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EDITORIAL

Powerhouse move is a tale all too typical



[The Herald's View](#)

Editorial

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NSW Arts Minister John Graham certainly hit the nail on the head when he told a parliamentary budget estimates committee on Monday that the Powerhouse Museum in Parramatta was “the Opera House of the west”.

He was speaking of his hope the new museum would open on schedule in November but inadvertently reminded MPs with a sense of history of the problems, financial blowouts, political controversies and key staff departures that bedevilled the Sydney Opera House from the day Bennelong Point was suggested in 1954 until Queen Elizabeth II opened the landmark in 1973.



The new Powerhouse Museum in Parramatta. STEVEN SIEWERT

The Powerhouse Museum has suffered some of the same malaise. Chief executive Lisa Havilah stood aside suddenly on the virtual eve of the November 7 opening, with NSW government architect Abbie Galvin last Tuesday taking up the appointment of acting chief executive and former Sydney Opera House boss Louise Herron becoming a senior adviser. Further, costs are soaring and are now pushing the total capital bill to \$1.4 billion after a decade of political compromises, which ultimately split one institution into three separate campuses. An investigation into a [protected whistleblower complaint](#) around procurement practices and job appointments at the Powerhouse has been ongoing for almost a year.

The \$80 million Powerhouse Museum opened in Ultimo as part of 1988 Bicentenary celebrations but by 2014, falling attendances – a consequence of massive staff cutbacks under previous Labor governments – prompted the Baird government to discuss shifting the Powerhouse to Parramatta.

The years of neglect and procrastination at Ultimo resulted not only in the attraction losing business but damage to the building. Leaks and mould put its unique collection at risk, and there was little remedial action taken

to stop the rot. Parramatta beckoned as an apposite site for a politically shiny new museum in western Sydney.

Yet what began as a drive for cultural equity rapidly devolved into a bitter political battle over location, heritage, architecture and political ownership. A culture war erupted, forcing the Berejiklian government to back away from selling Ultimo to fund Parramatta.

One result: when the doors to the Powerhouse Museum along the Parramatta River open to the public on November 7, build costs will have skyrocketed to \$915 million. Another result: the Minns government last year committed \$256 million to redevelop Ultimo but much of the modern museum has had to be pulled down and rebuilt due to safety concerns. The spending seemed eye-watering in a state that otherwise prides itself on its parsimony; in July, *Herald* arts writer Linda Morris' analysis of contracts found the institution had burned through more than \$70 million in the lead-up to its headquarters' grand opening, including 40 custom rugs at \$4000 apiece to decorate 30 in-house studio apartments.

Morris has also revealed the museum spent more than \$5 million on drumming up publicity before the opening, including a \$1.7 million-plus documentary commissioned into its foundation.

While it is wonderful that western Sydney finally has a major public cultural institution of its own, surely the museum could have been acquired without such significant cost.

Questions remain about the business case for the entire project. As it stands, with little clarity about the fate of the Ultimo site, NSW taxpayers

would be right in wondering why they have been left with one museum costing the price of three.