the British Museum and NASA. They include satellite probes, Australian astronaut Katherine Bennell-Pegg's spacesuit, on public display for the first time, engines, flying prototypes and planes. Many are still under wraps, to be announced closer to the opening date.

The show marks a sharp shift in approach away from exhibitions anchored in object display and explanatory text to one that chief executive Lisa Havilah says stresses diversity, inclusion and a plurality of voices from astronauts, artists and engineers to First Nations' elders, to scientists and speculative writers.

It will also be the most expensive of the opening exhibitions at the new \$915 million Powerhouse headquarters. Sources inside the museum say it will cost at least \$18 million.

The museum has confirmed *Task Eternal* will comprise 35 per cent of the opening program budget – reported by [the Herald](#) to have topped \$50 million – funded by Treasury and corporate sponsors.

The announcement comes in the same week as staff of the Art Gallery of NSW will learn the outcome of consultations on the [loss of 51 roles](#).



Powerhouse's *Task Eternal* takes shape. CREDIT: DOMINIC LORRIMER

Beijing-based husband and wife team Li Hu and Huang Wenjing from [OPEN architecture](#) are behind the Powerhouse design.

“Wait until you see,” says Wenjing of the exhibition. “This is such a vast and ambitious project, space, the sky, exploration, success, failure, tragedy, achievement, everything. So this will be a very compressed experience with a lot of amazing surprises.”

The 1991 science fiction novella *Tower of Babylon* is the starting point for the exhibition, a fictional story where an ancient civilisation on a flat Earth works over centuries to build a tower to reach God. It was written by award-winning writer Ted Chiang, who also wrote the book on which the film *Arrival* was based. Chiang will write an essay specially for the show.

The museum’s version of the Tower of Babylon will feature 60 tonnes of steel; it will take up one and a half basketball courts; and it will rise six storeys high.

The steel framework has been installed by Lendlease in the ground-floor Exhibition space 1, which at 2160sqm is Australia’s largest column-free exhibition space by volume. From its rafters will hang large aircraft, engine parts and rockets.

Inside the tower, audiences enter an immersive space intended to evoke the feeling of being suspended in the cosmos. At the heart of this space is a major commission by Thai artist Torlarp Larpjaroensook, a large-scale reinterpretation of the Voyager 1 spacecraft, which has travelled further from Earth than any other human-made object.

At the top of the tower will be a work by US artist James Turrell comprising a room-sized walk-in atmospheric installation that will immerse viewers in shifting fields of light and colour.

“That’s the key reason he’s in this show, because it’s actually giving the audience a real-life experience of the Ganzfeld effect, which is losing the horizon line you experience on a plane flying through fog,” Haviilah said. “It’s almost like this transformational off-earth experience.”

It’s not yet decided if this exhibition will be ticketed as Tasmania’s Museum of New Art does for its Turrell show, Haviilah said.

Sydney-based, Muslim-led Gould Studio has been commissioned to create a \$50,000 animation depicting the flight of Abbas Ibn Firnas, a figure of the Islamic Golden Age, and a work that celebrates themes of ingenuity and experimentation.

Powerhouse has acquired 10 Milniyawuy Larrakitj by Yolŋu artist Naminapu Maymuru-White, to be presented alongside loans from the Tia Collection and a newly commissioned soundscape of a sacred ancestral journey produced by Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre.

The show will run for two years, but exhibits will rotate through.

In response to criticism that the Powerhouse is neglecting its collection, the museum says hundreds of its own objects will be exhibited, including an F1 rocket engine, the most powerful ever built at the time; a Skylark rocket launched from Woomera; and a 1914 Bleriot XI monoplane, one of the world's earliest aircraft, owned by Robert Graham Carey, grandfather of Australian author Peter Carey.

The exhibition will be arranged in four acts: *Skyward*, describing early aviation and individual pursuits; *Power*, jet-age commercialisation; *Off Earth*, the future era of space flight; and *The Return*, the sustainable, peaceful and equitable use of space.

“Coming out of the exhibition, there will be a lot to think about. I think that is important,” said co-designer Li Hu. “There’s no conclusion for anything but there are a lot of questions about how we consider our existence, our position in space, in the universe and how we live.

“I hope that people will be inspired, knowing the unknowable, imagining the unimaginable and realising how much we do not know.”

Hu and Wenjing are best known for their museum architecture, in particular in Shanghai, where they converted five aviation tanks into an art and culture park. This is their first major exhibition project outside of China.

The challenge was to fit its ambitions into the space.

“It’s a big space, but not big enough,” said Hu. “We could have taken all the museum.”