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# Success of Powerhouse Parramatta in the hands of Sydneysiders

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The Herald charts the ups and downs of the creation of Sydney's newest cultural institution. See all stories.

The stars have never aligned for the Powerhouse Parramatta. From the start it was controversial. The backlash began almost as soon as premier Mike Baird announced his plans in 2015 to create a new cultural landmark by selling off the Powerhouse Museum's Ultimo site and moving the institution's headquarters to Sydney's geographical heartland.

An attempt to nudge our city's cultural centre of gravity westwards, while raising a handy $200 million to help pay for it, became a protracted dispute between the government, Ultimo locals and museum lovers, incensed at the Coalition's zero-sum approach to raising Parramatta's cultural capital and the deconstruction of a functioning facility.



Much is riding on whether the city embraces it new major attraction. STEVEN SIEWERT

Five years later, Baird's successor Gladys Berejiklian cut her political losses (but increased the cost to the state's coffers), deciding to keep the existing museum but also build a new cultural beacon on the banks of the Parramatta River, foregoing the multimillion-dollar payday expected from the sell-off of prime inner city real estate. Fears that the Parramatta site was a flood risk prompted a parliamentary inquiry (one of two into the development), while friends of the historic 1880s Willow Grove house campaigned, unsuccessfully, to save it from being dismantled to make way for the new glass-and-steel structure.

Now, after a fraught decade, and a near $1 billion spend, the Powerhouse Parramatta is open to the public. But what should have been a triumphant moment is instead an awkward one. The woman whose vision is at the heart of this 21st-century reimagining of a museum was absent from any of the celebrations. In August, the museum's chief executive, Lisa Havilah suddenly stepped down pending a procurement and governance investigation.

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Late last week came news the museum's board of trustees had referred a $2 million marketing contract, awarded in February, to the Independent Commission against Corruption. The allegations against Havilah remain untested and she strongly denies wrongdoing.

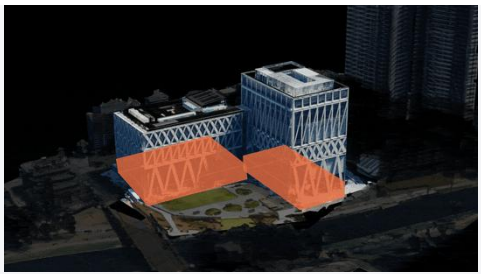
A string of stories has led to questions about spending priorities under her leadership. Celebrity chef Kylie Kwong landed a $440,000 new "ambassador" role with the museum soon after another $2.6 million program engaging creative identities as museum "associates" was canned. A film documenting the construction

of the museum was expected to cost up to $1.9 million while a $1.5 million culinary archive project is yet to materialise.

Thirty studio residences to be used by visiting artists, built at a cost of $3 million, will remain unopened. The expense of providing the management, housekeeping and security necessary to run them placed in the too-hard basket after Havilah's departure.

Treasury is yet to approve an operating budget for the museum. Its running costs were projected to be $145 million (as opposed to $69 million for the Australian Museum and $68 million for the Art Gallery of NSW). Treasury will be looking to trim that figure substantially. Doubts remain over whether projected earnings from gift shops and other commercial ventures will meet an optimistic $50 million contribution to expenditure. Staff fear job cuts are on the way.

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The big test will be whether Sydneysiders embrace this bold experiment in museum reinvention, with an emphasis on arts and events rather than showcasing the Powerhouse collection. But true to the seemingly cursed history of the project, it has opened in the midst of a cost of living crisis, when all cultural institutions are reporting that discretionary spending on entertainment is down. Its business model depends on a lively and varied program to draw in the punters, but its straightened budget may not be up to delivering on this promise.

Yesterday, the first visitors were wildly enthusiastic. Let's hope that means its fortunes are turning, and it becomes a vibrant addition to Sydney's cultural landscape.