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Night opening hours set to be cut at new Powerhouse museum



[Linda Morris](#)
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Extended night opening hours and a three-week launch festival for the $1 billion Powerhouse Parramatta are under intense scrutiny and likely to be rolled back as NSW Treasury scrambles for cost savings just weeks ahead of the museum's ribbon-cutting.

The new leadership team is looking to close exhibitions to the public most nights – bringing the museum's general admission operating hours into line with other major cultural institutions, said several sources not authorised to speak publicly.



The Riverside construction fence has come down on the new Powerhouse Museum.
STEVEN SIEWERT

This would leave the museum staying open late for shows on one night weekly, not seven days as originally planned.

The museum's original business case – and the plan championed by former chief executive Lisa Havilah – envisioned Powerhouse Parramatta operating seven days a week from 9am to 9pm. Extended public evening access was considered central to driving western Sydney's nightlife and reaching the museum's ambitious target of 2 million annual visitors.

The reduced schedule is one of several measures contemplated by the government to belatedly rein in a $50 million shortfall in the museum's allocated $145 million operating budget while effectively dismantling key elements of an operational model it had long endorsed.

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However, any curtailment of hours will face strong opposition from local business advocates relying on the precinct to fuel Parramatta's nighttime economy, and will be a sensitive topic in the countdown to the March state election.

"I think it would be a mistake to have the region's newest and biggest cultural investment only open to the public during standard opening hours," said Adam Leto, chief executive of the Western Sydney Leadership Dialogue. "The Powerhouse is not a bank. This is an anchor attraction that

will help fuel the area's night economy but for that to happen, it needs to actually be open at night."

Leto added that the precinct represented a vital asset for the region. "We want as many people as possible to engage with the spaces, the exhibitions and the hospitality offering it provides. To have the doors closed after hours is a real missed opportunity."

Late-night operating hours directly underpinned the commercial revenue projections that justified the museum's feasibility assessment in 2019 and convinced the former Coalition government to approve the project.

But separating general visitors from evening function guests while allowing adequate time for cleaning and security was said to be challenging. Under a mixed-use model unique to Australia, the new building offers high-end event spaces, including tiered retractable seating for 700 delegates, the 662-square-metre Presentation Space 7 that accommodates up to 600 cocktail guests with an adjoining riverfront terrace, and a 2000-square-metre rooftop garden with covered pavilion.

Furthermore, adjustments to staff schedules for curators and conservators to support night operations are yet to be negotiated with the Public Service Association.



The art commission of Bharti Kher installed at the Powerhouse. STEVEN SIEWERT

Acting chief executive Abbie Galvin said many components of the new Powerhouse Parramatta operations, including exhibition opening hours, were yet to be finalised. “We look forward to sharing more information in the coming weeks,” she said.

“The new Powerhouse has many different indoors and outdoor event and performance spaces in addition to the major exhibition spaces. The facility supports a mixed model of operation, where public programming can occur in and around the building outside of exhibition opening hours. Public programming includes events, talks and performances.”

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Concurrently, the launch program for the three-week opening festival (scheduled for November 6-27) remains unannounced, stalled amid the fallout from Havilah's shock departure whereby she stepped aside pending an investigation into procurement and conflict-of-interest allegations.

Planned launch events include a sit-down thank-you dinner for sponsors and philanthropists, and dedicated functions for three major exhibitions – *The Mall*, *Task Eternal* and *Overflow* – each expecting 400 guests. An official morning tea for 600 people is scheduled for the plaque unveiling, accompanied by a 2000-person community celebration featuring Rotary-run barbecues.

The community launch was set to feature a performance by a Sydney-based lion dance troupe, a ceremonial launch of a Maori waka or canoe and a time capsule burial.

In 2022, the Art Gallery of NSW marked the opening of its Naala Nura wing with high-profile donor dinners and a $10 million opening festival funded by Destination NSW, featuring nightly drone shows and a concert in the Domain.

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The Department of Creative Industries has provided $4.5 million for Powerhouse Parramatta's three-week festival, with the budget not extending to major fireworks displays.

Galvin said the opening festival program had been developed over many months and, like any major event of this scale, it remained a working draft while operational details were finalised.

"As we approach the opening of the new Powerhouse, we are finalising the program, including event timings, opening functions, individual program elements and operating hours," she said.

"As part of this process, some activities may be scheduled to run within the broader opening program or delivered at a later date to ensure they achieve the greatest audience impact and operational success.

"This is a routine part of delivering a major public event and reflects the transition from planning to implementation. No final decisions have been made."