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Dan Himbrechts/AAP

Powerhouse Parramatta was meant to reshape Sydney's cultural map. Now its leadership is under scrutiny

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The chief executive who has spent seven years overseeing one of Australia's most ambitious cultural infrastructure projects has stepped aside, just ten weeks before it was due to open.

Lisa Havilah was appointed chief executive of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, now known as Powerhouse, in 2019.

She became inseparable from its transformation: defending its direction through parliamentary inquiries, delivering its Parramatta home, and advancing a model that challenges what a museum should be.

From cultural controversy to governance scrutiny

Havilah's departure comes amid NSW government investigations into what officials describe only as "governance and procurement" at the museum. It is understood to have stemmed from a protected whistleblower disclosure first reported in October last year.

The precise allegations remain undisclosed. In March, Havilah was questioned in parliament over reported budget blowouts on the Parramatta build. She denied any overruns, insisting Parramatta and the Ultimo revitalisation at the museum's original inner-city site were both being delivered within budget.

But procurement was already under sustained scrutiny before any of this became public, including a parliamentary question last year about whether contracts had been split to avoid competitive procurement thresholds. To this, the museum's written response was a flat "No".

As Havilah's steps down, former government architect Abbie Galvin will become interim chief executive from September 1, with former Sydney Opera House chief Louise Herron joining as strategic adviser.

Powerhouse Trust president David Borger confirmed the Powerhouse's November 7 opening will be unaffected.

What can we read into Havilah's departure?

A protected disclosure initiates a process, not a finding. Havilah's standing aside is likewise neither a finding against her, nor an admission of responsibility.

The timing is nevertheless extraordinary, and says something about cultural leadership itself: a leader bound this closely to a

project's vision is rarely more exposed than in the weeks before the public judges it.

Havilah is withdrawing just before the opening of an institution born of a decade of political conflict, heritage campaigning, and argument over Western Sydney's cultural future.



Lisa Havilah poses for a photograph at a media event held at Carriageworks in Sydney, in 2018. Dan Himbrechts/AAP

A decade of contested authority

That argument began in 2015, when the government announced the Powerhouse would leave Ultimo, its home since 1988, for Parramatta. This was part of a longstanding push to correct Sydney's concentration of major cultural institutions around Circular Quay and the CBD.

The project was framed as more than relocation; redistributing cultural capital to Western Sydney would also help drive urban regeneration.

The former government of Gladys Berejiklian reversed course in 2020, keeping the Ultimo museum while still proceeding with the new Parramatta development.

At Parramatta, the 2021 dismantling of Willow Grove, a 19th-century heritage villa on the site, drew sustained heritage campaigning and a union green ban, with construction workers refusing to work on the site in support of the heritage campaign.

Representatives of the Dharug Strategic Management Group, representing the area's Traditional Custodians, argued they had been consulted only after key decisions were effectively made.

What began as an argument about where a museum should be became an argument about who has the authority to decide.

Havilah arrived in 2019 after that relocation fight was underway. She pressed a further question of her own: not just where a museum should sit, but what it should be.

Powerhouse Parramatta holds no permanent collection onsite. Its half a million objects sit instead at Castle Hill, and the building is organised around flexible exhibitions, performance and cross-disciplinary collaboration.

Havilah called this flexible model “upending the hierarchy of the museum”, a reordering that also produced friction, such as when a A\$2.6 million artistic-associates program was wound down in June amid union criticism it displaced curatorial expertise.

Leadership without a single authority

My research on cultural leadership increasingly points to these tensions as a defining feature of cultural institutions.

Leaders in this sector hold several distinct forms of authority at once:

- organisational, conferred by a board or government
- professional, grounded in expertise
- cultural, arising from decisions about value and representation
- social, granted or withheld by the communities an institution serves.

Few public roles require holding all four together.

There is real power in this kind of symbolic leadership, and real exposure. When an institution and its leader become this closely

identified, scrutiny of one becomes entangled with confidence in the other.

This moment is significant. This investigation coincides with the highly public departure of the leader who defined the project, and together they mark the culmination of a decade of contested authority over what Powerhouse Parramatta should be.

The institution Havilah reimagined is about to open without her. She has said she still intends to attend, watching from the crowd rather than leading the ceremony.

The investigation must reach its conclusion. But Havilah's stepping aside leaves an immediate question: can an institution built so closely around one leader's vision establish its own legitimacy in her absence?