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Powerhouse Parramatta opens without stood-down director Lisa Havilah, amid ongoing governance probe

The long-awaited launch of the almost $1bn museum ahead of its formal debut on Saturday delivered spectacle, ministers and multimillion-dollar exhibitions – but no Lisa Havilah.

TIM DOUGLAS and BIANCA FARMAKIS



Powerhouse Parramatta. Picture: Rory Gardiner

After seven years and the best part of a billion dollars, the Powerhouse Parramatta opened to the media with all the fanfare one might expect of a project billed as the most significant cultural project since the Sydney Opera House.

From the lights and news cameras to the besuited, beaming government ministers and gleaming multimillion-dollar exhibitions, the launch had everything. Everything, of course, but its director.

Lisa Havilah, the arts leader who, since 2018, has shaped and overseen the vision for Powerhouse Parramatta, had not been invited. Nor, it is understood, had she been invited to the official opening ceremonies on Saturday.

Lingering like a ghost over the sun-drenched 18,000sq m building, Ms Havilah was thanked by both NSW Arts Minister John Graham and Powerhouse Museum Trust president David Borger.



Lisa Havilah. Picture: Nic Walker

“I’d also like to acknowledge Lisa Havilah and her dedication and her work towards this museum,” Mr Borger told the crowd at Friday’s launch.

Mr Graham said: “We know that this will inspire not just creators but also scientists and engineers of the future, and that’s hugely important.
“We’re in a war for talent as a country, and it’s something that we need to do better on. This institution will make a huge difference to that. It will change people’s lives as they come and learn.”

Ms Havilah, however, did not get a mention in Powerhouse interim chief executive Abbie Galvin’s speech. Ms Galvin instead described the opening festival as a celebration of Western Sydney communities, applied arts and sciences, and education, thanking more than 1200 collaborators who had contributed to the program.

Ms Galvin, and strategic adviser and former Sydney Opera House boss Louise Herron, were appointed in August to shepherd the museum to completion.

Team Powerhouse 2.0 was determined not to let the ongoing controversy around the institution's leadership spoil the party.

"For years, we have had a hive of activity on this site, but over the last two months that activity has reached an absolute fever pitch," Ms Galvin said.

"This place will become a cultural backbone for Western Sydney. It'll be a place of innovation, of learning, and of wonder."

Ms Havilah and chief operating officer Mark Wilsdon were stood down in August – just 71 days out from the opening – on full pay pending the results of an ongoing departmental investigation into procurement and governance.



Architects Steven Toia, Hiroko Kusunoki and Nicolas Moreau. Picture: John Feder

Former Powerhouse trustee and museums consultant Kylie Winkworth delivered a searing verdict on the institution, labelling it a "$.5bn bait-and-switch con job" and neither "the Powerhouse Museum" nor "the promised interactive STEM museum".

"Only the Powerhouse name made it to Parramatta," Ms Winkworth added, noting that 2014 plans to "move" the institution as a means of cultural equity for Western Sydney became "the cover story for a shameless asset grab for the Powerhouse Museum's 2.6ha Ultimo site".

“In 2023, Labor promised to save the real Powerhouse Museum. It’s now a $300m hole in the ground, and Labor’s next act of cultural bastardry is selling all or part of the museum’s site to pay for its demolition.”

Despite Mr Borger’s claims there was a “new house in town” – comparing Powerhouse’s launch to the 1973 opening of the Sydney Opera House – Ms Winkworth said the latter “met an identified cultural need for an opera theatre and concert hall”.

“The point of this project is the edifice, the bigness, and the vacuous volumes at the expense of culturally significant content.”



Architects Hiroko Kusunoki, Steven Toia and Nicolas Moreau enjoy the outlook. Picture: John Feder

The opening weekend came as a petition calling for Ms Havilah’s reinstatement reached 800 signatures and, in the same week, the NSW government promised there would be a timely resolution of the departmental probe.

Still, Powerhouse staff excitedly threw open the doors to the five major galleries in the towering Moreau Kusunoki-designed building – dubbed the Oversized Milk Crate by its detractors for its exoskeleton-style design – as it welcomed the first of what are expected to be 20,000 visitors across the weekend.

Among the most significant artistic installations is Shangri La, a work situated in the top of the tower within Task Eternal by acclaimed American light artist James Turrell.



Forest of Us by Es Devlin at the Press preview at the Powerhouse Parramatta. Picture: John Feder

The museum's first major exhibition, the $18m Task Eternal, takes its inspiration from the scientific, technological and philosophical questions surrounding the possibility of extending life, according to the museum. It is the only one of the five exhibitions that is paid: tickets are $30 for adults and free for children under 16. The exhibition includes the historic aircraft Qantas Avro 504K and an ultralight Scout Skycraft Mark 1, suspended in the building.

Also on display are spacesuits, including one belonging to Australian astronaut Katherine Bennell-Pegg, satellites, and a series of original flying-machine drawings by Leonardo da Vinci borrowed from Milan's Biblioteca Ambrosiana.



A first look inside Powerhouse Parramatta museum and cultural space just before opening. Picture: Thomas Annetts

Elsewhere, the two-storey exhibition The Mall reimagines – and physically re-enacts – the suburban shopping centre as something other than a retail setting, presenting it as a social and urban environment shaped through a collaboration with architects OMA/AMO.

For younger visitors, The Dark reimagines the children's bedroom as a world of crystal tunnels and forests. Created for children aged four to 12, the exhibition has been developed with theatre-makers Kip Williams, Elizabeth Gadsby and Marg Horwell. Its more than 800 objects include commissioned First Nations animations and objects loaned by children from Western Sydney.



Come Homer Again by Es Devlin at the Powerhouse Parramatta. Picture: John Feder

British artist Es Devlin, whose multidisciplinary practice encompasses sculpture, architecture, film and performance, makes her Australian exhibition debut with The Turning. Devlin is best known for her stage designs for pop megastars such as Beyonce.

The relationship between people and the environment is at the centre of Overflow, a First Nations-led exhibition examining the cultural and ecological significance of freshwater and saltwater systems across NSW. In collaboration with seven Aboriginal organisations, the exhibition documents community-led initiatives through the cinematic lens of acclaimed Kamilaroi filmmaker Ivan Sen.