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Parramatta's Powerhouse is finally here. Will the $915m project live up to the hype?

The western Sydney arts precinct's long-awaited opening risks being overshadowed by an investigation into governance and procurement



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The decade-long project to build a world-class museum and cultural precinct, called the "opera house" of western Sydney, will open its doors next week.

But as the scaffolds came down from the white-latticed walls of the new Powerhouse and galleries began to fill with artistic commissions, an investigation into the governance and procurement at the museum, 11th-hour changes in leadership, a cadre of highly paid artistic "consultants" and the precinct's sheer cost have threatened to overshadow the grand reveal.

As workers scramble to install satellites and spacesuits before the 7 November opening gala, backers say those concerns will pale in comparison with the cultural change the Powerhouse will usher in for Parramatta.

So, will the $915m project live up to the hype?

Turrell installation and $4,000 rugs

The new Powerhouse complex is an architectural landmark sitting on the banks of the Parramatta River. A white exoskeleton encases two mammoth towers, which allow for column-free gallery spaces, some measuring 20 metres in height.

An installation from American artist and light master James Turrell features alongside an expansive roof garden and telescopes under a retractable roof. There are 30 architecturally designed apartments for visiting experts and artists, featuring custom rugs that cost about $4,000 each, as well as a student academy that can accommodate up to 60 children and their teachers at a time for experiences and camps. Supporters say the facility will have features that rival – or even best – some of its premier contemporaries around the world.



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Powerhouse horticulturalist Tyler Howard and program director Clare Holland inspect the rooftop garden. Photograph: Jessica Hromas/The Guardian

Yet the project is on-budget, with Powerhouse leadership noting the more than $900m cost – boosted by around $80m in philanthropic contributions – included $140m to buy the land along the river (a controversy in itself), millions to digitise its collection of 500,000 objects, and the upgrade of a Powerhouse facility in Castle Hill.

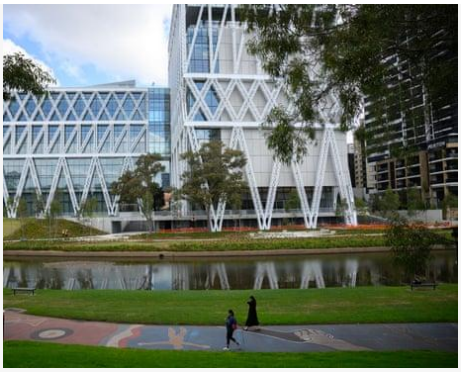
But the sheer scope of the effort and reports of a $70m spending spree in the lead-up to the opening has prompted a review from New South Wales Treasury. The government stressed such audits were common and had been undertaken at similar institutions, including the Art Gallery of NSW and the Museums of History.

“It’s entirely timely to assess what the ongoing operational funding requirements will be for that brand-new cultural institution,” the NSW secretary for the department of creative industries, Melanie Hawyes, told the state’s budget estimates in August. “The Treasury process is something that you would expect to occur at this point in time as we finish completion of the new museum.”

But it’s not the only review, and others have been less procedural.

Changes in leadership

The former long-reigning leader of the Powerhouse, Lisa Havilah, was stood aside in late August, eight years into the project and just 10 weeks before the opening festival pending an ongoing investigation into allegations over governance and procurement at the museum.



Investigation into Powerhouse Parramatta museum under way as stop-gap leader steps in. Read more

The NSW arts minister, John Graham, told budget estimates at the time that the decision came amid claims of a “serious nature” that the government was taking “very seriously”. Another investigation is also ongoing, related to a whistleblower complaint filed in 2025 surrounding allegations of “wrongdoing”.

The NSW government architect, Abbie Galvin, has stepped in as interim chief executive. She praised the Powerhouse team during a recent media walkthrough, saying the institution was bigger than one person.

“I was very trepidatious about [stepping in] of course, not knowing the state that we would find the team in, or the status of the work,” Galvin said. “I was just blown away by the capability of the team. They are phenomenal, they are so skilled, they are so passionate. And of course any team needs a good leader, and they’ve had a great leader.”



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NSW government architect Abbie Galvin was appointed interim chief executive on 1 September. Photograph: Jessica Hromas/The Guardian

Havilah declined to comment, citing the ongoing legal fog surrounding her position. An independent petition to reinstate her was launched on Tuesday and garnered

almost 600 signatures in two days, saying she should be allowed to “stand alongside the extraordinary team who have brought this vision to life”. Prominent arts figures including Ben Quilty, Penelope Seidler, Anna Schwartz, William Yang and Justene Williams are among the signatories.

The $440,000 chef

Among the criticisms of the museum was the decision to hire prominent figures as external consultants. A $2.6m program that featured nine Powerhouse “associates”, including the chef Kylie Kwong, was scuttled in June after five years. The Sydney Morning Herald has since reported that Kwong – who was a Carriageworks ambassador during Havilah’s tenure as that institution’s chief executive – has been appointed to a new ambassador role for Powerhouse worth $440,000 over a two-year period, which began in August.

Kwong did not respond to a request for comment. A Powerhouse spokesperson told the Herald at the time that the role was awarded in line with normal procurement procedures. Kwong features heavily in the Powerhouse’s large opening program, starting in November.

Troy Wright, who is the assistant general secretary of the Public Service Association of NSW (PSA NSW) which covers many Powerhouse employees, said the union’s members remained concerned about the use of artistic consultants over in-house staff and was worried that Powerhouse Parramatta had strayed from its original intent.

“What we’ve had over the last 10 years has been as succession of leadership that have tried to steer the museum from what our members believe is its primary purpose,” Wright said. “Our members were concerned about [Havilah’s] initiatives to bring in what she was calling artistic consultants. The collection speaks for itself, exhibited properly, it explains things.”
When asked about Kwong’s new contract, he added: “$440,000 for two years work? Part-time? I mean, fuck.”



View image in fullscreen A Qantas Avro 504K aircraft and an ultralight Scout Skycraft Mark 1 were some of the first items installed in May. Photograph: Jane Dempster/AAP

World-class galleries

The Powerhouse's five expansive galleries are being filled with odes to flight and space travel, the suburban mall, childhood imagination and First Nations caretaking of water systems.

Those galleries will host key pieces from the Powerhouse collection, acquisitions, commissions and loans. The new museum's first acquisition will be buried in one exhibit for children to unearth.

"People don't truly have a senes of what this building is until they step into it," the director of the Powerhouse program, Clare Holland, said. "For a capital project, it's a world-class museum."

The Powerhouse has also spent deeply on chronicling its new era, commissioning a full-length documentary at a cost of $1.7m after tax breaks, and a 1,000-page cookbook to be released next year called the Australian Culinary Archive, reported to have cost more than $1.5m.

'This is not the Powerhouse museum'.

About 22,000 people have registered to attend the museum's opening weekend festival, and 50% of those are from western Sydney.

Galvin said Parramatta locals and western Sydney more broadly had been "very much a part" of the project.

"The community have been a part of curation, they're a part of commission, they're a part of acquisition and content," she said.



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Parramatta's new Powerhouse opens on 7 November with a 23-day festival featuring more than 170 events. Photograph: Dan Himbrechts/AAP

Others aren't so sure.

“It wasn’t whether Parramatta needs a museum,” said Kylie Winkworth, a former trustee of the Powerhouse and member of the Powerhouse Museum Alliance. “The problem was from the very beginning the community had no say in the museum, in what museum they wanted, what best suited their cultural aspiration.

“In my view, it should come with a product disclosure warning: ‘This is not the Powerhouse museum.’”

Winkworth, a museum and curation expert, said while she and her colleagues supported artistic and cultural investment in western Sydney, the use of the Powerhouse brand and creation of the site at the expense of the former Powerhouse museum in Ultimo had left her “furious”.

The Ultimo site is undergoing a $300m revitalisation effort after advocates successfully saved it from sale and development. Powerhouse officials have stressed the Parramatta site is an addition to Sydney’s museum landscape, not a replacement.

Critics say the quick closure of the Ultimo site and the focus on Parramatta have sparked questions about the government’s priorities.

“We’re concerned that the budget, the use of consultants, all that stuff is going to jeopardise Ultimo,” Wright said. “Ultimo is really going to be our real game. Parramatta cannot replace Ultimo, it’s a very, very different museum.”

Powerhouse Parramatta opens to the public on 7 November with a 23-day opening festival featuring more than 170 events.