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The Gaza reporter who captured the world's eye

Havilah's fingerprints are everywhere,

but Powerhouse will open without

The face missing from the opening of the new Powerhouse

In print as: Havilah's fingerprints are everywhere but Powerhouse will open without her



Linda Morris
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The NSW government's biggest cultural investment in more than half a century will open on Saturday with its suspended chief executive Lisa Havilah "devastated" to miss the ribbon-cutting but increasingly unlikely to return.

Havilah's legacy was acknowledged by Powerhouse Trust president David Borger at a celebratory sit-down dinner for 200 donors, staff and VIP guests on Thursday night, even as news filtered through that the board he leads had referred conflict-of-interest matters to the Independent Commission Against Corruption.



After all the ups and downs, Powerhouse Parramatta opens on Saturday.
JESSICA HROMAS, STEVEN SIEWERT, SITTHIXAY DITTHAVONG, NADIR TOLJ-KINANI

And on the eve of opening, the museum's operating budget – along with Havilah's concept for a 24-hour-activated landmark – is being picked apart by Treasury for savings, with the cost of five exhibitions tipped to exceed $70 million inclusive of artist commissions and licensing fees. The museum says only that its exhibition costs fell within its budget allocation of $62 million for fitout and transition.

Havilah was abruptly stood down on August 27, just weeks from the completion of the western Sydney cultural institution, pending the outcome of a departmental investigation into governance and procurement practices.

The trust's ICAC referral followed legal advice and concerns contracts already under scrutiny as part of the formal misconduct inquiry involving Ki Community, a marketing agency co-founded by former Powerhouse trustee Mark Hassell.
As this masthead revealed, the museum awarded in February a $2 million contract to the boutique agency following a selective tender process – in which Ki Community

emerged as the sole applicant. Trustees subsequently declined to endorse the decision when it came before them in May.



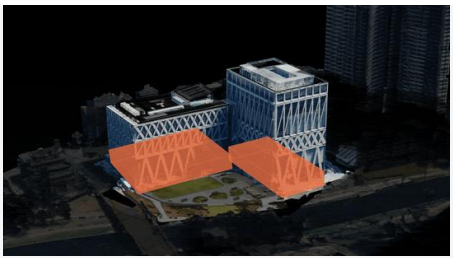
Lisa Havilah was stood down from her role as chief executive of Powerhouse Parramatta after seven years, amid a governance probe. JANIE BARRETT

ICAC referrals are statutory obligations handled in confidence and do not guarantee an investigation will be launched. Nor do they amount to statements of findings. But the move coincides with a hardening resolve within government to block Havilah's return once the misconduct probe concludes, regardless of the outcome. An arts-sector petition demanding her immediate reinstatement has drawn almost 800 signatures and the ire of government, which considers it a distraction from the staff's task of bringing the monumental project to fruition and a misunderstanding of its broader obligations on public integrity, administration of public monies and due process.

Havilah has appointed commercial law firm Arnold Bloch Leibler and extracts of her legal defence were published in *The Saturday Paper*, signalling a vigorous contest against any adverse findings to protect her professional reputation.

Through her lawyers, Havilah has strenuously denied any wrongdoing, insisting she maintained the highest standards of integrity throughout her tenure.

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"There has never been any suggestion of personal gain for Ms Havilah, and she has co-operated with the investigation process at all times," a spokesman for Arnold Bloch Leibler has said.

Havilah's defence has noted that all contracts, including the arrangement with Ki Community, were covered by a conflict of interest declaration and signed off by independent probity advisers. Friends say she was blindsided by the suspension and devastated not to be present for the opening after committing years to the project. The timings of those conflict of interest declarations are a key part of the inquiry. The legal lines drawn, Havilah's polarising micromanagement style alone makes a comeback unlikely, with fears that it created institutional bottlenecks and governance vulnerabilities, according to multiple sources not authorised to speak publicly. She is also understood to have lost the confidence of key NSW cabinet ministers over spending.

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Broader spending flashpoints – such as a $2.5 million documentary commission and bespoke furnishings for onsite apartments – remain outside the formal terms of the misconduct probe. Officially, the capital works met budget expectations, with head contractor Lendlease absorbing losses and the fitout landing within 5 per cent of projections.

Even before the opening, Treasury has begun pursuing savings in the operating budget and some contractors have been given notice that terms will expire and won't be renewed once the museum opens.

Appointed in January 2019, Havilah steered the project through an international design competition, two parliamentary inquiries and the tenures of three premiers. She served as a lightning rod for community dissent in her shift away from traditional museum display practices to an event and spectacle approach for screen-literate audiences.

Studio apartments, an overnight schools academy and flexible exhibition and commercial spaces were her concepts, forming the core business case that justified the redevelopment. She maintained direct oversight of architectural commissions, fitout specifications and curatorial programming, down to such detail as the crushed-oyster wall finishes and terrace tiles.

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British artist Es Devlin, responsible for the museum's headline international show, credits Havilah for bringing her to the project. "I'm confused," Devlin said of the fallout. "I think she's incredible."

The departmental probe began in March 2025, when the Department of Creative Industries, Tourism, Hospitality and Sport launched an assessment following whistleblower complaints. Havilah was interviewed by corporate advisory firm Kroll in September and a formal misconduct inquiry was launched later that year.

By April, she had been notified of more than a dozen allegations concerning external contracts, including alleged failures to disclose long-standing relationships, the structuring of procurement arrangements and management of conflicts of interest.

The department gave no timetable for delivering its findings, confirming only that investigators are pursuing multiple avenues. Few within government expect the matter to linger beyond this month.

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"The matters being investigated are of a serious nature and involve multiple lines of inquiry," the department said in a statement.

"The Department has a responsibility to address these matters with due diligence and procedural fairness. All reports of wrongdoing and public interest disclosures are taken seriously and actioned appropriately. As the investigation is nearing finalisation and no findings have been made, it would not be appropriate to provide further comment at this stage."

The broader backdrop is ICAC's Operation Landan, which exposed systemic subversion of recruitment and procurement rules within School Infrastructure NSW. Following corrupt conduct findings against that agency's former chief, the Premier's

department committed to tightening public sector standards to ensure conflicts are declared immediately, managed strictly at arm's length and re-evaluated over rolling contracts.

In the longer term, government and bureaucracy alike face uncomfortable findings regarding their oversight of a flagship project. Executive delegation limits are set to be overhauled, with clearer reporting lines drawn between the minister, the department and the institution's future leadership.

For Havilah, a triumphant public debut for Powerhouse Parramatta may eventually ease a move into philanthropic foundations or the international gallery sector – particularly in London, where Devlin notes her standing remains high.