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Powerhouse fires up western Sydney philanthropists



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Powerhouse Parramatta has been controversial since its announcement 12 years ago, but not to the new wave of western Sydney philanthropists who, it can be revealed, have so far donated \$68 million of its \$915 million price tag.

“This is about education for the children of western Sydney and beyond, and showing the world that Parramatta is not a second city. It’s a global city in its own right,” said Sarkis Nassif, founder and chief executive of Holdmark Property Group.



From left: Skylife CEO Luke Schafer; Neilson Foundation director Beau Neilson; UNSW dean of arts, design & architecture Claire Annesley; Holdmark Property founder and CEO Sarkis Nassif; Walker Family Foundation director Sue Walker; Walker Corporation assistant development manager Hugo Walker; Walker Family Foundation executive director Georgia Vesperman; Western Sydney University vice chancellor George Williams; ING Bank Australia CEO Melanie Evans; and Sir William Tyree Foundation chairwoman Robyn Fennell. **Dominic Lorrimer**

Holdmark gave \$10 million for the naming rights to one of Powerhouse Parramatta's five galleries, which will present a biennial exhibition around innovation in architecture, engineering and design.

Nassif was on Tuesday among a group of Financial Review Rich Listers and entrepreneurs with roots – like his – in western Sydney, inspecting the 32,000-square metre project, which is 95 per cent complete ahead of its public opening later this year.

Powerhouse chief executive Lisa Havilah revealed she had now secured more than 90 per cent of a \$75 million private fundraising target assigned to her in 2021 by the NSW government, helping defray total costs estimated at \$1.4 billion once the contentious knockdown and rebuild of its original home in inner-city Ultimo is included.

The Walker family, whose \$3.5 billion Parramatta Square project looms from the Powerhouse's southern windows and will eventually be connected to it by pedestrian boulevard, is the biggest private supporter of the first state cultural institution [based outside inner Sydney](#).

Sue Walker was there on Tuesday in a rare public appearance since the 2024 death of her developer husband, Lang, whose foundation has given \$20 million for a STEM education centre, including dorm rooms where high school students from far-flung areas can stay overnight.

“The Lang Walker Family Academy is not watching AI from the sidelines. It is using AI as a core part of how it teaches,” foundation director Georgia Vesperman said.

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Beau Neilson was there representing the foundation set up by her fund manager father, Kerr. It has donated \$5 million towards another Powerhouse gallery, and an immersive children's exhibition called *The Dark*, curated by former Sydney Theatre Company artistic director Kip Williams.

"The spaces in here are unprecedented," Neilson said, referring to gallery ceilings as high as 20 metres. "There's the flexibility to include something for everyone."

Havilah said the possibilities of Powerhouse Parramatta's mammoth scale were hinted at by the first exhibition it has announced, *Task Eternal*, about humanity's quest for flight.

Alongside 800 objects from the Powerhouse's permanent collection – all housed for now in Castle Hill – will be a prototype of a battery-powered helicopter being developed by AMSL Aero in nearby Bankstown.

"What we've got here is a hyper-platform that for the next 100 years can change and reflect one of the most dynamic regions in the country," Havilah said.

Powerhouse Parramatta, the largest cultural investment by the NSW government since the Sydney Opera House, is frequently blamed for cuts elsewhere, such as October's [loss of 44 jobs](#) from the Art Gallery of NSW, and the closure last week of Darlinghurst's Australian Design Centre after 62 years, following its failed application for recurrent funding.

Former Powerhouse director Kylie Winkworth – who criticises Powerhouse Parramatta as being more performing arts space and function centre than museum – said the government had been "raiding every hollow log" to pay for the project, whose total cost, including the relaunch of the Ultimo site, she estimates at closer to \$2 billion.

[Rich Lister Arnold Vitocco](#), who with his wife Irene has given \$5 million for a demonstration kitchen showcasing culinary innovation – inspired

by growing up amid the hobby farms on Sydney's fringe – countered that investment in the west was overdue.

"Whether it's health or rail or culture, we've always been underfunded out here, and that's why Powerhouse Parramatta is so important to us," he said.

Vitocco had not previously made a gift to a cultural beneficiary. Nor had the Tartak family behind the Bingo Industries waste management empire, whose Strathfield-based patriarch, Tony Tartak, made a \$1 million donation to Powerhouse Parramatta.

That gift was acknowledged by a terrace garden overlooking the Parramatta River. It was the first gift of the Skylife Foundation, which he established in 2022.

Other contributors to the capital campaign include the foundation of the late engineer Sir William Tyree, now led by his children including daughter Robbie Fennell. Its donation of \$8 million includes a capital contribution to one of the five galleries, as well as ongoing support for engineering summits and workshops.

Fennell, who grew up in western Sydney's Beverly Hills near her father's factory in Kingsgrove, said Australia needed to train more engineers.

ING Australia chipped in \$4 million for a pavilion opposite a rooftop kitchen garden established by chef Stephanie Alexander. Chief executive Melanie Evans, who grew up in western Sydney's Bankstown, said the partnership reflected the bank's support for education and wellbeing.

Cabramatta-raised property developer Roy Medich has donated \$1 million via his family's foundation, supporting a 55-seat cinema at the top of the building and commissions for Australian filmmakers.

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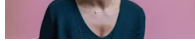
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