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The inside story of the day that shook Sydney's museum world

The departure of chief executive Lisa Havilah was sudden, and it shocked even her critics.

[Linda Morris](#)



The doors to the \$915 million Powerhouse Museum along the Parramatta River will open to the public on November 7. STEVEN SIEWERT

It was just two months until the highly anticipated November 7 opening of Powerhouse Parramatta, and its highly driven chief executive Lisa Havilah might have thought the hardest yards were behind her in a seven-year marathon to the finish line.

Invitations for a celebratory sit-down dinner were already at the printers, and the [five grand opening exhibitions had been revealed](#) to widespread fanfare. Journalist John Arlidge of *The Times* had just returned to London following a whirlwind 48-hour visit to western Sydney's first state-significant cultural institution, carrying with him Havilah's ambitious pitch for the museum as a world-class international tourism destination.

Acknowledged by the Committee of Sydney as a changemaker, Havilah was in the running for Sydneysider of the Year 2026, alongside Bondi Beach hero Ahmed al Ahmed and corporate heavyweight David Gonski, who had successfully steered his own major cultural infrastructure project, the Sydney Modern expansion, to completion four years prior.



Outgoing chief executive Lisa Havilah at the Powerhouse Parramatta in October.
JANIE BARRETT

Yet beneath the surface, Havilah's single-minded determination and laser-like focus had failed to detect that government support, which had long shielded her against

complaints from staff, trade unions, MPs and former curators, was rapidly crumbling.

On Thursday, [Havilah was out](#). Arts Minister John Graham cited “new allegations” in a carefully worded statement announcing NSW Government Architect Abbie Galvin and former Sydney Opera House boss Louise Herron as the museum’s new leadership team.

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It should be noted there are no findings. Havilah has not stepped down as an outcome of disciplinary proceedings, and due process and procedural fairness must be followed. Few, however, expect Havilah to return to the institution even if exonerated.

“She really did misread the room,” recalled one shocked senior staff insider. “To be honest, we all thought the museum would open in November and some time after that, she would go on her own terms. Not like this.”

On Havilah’s final day at the Powerhouse, the museum’s leadership was summoned to news of the leadership change at 2.30pm, but rumours had been swirling since the morning. An all-staff bulletin confirmed Havilah’s departure.

The message out of the executive meeting chaired by Cassandra Wilkinson, a Treasury official parachuted into the role of acting chief operating officer less than one month ago, was that the [Powerhouse Parramatta](#) was greater than one individual. Lisa Havilah was not the Powerhouse, the Powerhouse was western Sydney.

And yet for the most part, Havilah had characterised herself as the visionary leader of the Powerhouse, and she had long placed herself at the centre of the project. In the Powerhouse’s anaemic two-page strategic plan dated 2022-23, “staying with the trouble” is identified as one of the museum’s ways of working.

It could be Havilah's personal mantra. Change is hard, she would recite repeatedly to staff. Havilah ignored mockery, multiple complaints, unflattering headlines and attacks on her reputation as she worked towards the singular goal of delivering Powerhouse Parramatta to her vision. She worked most days. She fact-checked social media posts and staff communications. Behind closed doors, concern mounted over her centralised control and inability to delegate.

Rather than relying on established corporate structures, the chief executive maintained a style of micromanagement that left senior staff sidelined while spending surged. To be fair, an inexperienced government had entrusted this former arts venue operator with the job of delivering a billion-dollar museum with what seemed to be light departmental oversight.

One former staffer said: "It felt as if her threat level was incredibly high, and she was operating under the assumption that this day would come. And that fear permeated the internal culture. It was contagious: everybody caught the fear of hers, and it stemmed from her insecurities. It was a wild combination but impossible to operate effectively in that culture, and came to adversely affect many people's mental health."



(From left) Outgoing Powerhouse Parramatta boss Lisa Havilah, and newly appointed interim chief executive Abbie Galvin, and strategic adviser Louise Herron.

THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

An ever-growing group of former staffers refer to the culture inside the museum as typical of Stockholm Syndrome, where captives bond with their captors.

Government self-preservation and fear of interrogation in Monday's budget estimates and the heat that it could bring ahead of the March 2027 is one of the theories proffered for the sudden move on Thursday. The *Herald* had been pressing the Powerhouse to explain [contracts and preopening spending exceeding \\$70 million](#).

The government denies it was blindsided by [the Herald's revelation](#) of its commissioning of a \$1.7 million-plus documentary, but tensions were growing. Meanwhile, smaller arts organisations could only watch with a mixture of envy and despair as the Powerhouse absorbed a major slice of the state arts budget.

In fact, the wheels for Havilah's departure were set in motion by a protected whistleblower complaint alleging systemic cronyism and unethical procurement practices. It was not the first time alarms had been raised, but the meticulous detail of the subsequent complaint was impossible to sweep aside.

By March, the Department of Creative Industries, Tourism, Hospitality and Sport formally requested independent assurance from NSW Procurement for all Powerhouse contracts valued over \$10 million. Havilah had delegation for contracts up to \$5 million, but she appears to have been reluctant to consult either the board or the government.

Graham is understood to have escalated matters further to the museum's board, led by chair David Borger, reminding it of its governance responsibilities. The board met two weeks ago to discuss procurement matters.

Wilkinson's appointment only underscored deep government anxiety over the museum's long-term budget position, a belated attempt by Treasury to rein in the museum's spending, amid an arm wrestle about its future operating budget, which remains undisclosed.

But the latest allegations referenced in Graham's statement are understood to be fresh disclosures, arising separately out of ongoing inquiries.

In the end, the climax arrived swiftly: Havilah was to stand aside immediately pending the completion of an independent investigation. The seven-year reign of one of Sydney's most formidable cultural leaders was effectively over, leaving the flagship project to white-knuckle its final weeks to opening under interim management.

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