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Powerhouse Parramatta's $4.5 million opening festival revealed



Linda Morris
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A 23-day festival program featuring 179 events heralding the opening of the billion-dollar Parramatta Powerhouse will be unveiled on Saturday, as the government attempts to look past executive turmoil and build public momentum for western Sydney's first state-significant cultural institution.

The launch will proceed minus the museum's driving force, Lisa Havilah, who was stood down two weeks ago pending the outcome of a formal misconduct investigation into what Parliament was told were "serious" allegations involving two executives of the Powerhouse Museum.



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

Havilah is said to be strongly defending her conduct. NSW Government Architect Abbie Galvin is serving as acting chief executive until an inquiry by Sydney-based law firm Lander and Rogers concludes.

Despite the leadership crisis, the $4.5 million opening festival, funded by the Department of Creative Industries, runs from November 7 to 29 at the new riverside venue.

The line-up is short on high-cost spectacle such as outdoor concerts or drone shows, focusing instead on immersive works, talks and community events. The state government confirmed 65 per cent of the launch program would be free. Ticketed events will cost from $15 to $50 and will go on sale from midday Saturday September 19.

“It’s a great way to ease pressure on the budget as the majority of events are free,” Arts Minister John Graham said.

The festival kicks off on opening day, November 7, following a ribbon-cutting ceremony, a plaque unveiling and the previous day’s donor preview and media tour. To manage crowd capacity over the November 7-8 launch weekend, patrons will be required to book timed hourly arrival slots through the Powerhouse website from midday this Saturday.

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Seven weeks out from ribbon cutting, general admission pricing for post-opening visits remains unconfirmed, though the biggest show, *Task Eternal*, will require paid tickets for visitors over the age of 16 years.

At the same time as it is launching its festival, the Powerhouse is advertising itself as Sydney's newest event destination on socials. It is also advertising rental of its "flexible, large-scale spaces for events from 20 to 1,000 guests".

During the three weeks and four weekends of the festival, operating hours will run from 10am to 5pm Monday through Wednesday, and 10am to 9pm Thursday through Sunday. Post-festival operating schedules have also not been finalised and, as the *Herald* has disclosed, they are expected to be wound back to 10am to 5pm permanently as Treasury searches for belated cost savings.

Former NASA administrator Charles F. Bolden Jr, who flew on four space shuttle missions, leads the space and technology roster alongside science fiction author Ted Chiang (both November 8), whose short story *Tower of Babylon* inspired the design of the museum's *Task Eternal.* Chiang will discuss the pursuit of immortality. Additional talk panels focus on bio-manufacturing, space technology and AI diagnostics.

On the opening weekend, Locomotive 3265 – a 124-year-old steam train from the Powerhouse Collection originally commissioned in 1902 – will run passenger trips between Parramatta and Riverstone stations, accompanied by performances from the NSW Railway Band.

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On the Powerhouse terrace, British artist Es Devlin presents *Come Home Again*, an 11-night installation featuring 244 hand-drawn depictions of endangered NSW species created alongside the Botanic Gardens of Sydney, accompanied by live choral performances from River City Voices, Barayagal and Noqu Vanua.

Industrial designer Marc Newson (November 7) reflects on four decades of work, while artist Bharti Kher unveils her public sculpture *Tree of Life*. Sydney Chamber Opera will perform two newly commissioned works responding to Anton Bruckner's 1869 *Locus Iste* and an 1879 Sydney International Exhibition cantata held in the museum's collection.

Opening ceremonies begin with a Welcome to Country by the Jannawi Dance Clan and the presentation of a kahu kuri (dog skin) cloak by artist Keren Ruki, featuring a hand-woven kaupapa base that took 3000 hours to complete.

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Pacific community collective Matavai Pacific Cultural Arts will launch the hand-carved Maori watercraft *Te Waka Whakakotahi* alongside traditional weaving displays. Forty-four male dancers and eight musicians from Badu Island will perform *Eseli's Story*, based on memories of World War II fighter planes and bombers taking off from Horn Island, marking the Torres Strait Islander story-dance's first staging in its entirety outside its home region.

Local western Sydney organisations lead several acts, including Jin Wu Koon's *The Pride*, featuring custom-commissioned Fut San and modern lion costumes alongside a colossal dragon lion (November 7).
Young western Sydney artists will direct *A Swell of Stars*, a processional performance moving from the rooftop to the river, marking a communal performance by acclaimed playwright S. Shakthidharan. On the rooftop, a Diwali Day party inspired by 1980s British South Asian diaspora day raves will celebrate the Hindu festival of lights.

Bankstown Poetry Slam will produce a one-night-only spoken-word competition. A time-capsule burial that was to have taken place next month has been delayed until December.

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