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Sydney Morning Herald

Powerhouse Parramatta chief Lisa Havilah departs just weeks from opening

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The opening of the billion-dollar Powerhouse Parramatta has been plunged into controversy after its chief executive stepped down 72 days before the opening of the state's biggest cultural infrastructure investment since the Sydney Opera House.

In a shock development, staff were alerted on Thursday afternoon that Lisa Havilah had stood aside from her role of seven years pending completion of a departmental investigation into “governance and procurement practices”. Only five days earlier, the museum had announced its first [five exhibitions](#) for the November 7 opening to much fanfare.



CEO Lisa Havilah tours the new Powerhouse Parramatta. JANIE BARRETT

NSW Government Architect Abbie Galvin has been appointed interim chief executive, and the former chief executive of Sydney Opera House, Louise Herron, as strategic adviser, starting Tuesday.

Department secretary Melanie Hawyes sought to stabilise operations and committed to the opening timeline in a letter to staff: “As you would be aware from recent media reports, there is an ongoing investigation into matters relating to governance and procurement practices at the Powerhouse.

“After speaking with the chief executive earlier today, Lisa Havilah will be standing aside while the investigation is completed.

“I recognise that this news comes at a significant time for the organisation, as we prepare for the opening of Powerhouse Parramatta. I know how much work, commitment and personal energy all of you have invested in reaching this milestone, and I want to assure you that there will be no impact to the existing programs of work, or the opening on November 7.”



Outgoing Powerhouse Parramatta boss Lisa Havilah, and newly appointed interim chief executive Abbie Galvin, and strategic adviser Louise Herron. SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

Havilah has been the single-minded driving force of the Powerhouse Parramatta since her appointment in 2019. The project aims to deliver western Sydney its first state-significant cultural institution, while redrawing Sydney's cultural geography, and fundamentally changing how audiences encounter design, technology, and applied arts.

But the new building has been bedevilled by political controversy over budget, location and heritage for more than a decade.

A [protected whistleblower complaint](#) around procurement practices and job appointments at the Powerhouse has been ongoing for almost a year, leading the Department of Creative Industries and Tourism to seek assurances from NSW Procurement in Treasury in March about the tender of museum contracts.

Last month, the [Herald published revelations](#) that the museum had burnt through more than \$70 million in the lead-up to its November 7 opening. The Powerhouse has spent more than \$5 million on marketing and public relations in Australia and London, [including \\$1.7 million-plus on a film and television documentary](#), as well as \$25 million building exhibits for five opening shows, not including object loans, freight and commissioning of new artworks. Treasury parachuted Cassandra Wilkinson into the role of acting chief operating officer amid the spending disclosures.

Arts Minister John Graham said Powerhouse Parramatta was on track for opening.

“Following new allegations, the chief executive has stood aside while investigations into governance and procurement are finalised,” he said.

“I would like to thank the Powerhouse team for getting us to this point in the delivery of the Powerhouse Parramatta, the largest and most complex cultural infrastructure project since the Sydney Opera House.”

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The news took Parramatta Council by surprise, with the Lord Mayor Martin Zaiter declining to comment on Havilah’s departure.

At the Powerhouse Parramatta offices on Thursday, workers told the *Herald* they were unaware of the developments and were cautious about commenting. One said the building was “pretty much done” and filled with “wonderful exhibits”.

NSW Treasury secretary Michael Coutts-Trotter told budget estimates on Friday he was concerned about pre-opening overspending by western Sydney’s first cultural institution.

The Herald understands the museum’s board of trustees met two weeks ago to consider procurement issues at Parramatta. The museum’s executive was told at 2.30pm Thursday.

Public Service Association of NSW, representing staff, has written repeatedly to Arts Minister John Graham about the “excessive use of external labour and consultants”, and urged an independent financial

audit of the spending and recruitment methods used by senior management at the Powerhouse.

Former museum trustee Kylie Winkworth accused Graham and Powerhouse board chair David Borger of ignoring multiple complaints of mismanagement and waste, which were “documented and footnoted. I never got a reply.”

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