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EDITORIAL

Grand Opening

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JOHN MCDONALD

2 HOURS AGO **[10 NOVEMBER, 2026]**



“This is fantastic,” said Premier Minns, explaining how the project was funded.

Well, it’s finally open. I made my way out to Parramatta on the very first day to view the new incarnation of the Powerhouse and file a quick report. While I’ve tried to be as fair and objective as possible, such feelings don’t come naturally when you’ve watched the gradual destruction of a major cultural asset over a decade, under the auspices of successive NSW

governments that have shown no inclination to pay attention to the public or the experts. There's also the problem of having to overcome one's knowledge of the rorting, the lies and wastage that have played such a starring role in this saga.

Now that Powerhouse Parramatta is a $1 billion reality we'll have to learn to live with it, just as we've had to accommodate ourselves to Sydney Modern (AKA. Naala Badu), that other inappropriate building launched with such fanfare and hyperbole at the end of 2022. Despite initial delusions of grandeur, that structure has not been a raging success, with most visitors to the Art Gallery of NSW confining their affections to the old building.

At the Sydney Modern opening, Coalition Premier, Dominic Perrottet, pronounced that Sydney now had the greatest gallery in the world. Launching Powerhouse Parramatta last week, Labor Premier, Chris Minns, said: "This is fantastic. This is going to be great for western Sydney." Feeling bighearted, the Premier also decided to pay tribute to his Liberal Party predecessors who got the project underway, cheerfully abandoning the pretence of opposition that helped get Labor re-elected. What long-term supporters of the museum see as an historic betrayal was touted as a great cross-party achievement.

It continues a process whereby all criticism, no matter how well-founded, is ignored by a government prepared to spend millions on PR and spin-doctoring, knowing that today's media will swallow anything presented as a boon for some favoured group, whether it be the multicultural communities of the western suburbs, First Nations people, or fans of cage fighting. The blandest of assertions will never be questioned, especially if there are lucrative advertising contracts or 'exclusives' on offer.

Right on cue, tame outlets such as *The Sydney Morning Herald* delivered the guaranteed chorus of praise, with headlines such as: *'A new house in town': The $1 billion Powerhouse receives a joyous reception* and *'Instantly iconic': the people's verdict on Sydney's new Powerhouse.*

Journos and bloggers who had already shown themselves to be onside were welcomed to the media preview, while writers such as Yours Truly, or *The Australian*'s Christopher Allen, were pointedly not invited. As a public institution, it should be a matter of course that the Powerhouse rises above an 'us & them' mentality, opening its doors to critics as well as friends. In all the years I've criticised (and praised) the AGNSW or the Museum of Contemporary Art, they have never left me off the media lists. What we find in Parramatta is

the same markedly defensive attitude that saw staff obliged to work in silos and sign non-disclosure agreements. Anyone would think they had something to hide…

From the moment the project was announced it was never in doubt that Powerhouse Parramatta would be greeted with florid tributes and a rush of visitors. Any protracted construction of such dimensions will attract a similar response. The test will arrive in six months or less, when the first waves of curiosity have abated, and everybody has had a look. The building is vast, and the bill for gallery attendants, cleaning and maintenance will be enormous. With shows set to run for years, there will be little incentive for repeat visitation. Although the location is touted as a major plus for Parramatta, it's a disincentive for people in many other parts of Sydney, and I'm not referring exclusively to the wealthy Eastern Suburbs or the North Shore.

Some of the most grandiloquent schemes of suspended CEO, Lisa Havilah, have already been reeled in, notably the idea that Powerhouse Parramatta would operate on a 24/7 basis. The stated hours are now: Monday-Wednesday, 10 am to 5 pm, and Thursday – Sunday, 10 am to 9 pm, which are still generous by Australian standards, but won't incur the multi-million-dollar costs of an institution that stays open all night. It remains to be seen what happens with the plan to provide luxury, hotel-style accommodation to visiting celebrities, a facility that has nothing to do with the business of a museum. You don't need a crystal ball and a copy of the *I Ching* to predict major staff cuts in the near future.

Deviating from the usual NINE Media gush, the *Sun-Herald* sounded a warning in an editorial last weekend, pointing out that running costs for the new institution are projected to be $145 million, as opposed to $69 million for the Australian Museum and $68 million for the AGNSW. The piece also questioned "an optimistic $50 million contribution to expenditure" from gift shops and other commercial ventures. Here we need to remember that under the first five years of Havilah's leadership the Powerhouse's self-generated revenue dropped by approximately 90 percent. Even allowing for the pandemic, this is a figure that should have rung alarm bells.

Those who drive to Parramatta will find the Powerhouse provides no parking, while a promised new Metro remains nothing more than a hole in the ground, so visitors are well advised to travel by train or ferry. I went out on the ferry with a group of friends, which was a pleasant enough ride of 90 minutes from Circular Quay. When we arrived, a sign told us to follow a path along the riverbank to the Powerhouse. We obeyed and came to a flight of steps policed by two security guards. They informed us this was an exit and we'd have to retrace

our steps to take a road that looped back up to Phillip Street. Because one of our party was in his 90s, this was a major inconvenience, especially after the signage had brought us all the way to this spot. The guards apologised and said there should have been a person with a ticket counter, but they hadn't turned up. They also said there was a lift, about 100 metres back along the road. So there was, but it was shuttered behind a metal barricade.

OK, it was the first day, but for signage to be so poorly thought-out that it directed visitors who were elderly, disabled or pushing prams to a non-entrance, and made them double back – all in the shadeless glare of a hot morning, was not an auspicious start. When a billion dollars has been expended, you need to get the basics right.

Our first stop was Level 4, for a talk about a food project. Once again, there was a problem, as the lifts to Level 4 had been turned off, allegedly to regulate the flow of pedestrian traffic. This repeated the dilemma of the false entrance, necessitating a detour or a negotiation with a staff member. We took the latter option.

The talk, by Xinyi Lim and Tammi Kwok, held in the metal-walled Vitocco Family Kitchen, was about two thirds-full. It began with a screening of an episode from *Family Dineasties*, a new SBS series fronted by Kylie Kwong and 'Sydney Food Boy' Kevin La, which takes us to eight small 'community' restaurants in the western suburbs. It's an excellent taxpayer-funded advertisement for these restaurants, but the episode itself was quite boring, consisting of a plate of noodles cooked in a wok, and a nondescript chat about how nice it all was, both the food and the people.

Yes, the food looked tasty and the people seemed nice, but what did this have to do with a museum? Under Lisa Havilah's 'vision' for the Powerhouse, Science and Technology have virtually disappeared and been replaced by food. The curators who specialised in science and technology have been dismissed, while food people have been put on the payroll, changing the entire focus of the institution.



Red engines at Powerhouse. But where are the cowboys?

There are lots of items on display that relate to STEM subjects, but they are used *aesthetically*, as part of an exhibition design policy light on information and context. When one sees a room full of jet engines in the *Task Eternal* show, it comes across as essentially an art installation. The same ornamental principle is applied to thousands of items from the collection, which are used to create a sense of bewildering profusion, with no coherent educational objective. More of this later.

To return to the food show, it's slightly mystifying as to why a museum should be bankrolling an SBS program as a kind of joint venture. One needs to ask how this relates to Kylie Kwong's controversial recent appointment as a Powerhouse 'ambassador' for a payment of $440,000 spread over two years. When we add this to the payments Kylie has previously received under Havilah's 'Associates' program, her remuneration over four years appears to be $882,643 - a sum that could have funded the Australian Design Centre for two years. One can only wonder if this includes expenses such as restaurant bills and travel, or whether these have been billed separately. It's also worth asking whether Kylie and her business entity will be profiting from resales and residuals.

The most fundamental question is: "What benefit has the NSW taxpayer derived from these generous payments?" It would be fascinating to see a breakdown of how the money has been

spent, because initial appearances suggest that Powerhouse has subsidised a low-budget SBS program which has brought huge personal returns to a celebrity chef. Naturally, this has all been done in the name of “communities” and fed to the press as a feel-good project.

I don’t want to cast aspersions on anybody associated with these food programs who were simply doing a job to the best of their abilities. The question marks hover over the extravagant remuneration to Kylie Kwong, and how this was facilitated by a CEO currently under investigation for governance and procurement issues. What some of us might call a procurement scandal, others call “vision”.



Ramesh brings Tamil material culture to the rooftop

After the food talk, I ventured out to the roof-top ‘garden’, which looks like scrub set in concrete. The first thing I noticed were four bronze sculptures by Ramesh Mario

Nithiyendran, called *Carriers of Us* which had been commissioned by Powerhouse for the opening. I've seen volumes of work by Ramesh, who is also a great favourite at the AGNSW, and can't help thinking his funky style is better adapted to ceramics than bronze. These four pieces felt incredibly scrappy. Although a label relates them to "Tamil material culture", this may be a way of making the figures sound more museum-like. Rather than rely on my taste I urge you to go take a look for yourselves.

Even more problematic was an installation of bronze plaques embedded in the floor, celebrating the life and achievements of Daniel Moowattin (c.1790-1816), an Aboriginal man who helped gather specimens for the colonial botanist, George Caley, and was taken by him on a trip to England. The Powerhouse label tells us they are correcting "a lack of recognition of Moowattin's contribution". In doing so, they have quietly failed to mention that Moowattin was hanged for the rape and robbery of 15-year-old Hannah Russell, a white, native-born colonist, in 1812.

This project, *Got by Dan*, has already been the subject of an admiring story on the ABC's website, which tells us how it was a collaboration between artist, Keg de Souza (because everything at Powerhouse must include an artist); local Parramatta elder, Uncle Chris Tobin; and curator, Emerson Radisich, who "searched nature archives for months", and then "just went around the world" consulting herbarium records.



Got by Dan. A stylish tribute.

We read that “Daniel Moowattin’s contributions were barely mentioned in official records, a history of silencing that the new Powerhouse Parramatta is trying to change.” Given the depth and breadth of this research project, which sent a curator around the world, it’s scarcely credible that all concerned were unaware of Moowattin’s crimes and fate. The result is that Powerhouse has produced a permanent memorial to a man who was hanged for the rape, assault and robbery of a 15-year-old girl.

This story has already appeared on a site called *The Noticer* and was picked up by *The Australian*. It remains to be seen whether the ABC will be moved to add a rejoinder to their original story, and whether the NINE Media papers, *The Guardian*, and other outlets, will consider it worthy of a mention. Just imagine the outcry if a museum had put up a plaque in honour of a white man who had raped an Aboriginal girl.

Beyond the outrageous attempt to cherrypick historical facts, the Powerhouse has lost an opportunity in not telling Moowattin’s full story. Kylie Winkworth has alerted me to the detailed research undertaken by historian, Michael Flynn, which must have been consulted by the Powerhouse curator, but received no credit. The absence of scholarly etiquette is bad enough, but Flynn has revealed Moowattin as a genuinely intriguing character – talented, intelligent, cheeky, and ultimately tragic. It’s ridiculous to reduce such a life to a whinge that he didn’t get sufficient credit for helping a white botanist obtain specimens.

Kylie also points out there are dozens of Aboriginal people from colonial-era Parramatta whose stories deserve to be told. One obvious candidate is Dharug woman, Maria Lock (c.1805-78), a star pupil at Governor Macquarie’s Native Institution who married a former convict and became the first Aboriginal woman to receive a land grant. In her book, *People of the River* (2020), historian, Grace Karskens, refers to Lock as the “famous Aboriginal matriarch”. Wasn’t she deserving of a plaque?

The problem is that Powerhouse has little interest in the messy facts of history, preferring the narrow certainties of ideology, in which one side is always right and the other wrong. They employ artists and local elders to tell a preferred version of a story and use a curator who was happy to travel around the world at NSW taxpayers’ expense, while ignoring the story under his nose and the work of reputable historians. Don’t forget that Lisa Havilah has told the curators that she finds history boring.

How much did this lamentable exercise cost? Who made the decision to overlook Moowattin's crimes and portray him as a victim of colonial silencing? Is this flawed memorial destined to stand in perpetuity, with no corrections to the record? And the biggest question of all: Will anybody answer these questions?

Having addressed two specific issues, being the large sums of money paid to one celebrity chef, and the garbled presentation of colonial history, I'm going to try and describe my first impressions of the building and the exhibitions. First up, I won't comment on the show by British designer, Es Devlin, as the queues were too long to encourage waiting around. I'll save that for another day. If the Powerhouse expects a more detailed discussion of any of the main shows I'd need to read the catalogues, as is my usual habit. I wasn't tempted to purchase them because *The Mall* catalogue may be only $50, but *Task Eternal* sells for $140, and *Es Devlin* for $190. Somehow, I can't imagine them selling out overnight.

Although a versatile museum requires ceilings of a certain height, the dimensions of Powerhouse Parramatta are excessive, creating extra expense when it comes to lighting and displays. Beyond an optimum height the viewer is unable to study any item in depth, which encourages a predilection for large-scale spectacle, like a stage set, rather than contemplation and reflection. This is a deliberate preference, not a side-effect.

The crowds on opening day made it difficult to travel by lift from one floor to another, and at one point, a set of escalators was shut down. Later we would learn this was because a ceiling panel had detached itself and crashed onto the floor nearby. Let's call it a teething problem. As a result of this incident, Powerhouse decided to waive the $30 admission fee for its major exhibition, *Task Eternal*. I don't know whether those who had already booked and paid were given a refund. This gesture may also have been influenced by the fact that, despite timed ticketing, it was allegedly possible to enter at any hour during the day, revealing the reluctance of visitors to fork out. I had no interest in paying $10 to see the kind of James Turrell work I've seen in several other venues.

The Powerhouse architecture by Moreau Kusunoki Genton is simple and minimalist, hardly more than an exoskeleton wrapped around a stack of boxes. The transitionary spaces feel as large as the galleries. Anything on such a grand scale is superficially impressive, although my positivity took a blow when I thought of the billion-dollar price tag. For a sum like that, one would expect something imaginative and breathtaking, rather than a big, clean, spacious box. We decided not to dine in the crowded restaurant, preferring to head over to Temasek,

Parramatta's famous Malaysian joint, only five minutes walk from the museum. The Powerhouse café was small and uncomfortable, although the coffee was good.

Beyond a few chic-looking booths with a handful of books and doodads, there was no bookshop or museum store of any substance. This may reflect the anti-intellectual bias of the suspended CEO, but it's a worry that an institution of this size and ambition doesn't see any need for accessible books and educational material. It's also a lost opportunity, as merchandise has become a major revenue stream for many contemporary museums.



Overflow. Don't worry, it's supposed to look like this.

The most overwhelming and depressing part of Powerhouse Parramatta were the exhibitions. *Overflow*, classed as an exhibition, is nothing more than a very large room with a gigantic video screen, showing a specially commissioned film by Ivan Sen, a talented Aussie director who has has not produced anything especially memorable on this occasion. In front of the screen is a large paddling pool, shaped like a natural feature, populated by small children who show not the slightest interest in the screen, or the stated theme of Aboriginal communities caring for waterways. To reduce such a topic to a single film and a paddling pool is symptomatic of the Powerhouse's readiness to transform a complex subject into a mere

statement of care. The old Powerhouse would have made a substantial exhibition out of this issue, in a much smaller space, with a lot more content.

The Dark, classed as a children's exhibition, is a highly theatrical affair, designed by Kip Williams, Elizabeth Gadsby and Marg Horwell. The viewer wanders through a series of unusual corridors, looks at objects displayed in brightly coloured rooms, goes in and out of various nooks and crannies, stands in a central area painted up like the woods from a fairy tale, with a shadow puppet theatre not in use. It was a diverting interlude, but what got me down was seeing hundreds of items from the Powerhouse collection, including favourites such as the German medical model, *The Transparent Woman*; a mass of mechanical gadgets, rock and mineral samples, thrown together in a way that showed no respect for the specificity of the object. Everything was subordinated to the designers' whimsical ideas, like a carnival attraction. This is not the work of a museum - it's a way of undermining standard museological processes – which has been one of Havilah's aims from the beginning. She likes to speak of "breaking" or "unmaking the museum" – a concept that, to me, feels redolent of spite and sadism. We can now see that it's easier to break a museum than to create one.

The same 'jumble sale' aesthetic is repeated in *The Mall* and to a lesser extent in *Task Eternal*. The former is one of the most indigestible experiences I've ever had in a so-called museum, and that's saying a lot. Co-curated by American architect, David Gianotten of the firm, OMA, who sat on the panel to choose the winning design for the building, *The Mall* was reputedly budgeted at $13 million. Once again, it feels as if swathes of the Powerhouse collection have been hoovered up and dumped into display cabinets, including very ordinary collections of shoes, clothing, handbags and household gadgets (we found our home coffee machine in one vitrine). Commissions by overseas artists (as usual) were juxtaposed with large, coloured photos of local people, spread around the show. Shopping trolleys and a railway ticket machine were displayed like rare treasures. Masses of small, black-and-white photos and magazine articles were placed in rows of badly lit glass cases, daring anyone to read them or look at them. Nobody seemed to be taking up the challenge.



Roselands Shopping Centre reconstructed. Groovy, baby.

The centrepiece was a reconstruction of Roselands Shopping Centre c.1965, a hideous collection of green, blue and purple geometric shapes and pebblecrete benches. Free LSD trips should have been provided.

One bitter irony was the amount of space devoted to David Jones in the same week that the department store announced large-scale closures. In front of a display of Sportsgirl mannequins, I heard somebody say, “Sportsgirl? Aren’t they still around?”



Sportsgirl. Aren’t they still around?

The Mall's problems begin with the title, as this is a very American term. In Australia, we usually refer to shopping centres. The bigger issue is that malls are often viewed as destructive, dehumanising complexes that suck the life from small communities, replacing local shops with soulless franchises that look exactly the same from one city to the next. I don't know how this fits in with the Powerhouse's much trumpeted love of small, multicultural communities. Celebrating the shopping mall is like celebrating social alienation and standardisation. If they wanted to run a film in this show, I'd recommend George A. Romeros's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), which depicts a horde of zombie consumers staggering around a shopping mall. I wish they'd let me curate something!

I could go on and on about all the reasons *The Mall* made me feel that civilisation on this planet is doomed, but you get the picture. *Task Eternal,* conservatively budgeted at $18 million, was not so apocalyptic in the responses it induced, but still a shambles of an exhibition. It begins and ends with a boomerang in a glass case, and includes a significant amount of Indigenous work, displayed in contexts that felt completely arbitrary. I love Gunybi Ganambarr's metal shields made out of old satellite TV dishes but couldn't understand why a whole bunch of them were laid out in a way that prevented them from being seen clearly. I've also got a lot of time for Naminapu Maymuru-White's star-patterned *larrakitj*, but when I suddenly came across a large display of them, I could only think what a good customer, Sullivan + Strumpf found in the Powerhouse. Along with Ramesh's roof sculptures, and who knows what else, they have been the go-to commercial gallery.





Parramatta on the left, vs. now-defunct Ultimo

To my disappointment I couldn't find anything by Glenn Barkley, Lisa Havilah's estranged husband and most staunch defender, who also shows with S+S. I suppose we should feel pleased the suspended CEO has been prepared to support local businesses.

Alongside all the Indigenous knowledge and science fiction, *Task Eternal* has a display of glass cabinets, featuring space suits - both real ones, and those concocted by Hollywood. There's also a skimpy, metallic Paco Rabanne outfit that might not be appropriate for outer space. The NASA boilerplate space capsule that never left this planet, and was previously dumped in a park near Houston, has been given a fresh coat of paint.



Transcendental cup and saucer, from *Task Eternal*

You'll be thrilled by an old business-class seat from a Qantas jet, and a single china cup and saucer displayed in an immense empty cabinet. You'll love a reconstituted space rocket from a children's playground, and a wall of Aboriginal spear-throwing implements arranged in a pattern, like a Jonathan Jones installation. The previously mentioned room of old aircraft engines on tables is lit by an eerie red glow, to make it seem more mysterious, while a towering display of flying craft borrows an idea from the old central gallery of Powerhouse Ultimo, now demolished by way of "revitalisation". Oh yes, there's also Lawrence Hargrave's designs for an Aussie flying machine, and pages from Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks borrowed from the Ambrosiana in Milan, which presumably feels confident about the Powerhouse's flood mitigation plan**,** although few people have ever seen it.

I’m afraid my guise of objectivity began to disintegrate as soon as I started to discuss the exhibitions, but occasionally you have to write about a show to discover your actual thoughts. Ultimately, the hardest parts of the Powerhouse Parramatta experience are the way it trashes history, uses the collection as fuel for an excessive and shallow brand of entertainment, and projects a sanctimony that is contradicted at every turn. How can one purport to care for communities while celebrating shopping malls in a $13 million display?

As someone who’s spent his professional life writing about art, I’m appalled to see the way contemporary art has been used in this ‘vision’ of the museum, from the costly commissions and purchases to the foolish way artists have been substituted for historians, scientists and specialised curators. Scientific and technical knowledge is not art, and art is not a branch of the sciences. There are plenty of places where the twain can meet, but neither can serve as a replacement for the other. The museum itself may be housed in a bigger building, but the gravitas of the old institution has been replaced by an ‘experiential’ approach that leaves few lasting impressions. For many people the greatest pleasure of a museum is to stand in wonder in front of an extraordinary object. With Powerhouse Parramatta, the only wonder is how we managed to trade our greatest repository of cultural heritage for an over-scaled, Disneyfied fun palace on the banks of the Parramatta River.

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By John McDonald

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