

The most intriguing aspects of Lionel Glendenning's inspired Powerhouse building are its contextual references, some obvious and some immediate, some subtle and even obscure, and many historical 'vibrations'.

The most obvious contextualisation relates to the Powerhouse's site in Ultimo, east of Harris Street and flanking Darling Harbour. The original tram depot, which has been transformed into the present museum complex, fitted naturally into the robust architecture of Ultimo/Pymont, all of it commercial/industrial. In line with the Powerhouse, running north-south, the great wool stores still exist, their formidable facades now hiding nothing more than multi-storey car parks, their sad hulks a reminder that primary production has given way to the leisure industry.

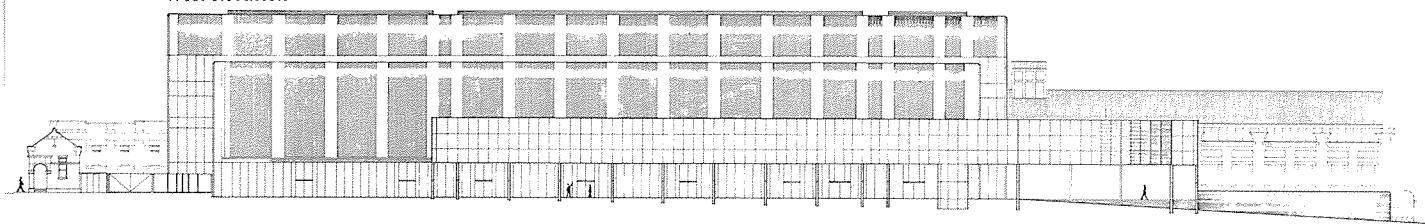
The Turbine House, Boiler Hall and Switch House look little different now to passengers on the new Monorail as it swishes southwards past the whole complex. They still look grim and sturdy, if not dark and satanic! But beyond them Glendenning's masterpiece soars, upwards and along. This is the Wran Building, an architectural triumph outstanding even in Sydney, a city of dramatic monuments.

Although it is conspicuously new, the Wran Building, or West Building, takes its place in Ultimo's industrial environment. It not only looks industrial in style, it also sits on and preserves old infrastructures. The stunningly lofty 'Galleria', for instance, resembling nothing so much as an enormous Gothic nave, lies exactly along one of the old Ultimo service alleys. How fitting that the Galleria is the dramatic stage setting, now, for 'Loco Number 1', the first steam locomotive

to see service in NSW back in the 1860's. With its curved line of carriages, the loco looks more than at home in Glendenning's brilliant structure; it looks vital.

As the industrial and topographic contexts for the Powerhouse are obvious and vivid, it's recent historical contextualisation is more codified. Sure enough, the glass and curves of the Wran Building reflect Paxton's Crystal Palace of 1851 but they refer more truly to Sydney's Garden Palace of 1879. The wonderful but tragic edifice dominated Sydney's skyline for three short years until it burned to nothing in just a few hours in 1882. Glendenning found the most astonishingly intricate ways to reminisce the Garden Palace. Just inside the Wran Building, for example, in the entrance lobby, there are two smallish canopies, each standing on four legs. These are set at an angle to the north/south line of the building (or indeed

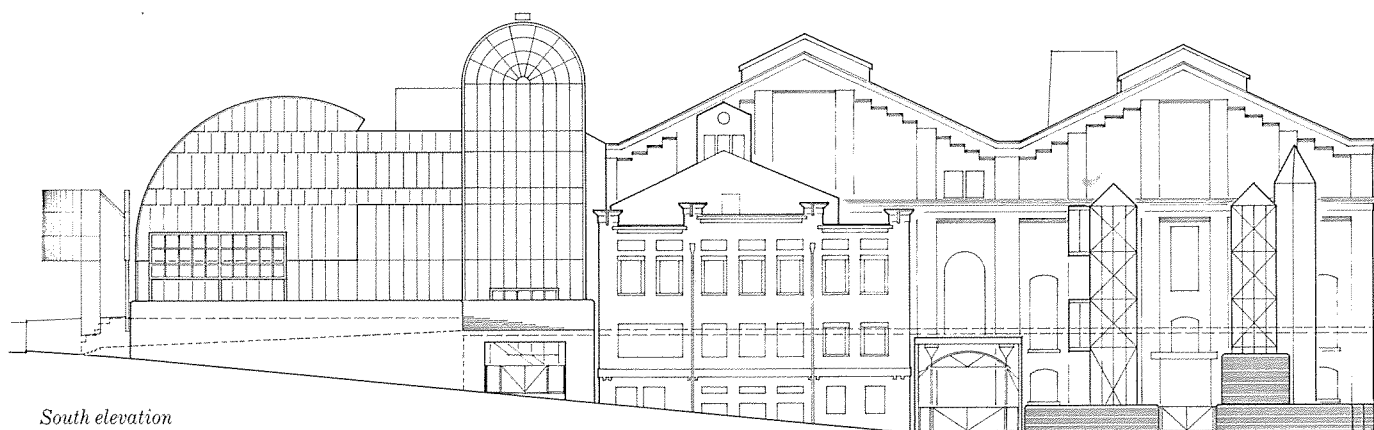
West elevation



North elevation



South elevation



the whole Museum). This angle is exactly that on which the Garden Palace stood over in the Botanic Gardens in relation to the north/south axis of Macquarie Street. Glendenning does it again in the entrance porch of the Powerhouse. This porch is a box-like container, a veritable *Tardis*, whose offset angle is a time machine for the mind, taking one back in a flash to 1880. The roof of the entrance lobby canopies is a depressed pyramid. In each of these three examples we might be reminded of roof structures of the Garden Palace itself or, more topographically, of the towers still existing within sight of the Central Station itself.

Moving further back into history, Glendenning provides a wealth of associations and references. That his Galleria is a cathedral is inspiring obvious. It is a Romanesque basilica with its perfect barrel-vault and semi-circular

ribs and simultaneously a statement in high Gothic with its clerestory lighting and its membrane-like use of glass. The rest of the west sky-murals at north and south ends of the building are a glorious conceit, joyfully reminiscing the counter-reformation theatrics of 16th and 17th century Rome and these paintings of blue sky and floating cloud add to the dizzy sensation which all visitors feel on Level 6, where administrative staff blink as they gaze down through glass walls to the ant-like figures of the crowds of visitors which this museum attracts.

Painting is again used on the ceiling of the boardroom, where the barrel-vault ceiling has been turned into a playful parody of Tiepolo. There is even a naked putto or Cupid with an arrow aimed downwards at the President of the Trustees.

Parody apart, the design of the boardroom is ruthlessly logical. It is a simple shed made to contain confidential Trust discussions, isolated from the Rail Terminal-like commotion which characterises the rest of this whole west building. Like an eyrie, the boardroom looks out across the skyline, providing the appropriate atmosphere for sage and lofty thoughts!

The boardroom is a discreet structure which fits into its container building in a way resembling an assembled kit. Glendenning transmits the same sense everywhere through the whole complex. Everything is a kit of parts which have been assembled lucidly and all of which retain an independent integrity. The whole may be more than the sum of the parts but each part is respected and left intact. Even the humble roof monitors,

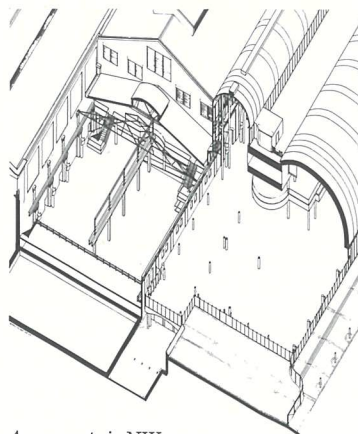
The Powerhouse Museum

1. The Powerhouse Museum in its Ultimo industrial setting on the west bank of Darling Harbour

2. South front of the Wran building, abutting the original Switch House of the tram depot. The Switch House now contains several exhibition galleries as well as restaurant and executive offices.

3. Colonnade on the west wall of the Wran building. This is part of the 'entrance kit'.

Right: The Board Room with its painted 'Tiepolo' style ceiling. The entrance porch is a separate unit resembling a 'Tardis'-like structure with a pyramidal roof.



Axonometric NW corner



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normally ignored in buildings, are here awarded a sense of significance.

The approach to the Powerhouse is a *welcome kit*. Glendenning has strung out an angular colonnade and culminated it with a bull-nosed portico, somehow art deco and ancient Roman simultaneously. This whole kit looks both monumental and portable at the same time. It dresses the building in a theatrical manner, which took my mind back to Vicenza and Palladio's Olympic Theatre. I also thought of Inigo Jones' theatrical games at the court of King Charles 1.

Lionel Glendenning was thinking of his favourite architect, a tormented, twisted genius of baroque architecture whose works were also assembled and constructed in a way that allows the visitor to unpack, conceptually, a building.

Let me identify him with this description of architectural features:

'So subtle that one could go on examining and dissecting them, constantly discovering new beauties, new refinements, new ingenuities and always, in the end, coming to the conclusion that what seemed at first sight to be freaks of fantasy were, in fact, variations passed on an almost ruthlessly logical method'.

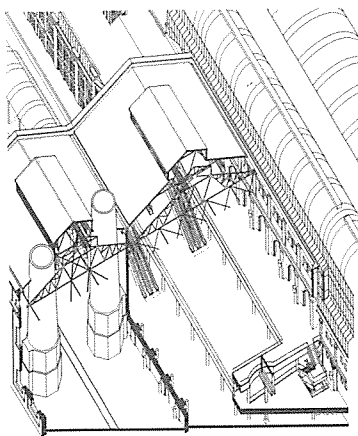
Sounds just like an account of Glendenning's style at the Powerhouse. In fact, it is Anthony Blunt writing on Francesco Borromini.

Terence Measham

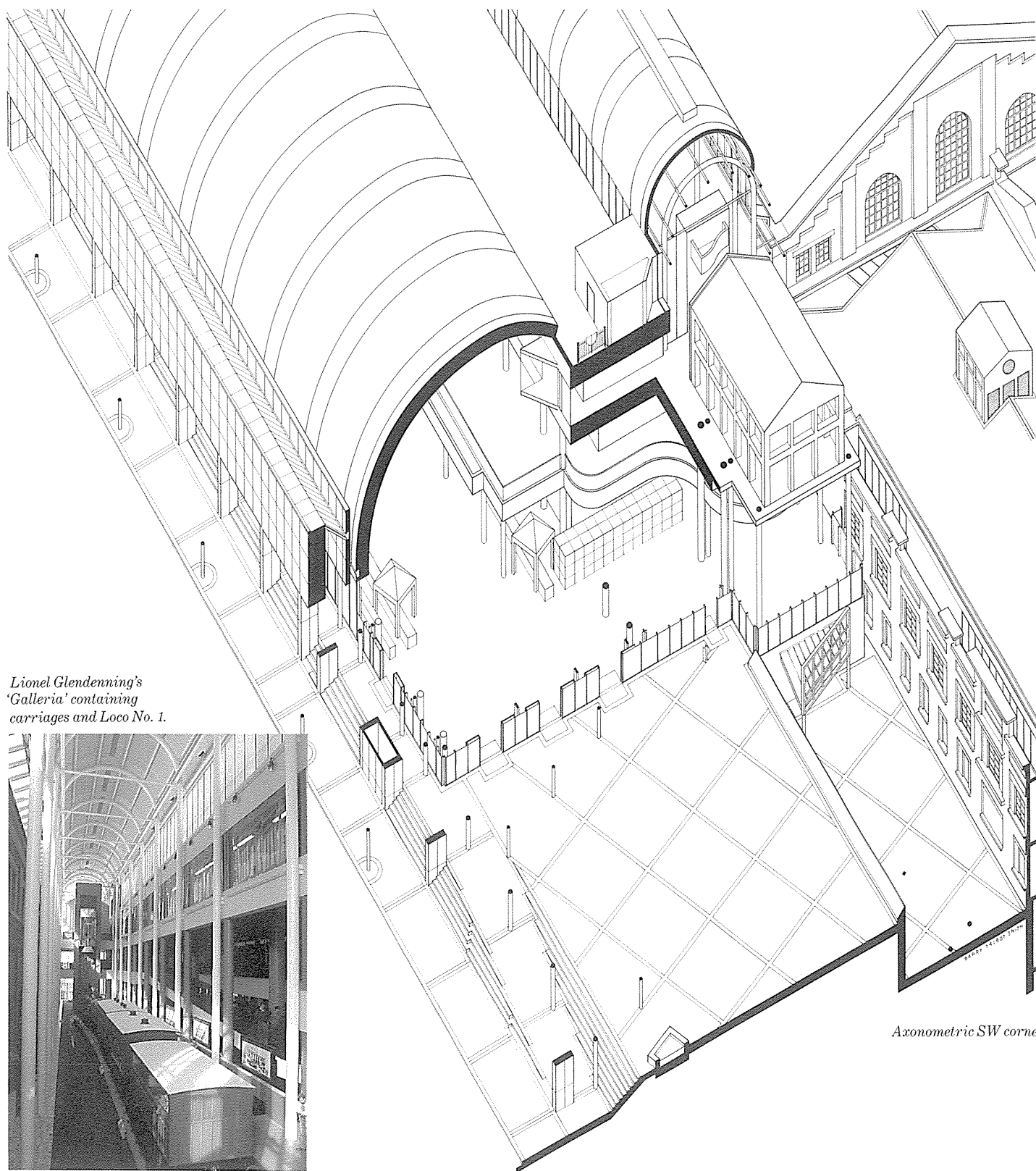
After ten years at London's Tate Gallery and eight years at the Australian National Gallery in Canberra, Terence Measham joined the Powerhouse as Assistant Director in Charge of Collections. At the time of writing he is Director.



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Axonometric NE corner



Axonometric SW corner

*Lionel Glendenning's
'Galleria' containing
carriages and Loco No. 1.*

