

# **SUBMISSION ON DEVELOPMENT APPLICATION FOR “SYDNEY MODERN”**

December 2017

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## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Art Gallery of NSW has a convincing case for providing better facilities for the presentation of art in our dynamic and wealthy city. It has not however persuasively argued why these should be in the Domain on a site which would never be chosen today for such a use.

For decades, large sections of the Domain have been alienated through insensitive Government decision making, such as building the Cahill Expressway and the Domain Car park.

The JPW master plan framework proposed an integrated building with a single entrance for both the existing building and Sydney Modern.

As the Sydney Modern design has evolved, much to its benefit, it has become an autonomous “stand-alone” building. There is no functional disadvantage to Sydney Modern being built in another location.

The “Undercut” at Headland Park, Barangaroo is an ideal alternate location, adjacent to a new Metro Station, the city and the Walsh Bay Precinct.

The Competition Jury inexplicably eliminated some of the worlds finest designers of art galleries such as Renzo Piano and Herzog de Meuron from the shortlist. The results of the competition were seen as desultory by many in the architectural community and SANAA’s winning design as the “best of a bad lot”.

In a recent article in the Sydney Morning Herald leading architectural critic Elizabeth Family described the design as follows:

“... this building does not blow our collective minds, we should withhold the site and send Sydney Modern to the vast and unused Barangaroo Cutaway instead. ... clarity is what this proposal lacks. Intimidated, perhaps by the red-carpet hoo-ha, the ground sandstone neighbour and the staunchly beloved site, the building drops into profoundly casual demeanour, strewing its eight pavilions like so many tatami mats down the hill to Woolloomooloo Bay”

Given the significance of the project and the site it is suggested that the design is subjected to a peer review by, say, three gold medal winners nominated by the Institute of Architects.

A critique is made of some of the key features of the design.

In all humility, some suggestions are made as how if building on the site is to proceed, the impact of the building upon the Domain can be mitigated.

These include marginal locational shifts to preserve important trees, the introduction of green roofs and walls, increasing shade over roof terraces and other improvements.

## II. PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT WITH THE ART GALLERY OF NSW

After finishing studies at Sydney University in 1963, I commenced work in the Government Architects office of the NSW Public Works Department. At this time, I was involved in a number of minor works and proposals to expand the building.

In 1968 I was asked to design a substantial extension to the building which became known as the Captain Cook Wing, opening to the public in 1972. This wing completed the anticipated plan form of the Vernon building in a contemporary style, incorporating yellow block sandstone cladding to complement the existing building.

In 1985 I designed what became known as the Bicentennial Wing, opening to the public in 1988. At this time encroachment upon the Domain became an issue and three options for expanding the building were investigated:

- Expansion to the south in a free-standing building accessed through the historic 19<sup>th</sup> century Vernon Galleries.
- Expansion to the north by a “mega structure” spanning over the Cahill Expressway.
- Expansion to the east, stepping down the hillside.

In the event, the last option was adopted after personal involvement with then Premier Neville Wran as the concept contained a roof top sculpture garden to compensate for the loss of parkland in the Domain.

Both schemes were awarded the Sulman Prize by the Institute of Architects.

In 2003 Johnson Pilton Walker completed the Asian Galleries, sitting on top of the Bicentennial Wing and eliminating the roof-top Sculpture Gardens. While adding much-needed space and amenities, the work by JPW destroyed the architectural unity of what had existed before, introducing a new level of complexity with white glass cladding and aluminium window framing of a lighter colour.



In 2011 the John Kaldor Gallery was completed to my design, in an area previously used for storage in the basement of the Captain Cook and Bicentennial Wings. This work received the National Emil Sodersten Award for the best interior design from the Institute of Architects.

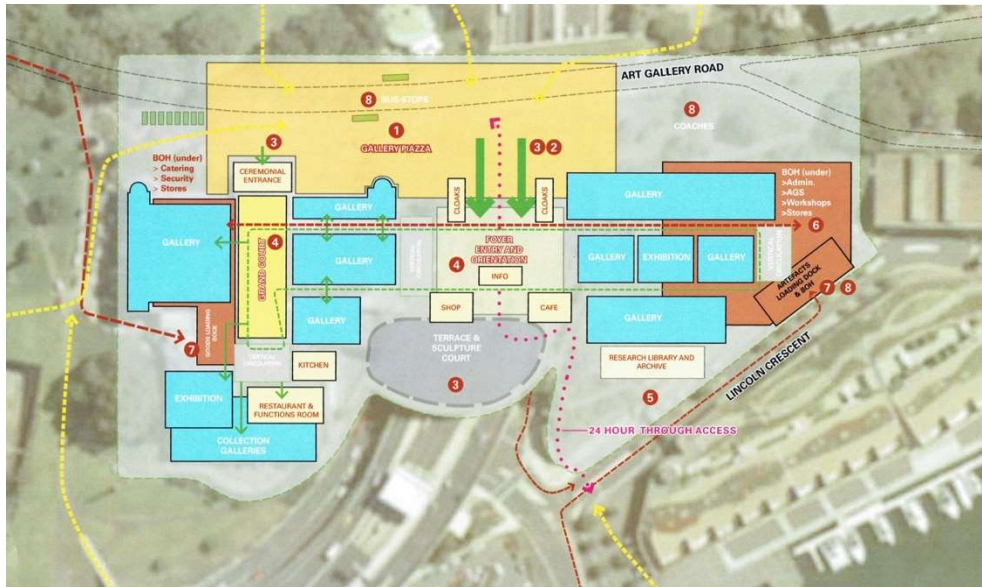
In 2005, as part of the Cross-City Tunnel project, a “land-bridge” was constructed over the devastating intervention of the construction of the Cahill Expressway in the 1960s. The newly re-instated parkland improved the pedestrian pathway from the city to Woolloomooloo and beyond.

About the same time the Woolloomooloo Finger Wharf development was completed, for which I produced the Development Applications, including a roof-top park over the land-based component. Sadly, after a change of ownership, the Central Sydney Planning Committee approved amendments to the plan significantly reducing the quality and extent of the roof-top garden



In 2012 JPW completed the “Sydney Modern Masterplan Framework” for expanding the Gallery. This scheme proposed massive additions to the building over the “land-bridge” and Domain to the north, with a new central entrance, designating the Vernon portico as a “ceremonial entry”. Whatever the consequences may have been of this radical scheme, it had the advantage of making Sydney Modern and the existing buildings into one integrated functional entity, with joint entry, orientation, retailing, loading dock and the like, promising operational advantages.





*The Johnson Pilton Walker masterplan set the Sydney Modern project on the wrong course. Making the Vernon Portico a “ceremonial entrance” was an affront to this important building. There was never enough programme to justify the enormous entrance space. Had this been built it would have been devastating for the Domain. The current SANAA scheme is a huge improvement upon this.*



*This is a highly deceptive rendering showing glowing pavilions in a transparent matrix. This belies the reality of the nature of art galleries.*



Notwithstanding the above, I felt that this scheme would have a devastating impact upon the Domain and the existing building. In response to the masterplan I produced an unsolicited alternate diagram which I presented to the then Deputy Director, Ann Flanagan.



This scheme, in essence, left the “land-bridge” free of construction, with the new facilities to be built over the void left by the World War II “emergency” oil tanks.

I urged Ann Flanagan to call the JPW masterplan a “design option” and not a specific instruction for the purpose of the competition however this clearly did not eventuate.

Naturally it was disappointing not to be included among the forty firms invited to submit for the design competition, notwithstanding years of involvement with the AGNSW and the recent completion of a highly acclaimed addition to the National Gallery of Art in Canberra.

Equally disappointing was not to be invited to be a jury member as I felt I had much to contribute to the project, although I did attend a number of extravagantly catered cocktail parties for the “celebrity” jury.

Had the Gallery proceeded with the masterplan there would have been a considerable impact upon my Sulman Prize-winning designs, however there was no attempt to consult with me as required under “Moral Rights” legislation.

After the publication of an article written by me in the Sydney Morning Herald, critical of the results of the Sydney Modern Competition, I was contacted by the Art Gallery staff for three information sessions.

After two of these I have sent two extensive written responses (see appendix) and I believe the current scheme departs from the competition winning scheme in perhaps in some small way in response to my critique. However, I feel the overall architectural quality and impact upon the Domain do not justify the approval of this Development Application.

### III. ENCROACHMENTS ON THE DOMAIN

There can be no question that the parklands of the Domain and Royal Botanical Gardens are an essential component of what makes Sydney an appealing city. Contrasting with the increasingly dense built form of the Central Business District, the natural environment is absolutely invaluable as Sydney expands relentlessly.

Sadly, the Domain has been the victim of numerous pragmatic interventions by Government causing extensive damage to its quality. These include the following:

- The construction of “emergency” oil tanks during World War II
- The construction of the Cahill Expressway and destruction of “Figtree Avenue”
- The construction of the Domain Car park
- The construction of a major electricity substation by the Sydney County Council

In addition, access to parkland is affected within increasing frequency by commercial events such as open-air music festivals, open-air cinemas, opera on the harbour. Furthermore, expansion of tourist activities with buses causing Art Gallery Road to become heavily trafficked.

Given the above it is difficult to see how doubling the size of AGNSW through the construction of Sydney Modern can benefit the Domain.

Sydney Modern can only be justified upon the proposed site if it makes the Domain a better place and the architecture is of outstanding quality. Sadly, this is not the case with the current proposals.



#### **IV. PEER REVIEW**

Given the enormous significance of the project and the sensitivity of further encroachments upon the Domain, it is recommended that the design of the building be subject of a Peer Review by three distinguished members of the Institute of Architects, preferably recipients of the Gold Medal and with expertise in the design of art galleries.

## **V. LOCATIONAL FACTORS FOR A MAJOR ART GALLERY**

Building the AGNSW at the eastern edge of the Domain in the 1880s was typical of 19<sup>th</sup> century attitudes when a visit to such an institution was part of a gracious walk through parkland by a middle class family on a Sunday afternoon (the Auckland Museum is similarly situated).

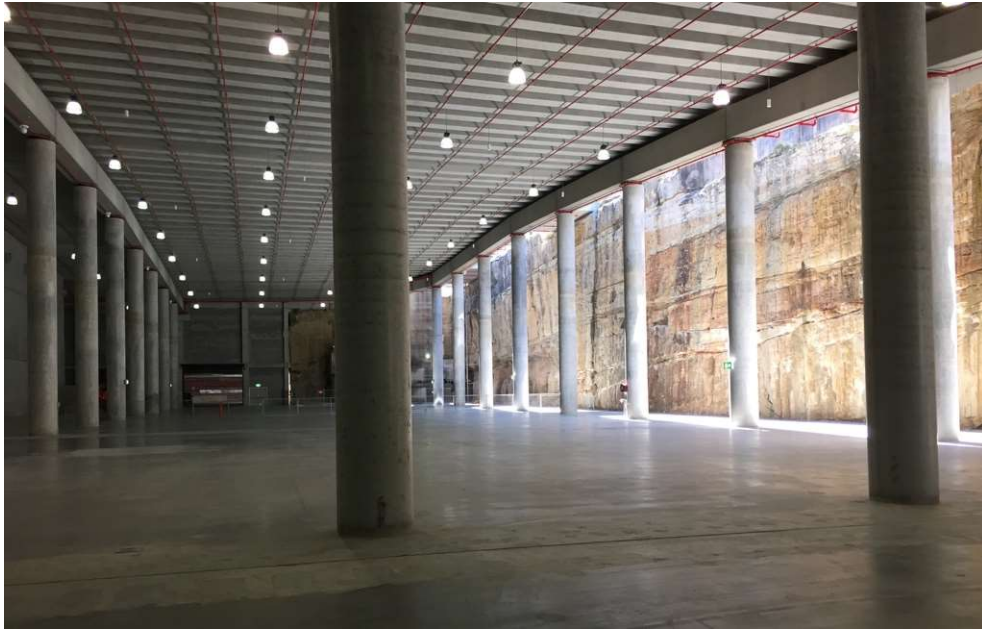
Today Art Galleries tend to be built on sites that are central, easily accessible by public transport and set up a sense of engagement with the public. Were the construction of the AGNSW to be contemplated today, it would be most unlikely for it to be located on the current site, which is remote from public transport, unpleasant to access at night through deserted parkland and remote from urban life and activities.

The DA documents allude to the consideration by the AGNSW of alternate scenarios for expansion but offer no details of the points of consideration. It is suggested that these were evaluated by a “weighted matrix”. Given the momentous nature of the decision to proceed with Sydney Modern on the proposed site, it is incumbent upon its proponents to publish this information to justify their decision.

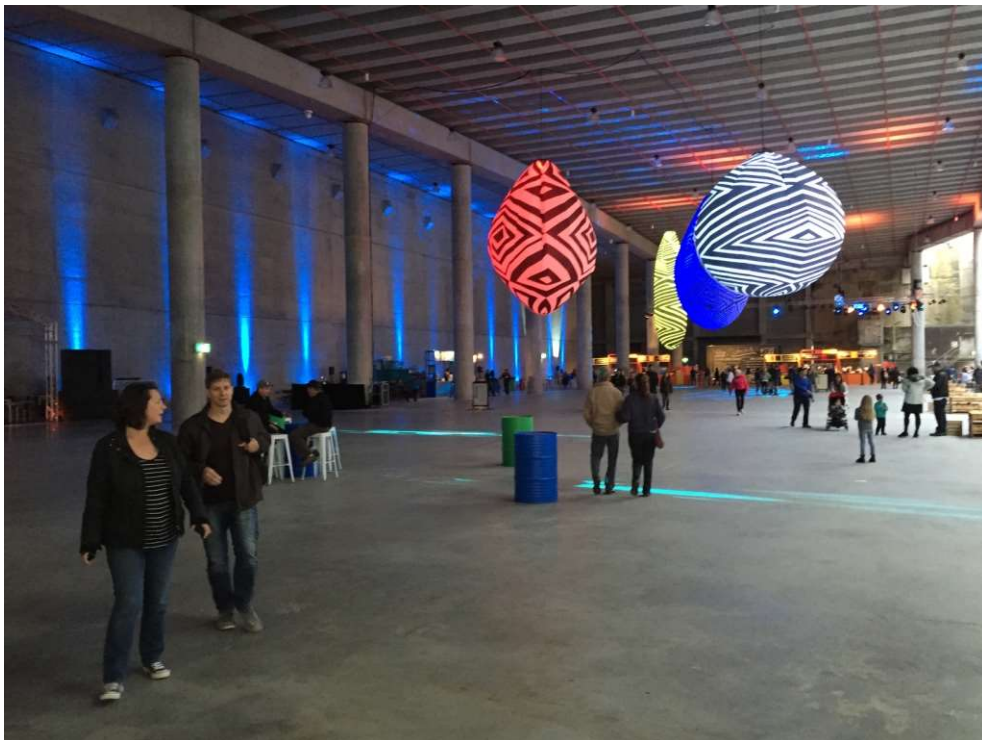
Since the publication of the masterplan in 2012 a number of factors have changed. The completion of Headland Park has left an enormous space, “The Cutaway”, of sufficient volume to accommodate much, if not all, of the Sydney Modern Programme.

Adjacent to a Metro Station, in early stages of construction, astride Sydney’s 12-kilometre-long waterfront, between the Walsh Bay Arts Precinct and the dynamic energy of the Barangaroo commercial precinct, this site is an ideal location for Sydney Modern.

Fitting out this space would be a fraction of the approved cost for Sydney Modern, the balance of which could be invested in a foundation to subsidise the operating cost of such a space.



*The “Undercut” at Headland Park in Barangaroo is a magnificent but underutilized space. Situated adjacent to a Metro station, now under construction, between the lively Barangaroo commercial precinct and Walsh Bay Arts quarter and at centre point of Sydney’s waterfront promenade, it is ideally located for much of the programme of Sydney Modern.*



*Fit-out would be a fraction of the cost of Sydney Modern and could be achieved in a far shorter time. At the same time significant improvements could be carried out at AGNSW like the construction of a new temporary exhibitions gallery to the east of the existing building, improvements to the forecourt and development of the “land-bridge” as a sculpture garden.*

The existing building in the Domain could be much enhanced by the improvement of the “land-bridge” by the development of a sculpture garden (as proposed in the current plans), the construction of a more commodious temporary exhibitions gallery to the east of the existing building, as well as refurbishing it.

As the latest Sydney Modern plan is for two autonomous, free-standing buildings, there is no longer a functional impediment for the new building to be situated on a different site. As indicated, the Barangaroo site has many advantages over the proposed site in the Domain and involves no less of open space.

There are numerous examples of major cultural institutions around the world that are located in two (or more) sites. An outstanding example is that of the Tate Gallery, with “Tate Modern” and Tate Britain” at Millbank, situated at opposite ends of London. When such a proposition was discussed with AGNSW staff it was suggested that since the construction of “Tate Modern”, “Tate Britain” had died. This is not the impression I had from visiting both galleries earlier this year.

There is every reason to expect that a Sydney Modern in Barangaroo would attract more visitors than it would located in the Domain. The current AGNSW is already larger than a conventional visitor can appreciate in one day, therefore there is no advantage in co-location.



## **VI. REVIEW OF PROPOSED DESIGN**

### **SYDNEY MODERN ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS**

It seems surprising that in more than three years since the commencement of the design competition, the main architectural drawings seem to be little more than single line diagrams.

Notwithstanding the importance of the external image, art galleries are largely about internal exhibition and circulation spaces. Given the unquestioned significance of the Sydney Modern project, it is most unusual that there are no internal views of the proposal (other than four small snapshots of the Louvre Lens and on the other Sanaa project on pages 22 and 23 of the Architectural Design Report).

While the Design Report contains generic descriptions of the principal components of the proposed building in the absence of any internal perspectives or sketch details, it requires an enormous leap of faith to be convinced about the quality of the building.

There is no evidence of the design philosophy behind the tilting ground, floor and roof plans and whether the contradictory nature of the various “scatter patterns” juxtapositions will be of enduring value.

These aesthetic devices, together with the large panes of clear glass and grids of thin columns are to be seen in other Sanaa projects however they are usually contrasted with a strong horizontal ground plan, as in their prize winning entry for an art gallery in Budapest.

The steep topography of the Sydney site together with the geometric complexity of the expressway, land-bridge, Art Gallery Road and oil tanks are a poor foil to the restless arrangement of the pavilions.

The computer-generated perspectives are of poor quality and do not give a realistic impression of the proposed building.



*SANAA's competition winning entry for an Art Gallery in Budapest is sculpturally complex but the composition is resolved through its contrast with the essentially horizontal ground plane of the lawn.*

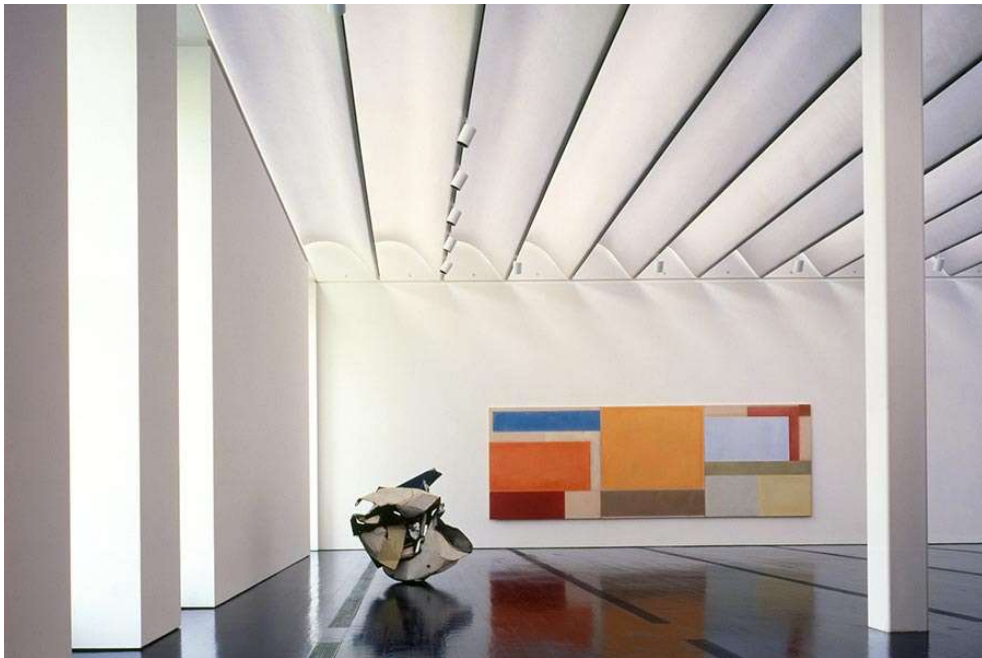


## ART GALLERY ROOFS

The development of the art gallery typology over the last two hundred years is largely about the evolution of top-lit daylighting systems. Beginning with Soanes Dulwich Gallery, the Vernon wing of AGNSW is part of this tradition. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Louis Kahn's Kimbell Gallery in Fort Worth and Renzo Piano's Menil Collection building in Houston are outstanding lyrical examples of this approach

It is disappointing that there is no attempt to introduce daylighting through the roof or to incorporate green roofs, given that they are overlooked from high-rise city buildings as well as the upper levels of the AGNSW.

With high windows with clear glass on all sides the entrance pavilion will be subject to severe disability glare unless there is strong artificial lighting at its centre. A far better solution would be to introduce some rooflights.

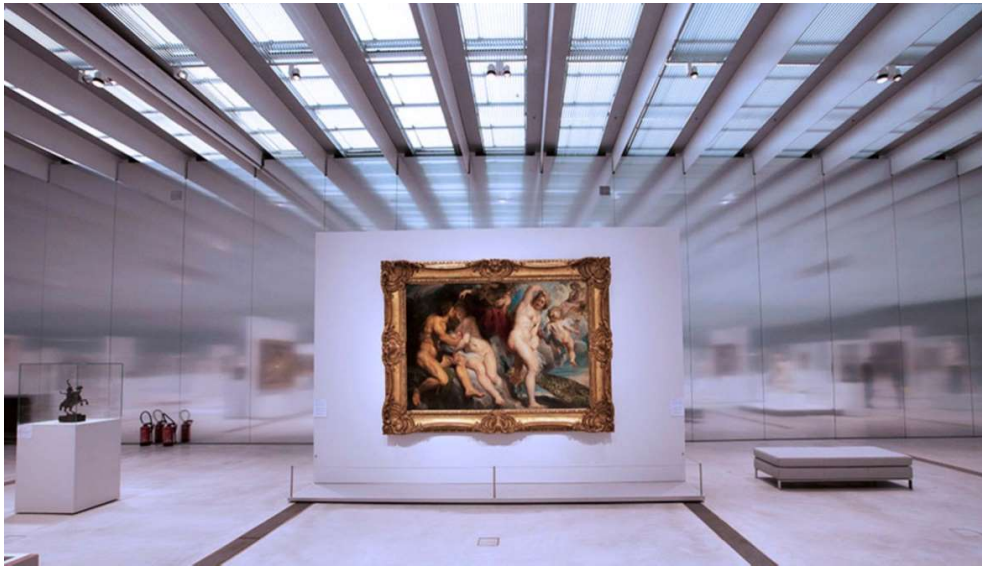


*Articulated ceilings and introduction of controlled daylight have been a feature of 20<sup>th</sup> century art gallery airing. The Menil Collection by Renzo Piano and the Kimbell Gallery by Louis Kahn are two outstanding examples.*





Sanaa's own minimalist Louvre-lens building makes extensive use of daylighting.



*Roof-lights in Louvre Lens by SANAA admit daylight. Similar treatment would enhance the roof of the Entrance Pavilion.*

It is therefore most disappointing that some thousands of square metres of flat unarticulated concrete roofs are proposed with no attempt at daylighting. The building's fifth elevation is a disappointment.

## ROOF TERRACES

Accessible roof terraces are an important component of the scheme to optimise the views to Sydney Harbour along Woolloomooloo Bay. A conventional design solution would be a stepped building with richly landscaped roof terraces providing an attractive outdoor environment to celebrate the outlook and benign north-facing environment.

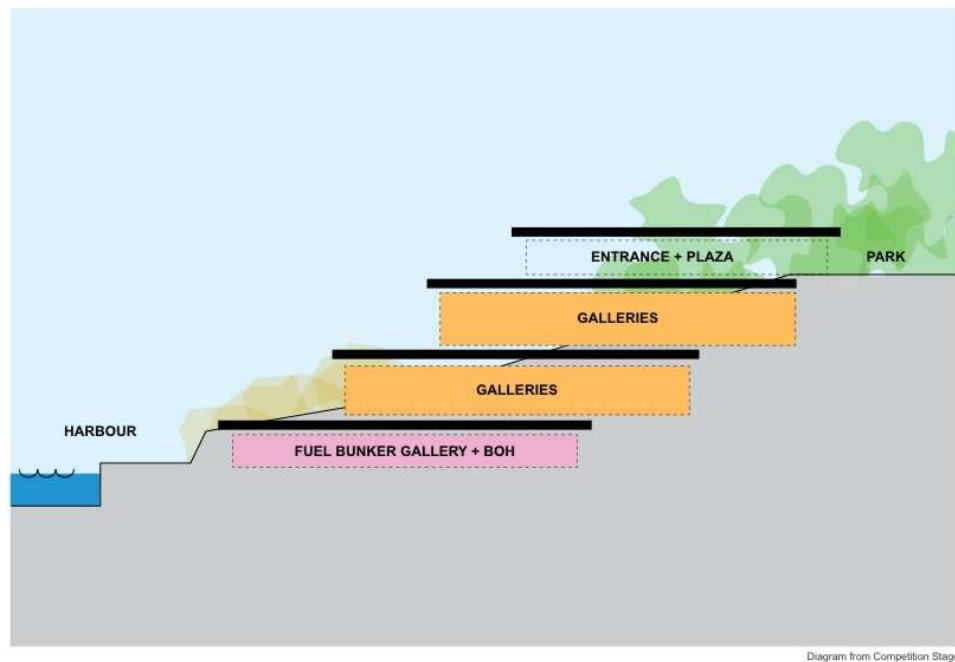
A celebrated example of this approach is Roche Dinkerloo's Oakland Museum opened in 1969. The splendid roof garden was landscaped by Dan Kiley. The building is an exemplar of how to build on parkland to compensate for loss of open space.



*Roche Dinkerloo's Oakland Museum from the 1970s is a timeless example of how an accessible, well landscaped rooftop can compensate for the loss of parkland.*



The diagram on page 11 of the Design Report (annotated as “Diagram from Competition Stage)



shows outdoor terraces are an extension of interior floor plates of about 25%. Such terraces would be integral to the design concept and can be easily shaded and landscaped.

This seductive diagram belies the reality of the design. Instead of roof terraces being an extension of gallery floor plates they are in fact the tops of adjacent pavilions, creating challenges for shading, landscaping and access.

The reality of the proposal is quite different.

Access is gained to what is, in effect, an adjacent pavilion’s rooftop. At the entrance level a 2,500sqm roof deck is accessed through the lift lobby. Paved in what is described as “pigmented concrete” the accessible area is contained by crescents of “low vegetation” and balustrades. Beyond the landscaped crescents are large areas of concrete roof decks, In the westerly direction the roof deck slopes (surprisingly) upwards to an edge gutter.

The cross sections show no soil depth for the planting, for which there is no detail in the landscape architects drawings.

Page 20 of the Design Report shows an image (“View Terrace looking towards Woolloomooloo”) in which groups of patrons are sitting in full sunlight on the “pigmented concrete pavement”. This must be an uncomfortable experience. A stair from the café terrace level appears to be blocked by on the of the landscaped crescents.

Page 22 of the design report shows an image (“Garden Surrounded Café Terrace”) in which the shade structure of “glass sheets integrated with PV cells” appear to cast no shade.





*This image in the DA shows patrons sitting on the “pigmented concrete” pavement. This would be a truly painful experience on a Sydney summers day.*



*In the Sydney climate, shade over roof terraces is essential for their enjoyment. This image of the “clear photo-voltaic glass” shade structure gives little comfort. A trellis with vines would so much more attractive.*



## ELEVATIONS

The elevations appear to be a combination of large pre-cast concrete panels and equally large sheets of clear glass. The lumpen overhanging roofs to the windowless sections of the buildings, seen in earlier perspectives, have been removed to the benefit of the appearance of the building.

The Design Report (page 12) makes a point that “the material of the new building does not mimic the material of the existing building but is meant to compliment it”.

A far better approach, given the disparate complexity of the juxtaposition of the old and new would be to achieve a sense of harmony through the use of the same materials wherever possible.

The aesthetic unity of the existing building is already diminished by JPW’s white glass and light coloured aluminium framing in contrast with the Captain Cook Wing and Bicentennial Wing’s use of bronze-coloured framing, sandstone cladding and textured bush-hammered concrete to harmonise with the Vernon wing.

It is doubtful that the 40 metre by 8 metre walls of pre-cast concrete, articulated only by the joints between panels will convey the sense of an important cultural institution.

The clear glass floor to ceiling panels, with largely east and west orientation will need to be shaded with operable blinds and will not appear transparent as indicated on the computer generated images.

Side lighting in galleries is problematic at the best of times because of reflections. Clear glazing produces LUX levels well in excess of conservation requirements. The existing AGNSW building is glazed with heavily body-tinted glass. Even then, the current administration covers windows with blinds or reduces their extent with plasterboard panels.

The 35m x 2.5m space to the south of Gallery 1 will receive significant solar radiation in summer afternoons limiting its usefulness, already problematic because of its shape factor.

The 40m x 25m space adjacent to Gallery 2, which faces north, without an overhang, will receive strong solar radiation almost all day, all year round and will require blinds to maintain reasonable conditions.



*In image from the DA showing the south-west facing glazed ambulatory of Gallery 1. This will receive significant heat load from afternoon sun, especially in summer and will require blinds. The rendering is unconvincing.*



*Glazed wall at SANA's Louvre Lens showing the more likely appearance of such a screen. The blinds are clearly visible and are a design challenge, especially where the roof line is curved or sloping.*

Photographs of Sanaa's Louvre Lens building show the impact of blinds (which is quite unlike the CGI images of the proposal). It should be noted that Lens is at a latitude of 50.4N while Sydney, at a latitude of 33.8S is a far more demanding environment for solar radiation. The unshaded glazing is also an air-conditioning problems in terms of operating costs and sustainability.

## COMPUTER GENERATED IMAGES

The images submitted are unconvincing. A view on page 15 of the design report shows



the shade structure over the Entrance Plaza showing no shade. To the right, the glazed section of Gallery 1 appears unnaturally brightly lit. The openings to the Gallery space which would have a far lower LUX level would appear dark rather than white.

The principal view from the north east has shadows cast in opposing directions. The narrow space outside Gallery 2 has five patrons trapped in an unexplained yellow band.

## SCALE RELATIONSHIP TO EXISTING BUILDING

The design report (page 12) suggests that "the new building is a low profile to compliment the existing building". The lengthy 150 metre frontage to Art Gallery Road (West Elevation DA 3001) has no scale relationship to the Vernon façade, one of Sydney's finest public buildings. A far better relationship would be effected if the Entrance Plaza canopy were to be reduced in plan extent and increased in height to match the Vernon Portico, embodying the significance of Sydney Modern.

## VII. PLANNING

### ENTRY PLAZA

In contrast with the Vernon façade the Entry Plaza roof is on the street alignment making it highly intrusive, though under scaled. On its south east corner, a significant fig tree is unnecessarily removed, damaging the “parklike” appearance of the precinct.

The landscape architect’s drawings suggest the ramped paving will be in stone, making a curious progression to the concrete floor of the building’s interior and the pigmented concrete pavement beyond.

The design report suggests (page 14) “the roof softly reflects the surroundings and changes its expression with the weather”.

The space lacks any embellishments other than two bag stores exposed to the weather on its southern alignment and an extremely narrow triple-crescent seat adjacent to the entrance doors. Surprisingly a small 3.5m diameter pill box of a café, which would have given some sense of animation to this space is located without any shelter in the landscaped land-bridge beyond.

This space is open to adverse weather conditions and is generally permeable to the rain. It will not be welcoming in wet, wintry weather.

Differential weathering of the “porous aluminium” needs to be carefully considered to avoid the ugly staining to be seen at Paddington Reservoir.

### ENTRY PAVILION

This space contains an ovoid cloakroom accessed by a single swing door which is unlikely to prove a functional arrangement.

At its north-east corner a section behind the passenger elevations appears inaccessible while another section of pigmented-concrete roof deck, with separate entrance from a roof terrace, intrudes into this space.

While it is understood that these devices are generated by the over-lapping geometry of the plan, they will have a dysfunctional impact upon the interior.

### GALLERY 1

Walls labelled “air duct wall” are too narrow to have internal and external cladding and riser ducts. The openings to the clear glazing of the south façade and window to the north will need to be screened to maintain acceptable LUX levels.



## GALLERY 2

The spatial flow from the circulation space to the gallery through a pair of small rectangular lobbies seems awkward.

The ladies' toilet with 14 cubicles off a 1.2m wide passage is unlikely to prove a gracious experience.

## CAFÉ

The café is served from an enclosed ovoid kitchen, accessed by a pair of swing doors. Given the increasing use of open kitchens and bar fronts this seems an unlikely arrangement.

## SHOP

The location of the shop gives it limited exposure. This puts the Entry Pavilion at risk of becoming a de-facto retail area.

On its eastern frontage the shop appears to lead to a monumental 14-metre-wide stairway through a pair of doors. Is this an alternate entrance to the Gallery from the through-site link? If it is a fire escape the public nature of the monumental stair will cause confusion.

## MULTI-PURPOSE SPACE

Glazed on three sides with a steeply sloping roof which will make black-out curtains difficult to install. The supporting service elements appear inadequate with a bio-box remote from the space.

## VERNON CURTILAGE

Notwithstanding recent improvements, the approach to the Vernon façade is unsatisfactory with its multiple lanes of traffic, angle parking, median strip and zebra crossing. However, the proposals illustrated on “Vernon Curtilage” LD DA 1001 are particularly disturbing.

The Vernon façade is the finest of any of Sydney’s historic public buildings. For many years its principal approach from the city has been across the lawns of the Domain, on axis with the portico. It seems positively perverse to intercept this desire line to a new pedestrian crossing some 50 metres to the south or seventy metres to the north. A 28-metre-long square cross-section masonry “seat” 2-metre-wide planting bed blocks access to the portico. The under-scaled banality of this device will be a sorry site in front of Vernon’s splendid portico.



*The footpath across the Domain on axis with the Vernon portico has been the principal access way for the majority of patrons for decades. It seems perverse to make pedestrians walk a 150m dogleg and placing a seat in front of the portico is totally insensitive to the architectural significance of the building.*



The “heritage” dwarf walls separating the paved area from the lawn adjacent to the façade are incorrectly shown. They extend towards the portico in front of the equestrian statuary. The southern section is shown faceted, not curved. It is proposed to demolish lengthy sections of these important elements to widen the footpath. If such widening is really necessary, the walls could be dismantled and re-erected in a marginally different location.

Two inexplicable dwarf walls, wider than the proposed seat along Art Gallery Road are shown asymmetrically to the portico and equestrian statuary.

No attempt is made to address the “ant track” that has been worn through the southern lawn section, on the way to the Domain car park.





*The plan for the forecourt fails to address this ugly “ant track” to the Domain Car park. Surely a solution can be found by the landscape architects.*



*Demolishing sections of the Vernon dwarf wall is an act of vandalism. If absolutely necessary, the wall can be relocated in a slightly different location.*



The removal of half the existing creates a space, including the lawn areas, some 120 x 30 metres in area with splendid potential. It will however be hot and glary in summer. One way of ameliorating this would be to introduce water features, as is the case with the Fifth Avenue forecourt of the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

Sitting on the steps of the Vernon portico is a long established tradition, enhancing this space in a manner sensitive to the heritage considerations is a worthwhile objective.



*Water feature at the Metropolitan Museum in New York creates an attractive meeting place contrasting with the busy traffic in 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue.*

*Increasing the size of the forecourt in front of the existing building is an excellent idea. However, it will be left hot and glary in the Sydney summer. Trees can provide shade but will block views of the splendid façade.*

*A water feature can reduce the amount of glary paving and engender the perception of a cooling effect.*

## VIII. DESIGN SECTIONS TO AMELIORATE IMPACT UPON DOMAIN

### EVOLUTION OF DESIGN



*The SANAA scheme some months ago. Accessible roof terraces are absolutely minimal and dominated by glary rooftops. The thick overhanging roof-planes appear coarse and the “overlaps” unresolved.*

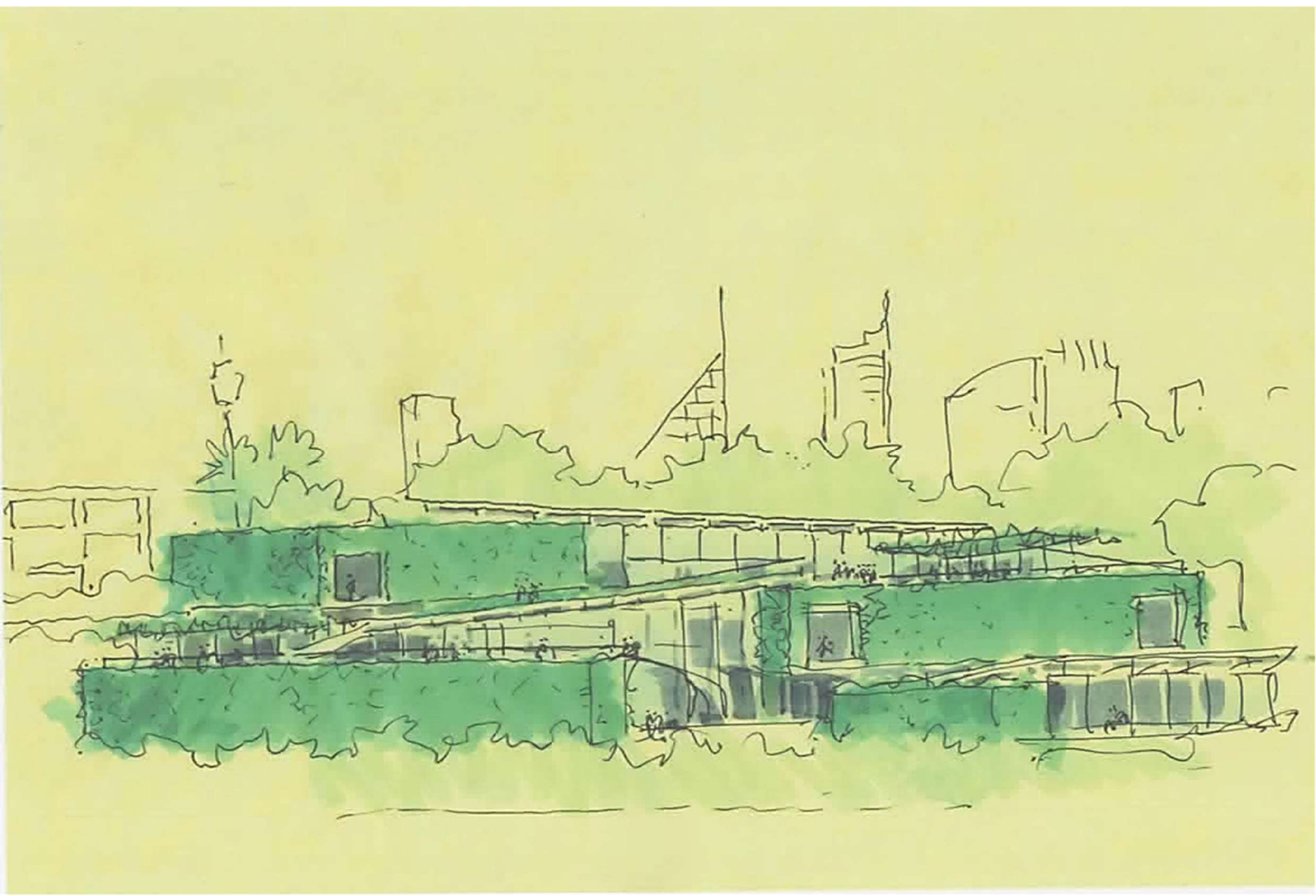


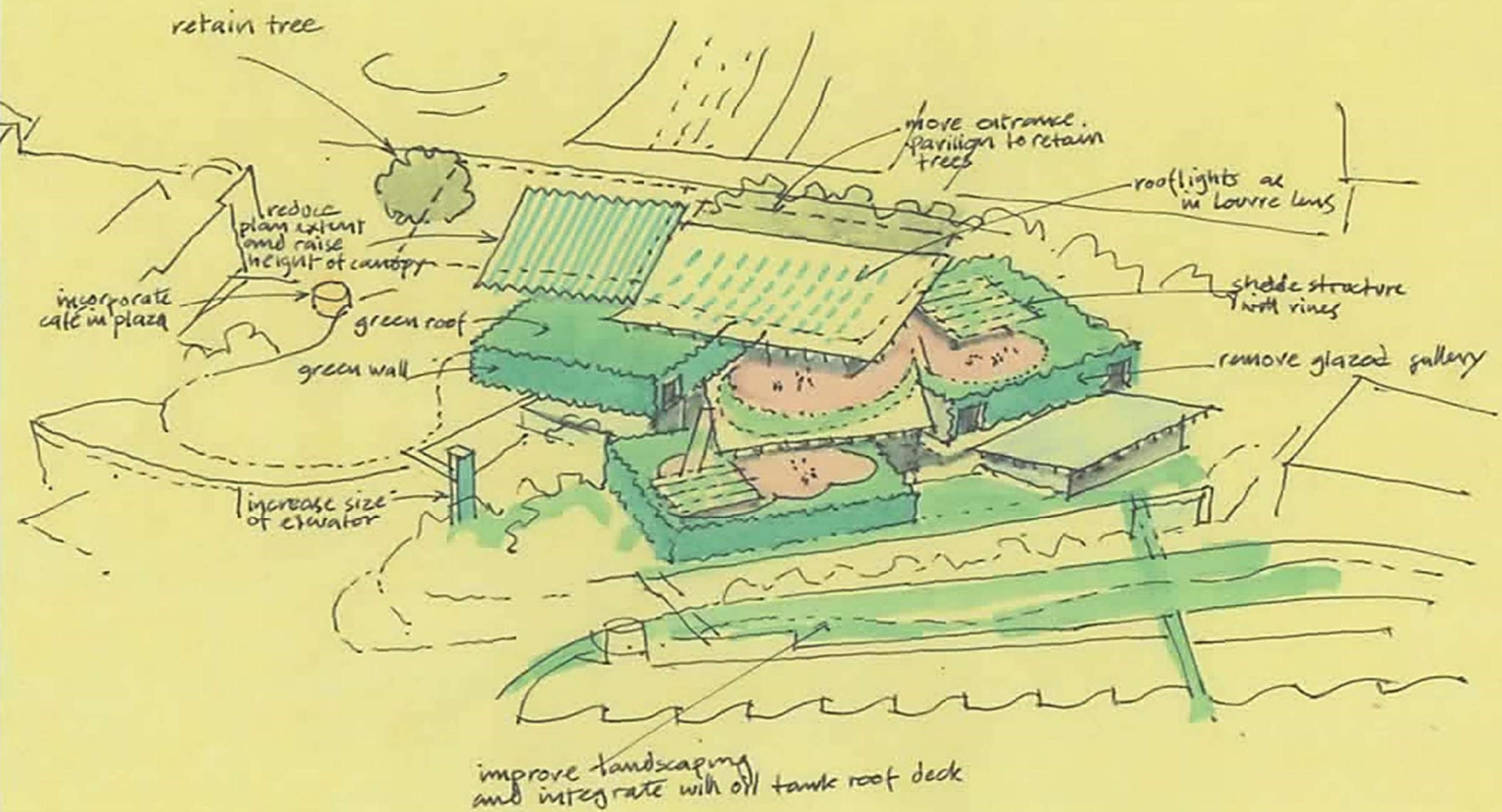
*The current scheme shows significant improvements by removal of the overhangs to the windowless sectors of the building.*





“Greening” the solid walls of the building would significantly reduce its impact upon the Domain. Improving the shade structures with vine coloured trellises, increasing the shade, will make the roof terraces far more attractive.





Further potential improvements to the scheme are summarized on this diagram:

- The main idea is to “green” the solid walls and some of the roofs, creating an interplay between gracefully curved glazed pavilions and masses of greenery which would blend with the parkland, reducing visual impact of the building.
- Retention of trees along Art Gallery Rd by reducing the size of the Plaza roof and shifting the entrance pavilion east.
- Introduction of roof-lights over the entrance pavilion will enhance this space.
- The glazed gallery to Gallery 2 is of little benefit and could be replaced with a green wall and a pair of large windows.
- The roof-terraces would be enhanced by trellises with greenery rather than sheets of glass with photo-voltaic cells.
- The café would be far more useful and comfortable integrated with the entrance plaza.
- The rooftop at the Woolloomooloo terraces carpark could have better landscaping and add to the appreciation of the building.





*Current stair from 'land bridge' to Woolloomooloo makes a large statement consistent with significance of link. As half will be demolished there should be some other improvement to compensate. Proposed elevator sales 1.2m square and should be increased.*

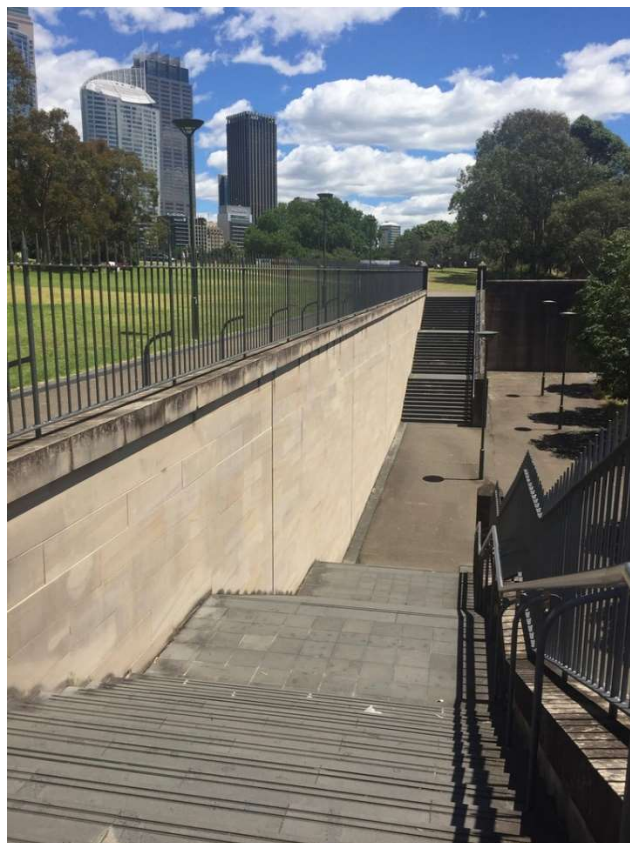






Fig tree should be retained as it enhances space between buildings and provides a buffer between contrasting architectural expression.



Tree frames Henry Moore sculpture.



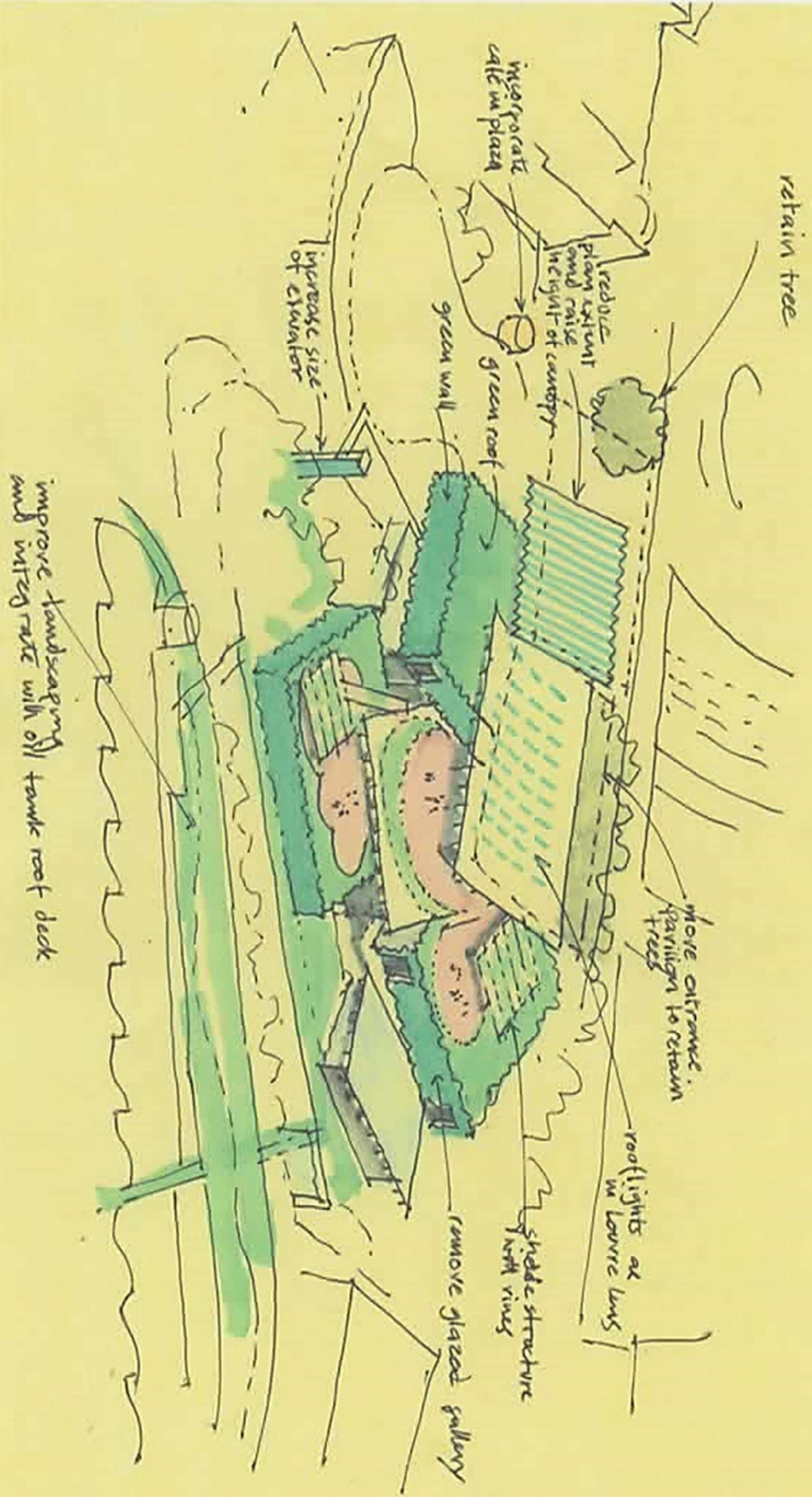


Trees at centre of land-bridge may prove advantageous for positioning sculptures and in case, should be retained until other trees have grown to maturity.

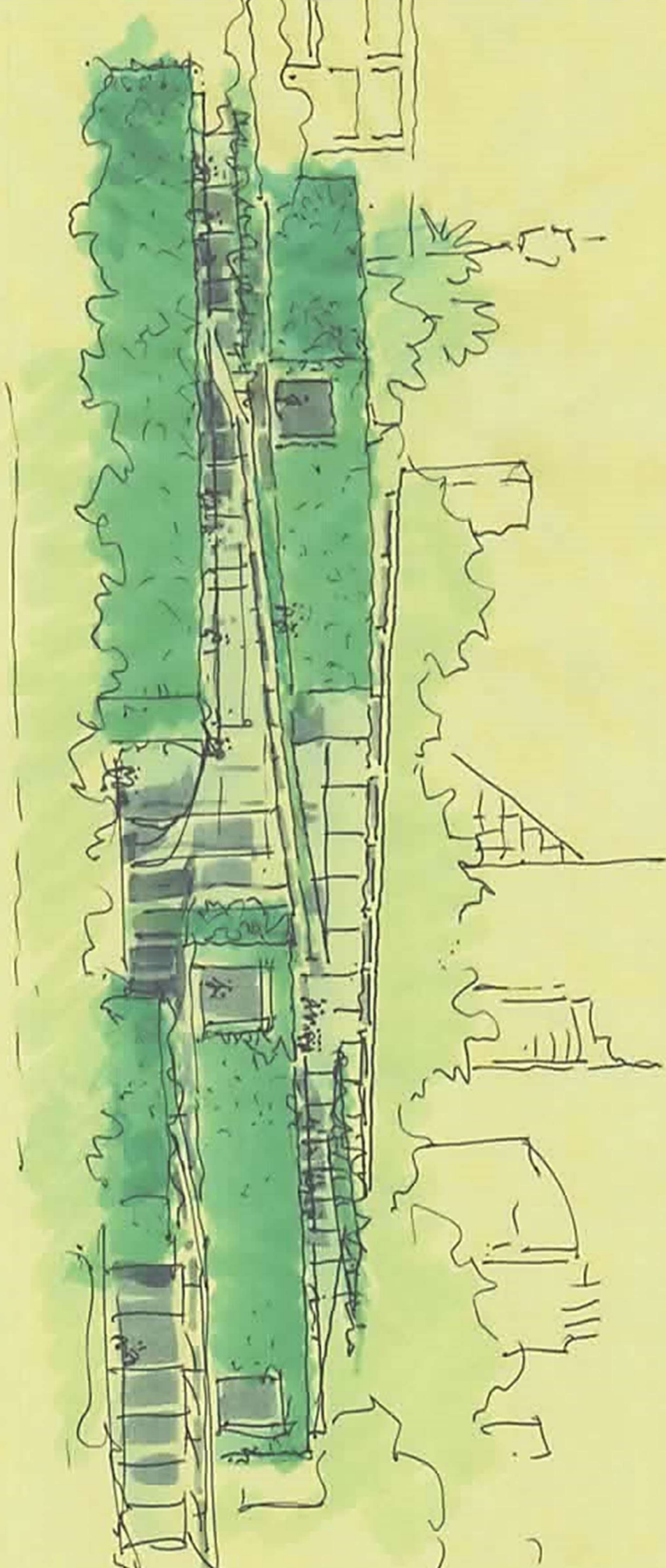


Moving the Entrance Pavilion Eastwards would enable this important buffer of existing trees to be retained.









ANDREW ANDERSONS AO

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A R C H I T E C T

Nicholas Wolff  
Sydney Modern Project Team  
[nicholas.wolff@ag.nsw.gov.au](mailto:nicholas.wolff@ag.nsw.gov.au)

Dear Nicholas,

**Re SYDNEY MODERN**

It was great to spend two hours with yourself and Sally discussing this project. No doubt you became aware of my view that the AGNSW would be far better off utilizing the massive space under the Headland Park at Barangaroo where, by my estimation, one would obtain far more space, suitable for the unbridled demands of contemporary art at a fraction of the price and project time.

If the Trustees of AGNSW were really interested in contemporary art they would pursue this course, but I appreciate how difficult it is to change direction after all that has been advocated in the five years since the 2012 master plan.

If SYDNEY MODERN is to be built in the vicinity of the AGNSW it must be justified by the following:

- It must be an ARCHITECTURAL MASTERPIECE
- It must read as FREESTANDING BUILDING from KEY VIEWPOINTS
- It must make the park and precinct a BETTER PLACE

I'm pleased to say that the departure from the master plan in making the new building "freestanding" is a great improvement but I think the separation is inadequate as was, in my opinion, demonstrated by the perspective from the west.

I must also say that I was surprised by the extent of the work that remains to be resolved two years after SANAA were identified as winners of the competition.

I realize that many architects have their own distinctive way of developing a design. However, I can't imagine myself being in a position, two years down the track, without clear direction about such ideas as:

- Display and lighting techniques
- The mode of air conditioning in display areas
- The resolution of sun control for the extensive east-west walls

All of these can have a strong impact upon the quality and experience of the building.



The following are some quick responses to the design as presented. I feel somewhat limited by not having drawings in my possession for closer study as I appreciate the cross-sectional design is complex.

## MASTER PLAN

It is pleasing to see that the fundamental precept of the ill-considered 2012 master plan has been abandoned, that of Sydney Modern being a massive composition around a new central entrance with Vernon's magnificent portico being reduced to a "Ceremonial Entrance".

The new concept of "Sydney Modern" as a separate building to the north breaks the almost insurmountable limitations of building over the expressway and generating a program for entry and orientation activities large enough to fill the space envisaged in the master plan.

This is along the lines of an unsolicited proposal discussed with the then Deputy Director, Anne Flanagan, urging her to make the master plan a design option but not the guiding document for the architectural competition.

It has taken the AGNSW five years to come to this more practicable proposition.

## BUILDING SEPARATION

While the graphic of the entrance level plan is encouraging, the reality is that the entrance canopy comes quite close to the north-west corner of the Vernon Building.

The tabled perspective looking north east, still shows an unfortunate juxtaposition or "collision" of unrelated architectural language that can best be resolved by increasing the distance between the buildings, leaving the "land-bridge" over the expressway clear of structures other than the entrance canopy.

The computer-generated image with its questionable perspective and rendering of light does little to advocate the design.

The appearance from Art Gallery Road is of such importance that a number of views should be generated to test the efficacy of the design.

## ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN CONCEPT

The architectural design concept is that of floating cantilevered roof planes surmounting a series of glazed pavilions. This forms a pleasing contrast with the essentially windowless masonry architecture of the existing building.

However, the floating roofs are difficult to relate to the sloping ground plane. These problems are usually best solved with masonry elements making the necessary

transition. Such elements do not appear to be part of the architectural language for the design. The original competition elevations highlight this issue.

## TRANSPARENCY

Hardly an architectural competition design is presented these days without crystalline forms and glazed transparent screens. This was the case with the imagery of both the JPW 2012 master plan and SANAA competition design. The two schemes were extensively illustrated with clear glass walls of total transparency, clearly impossible with an art gallery.

Light levels required by materials conservation are a small fraction of external light levels, requiring glazing that is heavily tinted, reflective or protected with louver systems. With any of these systems one can see out but not in. Drawings showing transparent display spaces are disingenuous.

Even lobbies and break-out areas facing east and west need to be protected from solar radiation at low levels. Solving this problem will impact strongly on the appearance of the building.

## ENTRANCE CANOPY

The current entrance to the AGNSW with its architecture of Sydney sandstone and benign micro-climate is handsome and welcoming.

The canopy facing the street strives to do the same for the new building. However, in its current configuration, it is unlikely to provide the necessary comfort conditions being open to the strong winds this ridge top location will experience from south-east and west, especially in winter. Presumably the louvered roof will be operable to allow for winter sunlight and summer shade.

There is little indication of the detail and activities that will make this a successful arrival space.

## STEPPED CROSS SECTION AND VERTICAL CIRCULATION

With an ageing population an increasing proportion of visitors are likely to have impaired mobility. It is important that a public building with spaces distributed over four levels has an inviting and legible vertical circulation system.

The proposal is dominated by a monumental stair with a single escalator at one side and lifts relatively close to the stair at the entrance level, but increasingly distant from the stair and escalators as one steps down to the lower level.

An essential feature of a satisfactory vertical circulation system is that all three transportation modes have line-of-sight connection at all levels. This is currently not achieved where there are dog-leg connecting corridors on the lower levels.

The provision of single escalators between levels is problematic for a building in which visitors arrive and depart over the whole day.

## VIEWS OUT OF BUILDING

One of the much appreciated contributions of the Captain Cook wing was the opening up of dramatic vistas over Woolloomooloo Bay from a building that was previously windowless. This connection between interior and exterior is fundamental to the perception of “sense of place” for AGNSW.

It seems unfortunate that the new building does little to capitalise on these views, especially from the circulation system, yet at the same time it blocks the key vista from the Captain Cook wing. The design relies upon a “viewing platform” which will be compromised as it has large areas of roof deck in the foreground.

## ROOF PLANES

A key feature of the design concept are the square floating roof planes. They have been variously described as turf covered green roofs or of conventional roof cladding systems.

It seems a lost opportunity that there is no attempt to articulate these extensive areas with roof lights to provide top-lighting for display. This could also act as a way for compensating for the disability glare from the window walls without resorting to artificial lighting.

## LIGHTING AND DISPLAY TECHNIQUES

One has only to think of great buildings such as Kahn’s KIMBELL GALLERY in Fort Worth or Piano’s MENIL COLLECTION in Houston to perceive how the lighting system determines the architecture.

Even the AGNSW achieves a certain amount of distinctive architectural character through the Captain Cook Wing grid ceilings, the exposed structure of the John Kaldor galleries or the traditional top-lit configuration of the historic courts.

The drawings give no indication of how this may all work.

The interior view, tabled at our meeting was singularly unfortunate. It has been my experience that perspectives with a downward line-of-sight are extremely difficult to generate. People and works of art need to be part of the computer model to be accurately presented.

Usually gallery interiors look best with very few people, just sufficient to give scale to the spaces and highly realistic brightly dressed people are to be avoided.

## SEEING WORKS OF ART

It is a sad feature of the contemporary corporatised world of museums that one has to struggle through tedious “orientation”, “interpretation”, retailing and other facilities before engaging with works of art.

The design is at the risk of this same failing. The canopy and lobby would benefit from accommodating some powerful pieces, suitable for the lighting environment. The symbolism of locating the display of indigenous art closest to the entrance will be lost if it is contained totally within its “box”.

In the recent addition to the National Gallery in Canberra, the then Director, Ron Radford went to great pains to ensure that the emblematic “Aboriginal Memorial” is visible to all who arrive and depart from the building.

With regards,

Andrew Andersons  
23<sup>rd</sup> May 2017

ANDREW ANDERSONS AO  

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A R C H I T E C T

Dear Nicholas,

Re SYDNEY MODERN

Thank you for Monday's meeting and the candid discussion.  
While there are useful improvements with design  
development in the last six months it seems that fundamental  
problems remain.

Attached are some comments on issues as I see them.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andrew Andersons', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Andrew Andersons



## **COMMENTS ON “SYDNEY MODERN”**

**18 October 2017**

### **BUILDING LOCATION AND ENTRANCE PLAZA**

There seems to be no coherent landscaping plan for what will be an enormous arrival sequence at the Gallery.

It appears that the roadway has been reduced and car-parking bays have been removed adjacent to the Vernon façade, which is a positive move, however with its north-west orientation, this will be a very hot and glary space in summer without the provision of shade.

None of the paths indicated seem to be on pedestrian desire lines; it would seem more appropriate if the major movement systems were obvious in the layout of paths and gardens.

### **ACTIVATION OF ARRIVAL SPACE**

Such a large area of public space would benefit from a food outlet serving refreshments to the large numbers coming and going from both venues. Sitting and enjoying this spectacle is the hallmark of great museum arrival sequences. It seems odd that this is not part of the plan.

### **TREE PLANTING AND LEVEL CHANGES**

There are significant level changes and major trees adjacent to the north-east corner of the existing building and opposite the RBG entrance.

The latter group of trees is of particular significance and provide a visual buffer between the Domain and the SYDNEY MODERN building. It is unclear if these will be retained, in any case the impact on the character of the Domain would be ameliorated if the buildings were to move further east.

### **LOCATION OF SHADE STRUCTURE**

The location of the shade structure, as far west as possible on the footpath alignment makes it extremely visible, no doubt this is the design intent. I would, however, say it is intrusive and would be much better located a greater distance from the Vernon façade, arguably the best 19<sup>th</sup> century façade of any public building in Australia.

It would seem prudent to generate a variety of 3D views from a large range of locations along Art Gallery Rd, especially looking north with the existing building in the foreground.

### **DESIGN OF SHADE STRUCTURE**

The images of this structure presented were, of course, alluring. However, the folded perforated aluminium sheet sitting on top of cantilevering columns without horizontal elements is, in my opinion, a structural impossibility.

Obviously a folded sheet has strength to span in the direction of the folds, but poor capability at right angles to this.

The second option with the horizontal elements supporting the folded sheet, enabling cantilevers and a back span could obviously work but lacks the magic of the first sketch.

However, there are massive design issues, not the least of which would be staining at the soffits of the valleys of the folds when water drops through the perforations. Is the gallery going to pressure hose the roof once a month?

Enclosed are some photos of Tonkin Zulaikha's shade structure efforts at Paddington Reservoir.

### **MICROCLIMATE UNDER SHADE STRUCTURE**

As pointed out in my previous notes, the ENTRY PLAZA space is open to the west, south and east, all windy, unpleasant orientations in the winter months. It is quite different from the Vernon Portico which has a massive sandstone wall protecting pedestrians from the wind.

I believe the design in its current form is simply bad FENG SHUI and you will proceed at your peril. I seriously recommend you have a FENG SHUI expert review out.

I suspect this space will require wind screening to provide an acceptable micro-climate and you should carry out some detailed wind-tunnel assessments.

### **SCULPTURE GARDEN**

The idea of a curated sculpture garden between the two buildings is an attractive idea. However when in a confined space such installations usually design specific settings for exhibits limiting visual juxtapositions of other items. There is no hint of the intended character of the sculpture garden.

### **GLASS FACADES AND TRANSPARENCY**

Key to the imagery of the building are the floor to ceiling-glazed facades engendering a sense of transparency to the "pavilions" of the architecture.

These walls include the Entry Pavillion, south wall of the indigenous art display, north east wall of the contemporary art display, the east wall of the gallery space, and the north and east wall of the multi-purpose space.

At various times of day, all year round on east and west facing facades, in summer at late afternoon on south facades and in winter on north facades, notwithstanding the proposed overhangs, there will be massive solar penetration and high daylight levels. Many museums cope with this issue, as does the Captain Cook Wing with heavily body-tinted glass.

Clearly the design concept is all about transparency. While low-emissivity glass can cope with some the heat load, it is hard to imagine many activities, let alone display of most categories of works of art that survive direct solar penetration. Clearly some form of operable shading will be necessary which will generate much of the character of both exteriors and interiors yet there is no indication of how this will be achieved. Does one really want to look at (an approximately) fifty-metre long, eight-metre long wall of blinds, facing west in the entrance pavilion?

Motorized, roll-up blinds will be extremely difficult to achieve in many of the window walls as the ceiling soffits are on a slope and there may not be enough depth of ceiling to conceal the horizontal rolls and motors that would in all probability be necessary.

It is noted that the indigenous and contemporary galleries have narrow ambulatory spaces, just inside the window walls. These spaces will be extremely limiting in terms of works that can be displayed, and will give only a limited sense of transparency.

#### **VIEWS OF HARBOUR**

One of the most admired features of the CAPTAIN COOK WING is the vista down Woolloomooloo Bay obtained through the ground floor window (currently 50% blocked off by AGNSW staff) visible from just inside the gallery entrance. When one goes up to the window, one is on the “edge of the view” with an attractive foreground below.

In the proposed design the key view on arrivals has the roof of the box of the contemporary art display in the foreground. Even though one can then exit the building to a viewing terrace, the public is kept well back from the edge by a landscaped mound with a large section of built-up roofing in the foreground. A series of detailed cross-sections demonstrating view lines of the bay should be drawn to demonstrate the efficacy of this design.

Optimising the view of Woolloomooloo Bay is one of the key opportunities for building on this site. The view from the Captain Cook Wing will be lost, yet the geometry of the new building fails to dramatize the unique qualities of the location.

There are no air locks at entry points to the roof terraces and it is likely that blustery north-east winds in summer will make these doorways uncomfortable.

#### **CAFÉ LOCATION**

While reasonably located in terms of circulation through the Gallery, it is not in a particularly desirable spot in terms of outlook when compared with food outlets in the Captain Cook Wing. The outdoor seating, on top of the temporary exhibitions box, exposed

to the south and east will have a poor microclimate and lacks shading necessary in summer. If the outdoor seating is to be a success, shading and wind-screening will be necessary.

#### **KITCHEN**

It is not clear from the tabled drawings how food services will operate. Is there a central preparation kitchen with satellite outlets? How will kitchen exhaust systems be located to minimise intrusive food smells? Is there a pathway to a discharge points at the top of the building? This may seem a trivial detail but often is extremely difficult to solve.

#### **SHOP LOCATION**

One can be thankful that the shop does not dominate the entrance and is somewhat discretely located inside the building. The Gallery may find it difficult to resist the later push to have the shop in the vast spaces of the entrance pavilion as is sadly the case at the re-vamped NGV.

#### **MULTI PURPOSE SPACE**

It was not made clear exactly what will go on in this space, it seemed to range from school activities through to banquets. This is a wide range of activities and needs significant services infrastructure to work. Usually multi-purpose spaces aiming to accommodate a broad diversity of activities fail to do any of them particularly well.

#### **ACCESS TO OIL TANK DISPLAY SPACE**

The access to this vast display space (other than from the lifts) is down what seems an extremely tight geometric stair. If the space proves a success, this stair will be an awkward "pinch-point" and should be enlarged.

#### **SEEING ART IN A NEW WAY?**

The publicity material for SYDNEY MODERN asserts that the building will allow "art to be seen in a new way". Although it cannot be denied that passage through the building will be unusual, the three designated display areas, "indigenous", "Contemporary", and "Temporary Exhibitions" are all featureless boxes devoid of any spatial complexity, utilisation of daylighting or of any architectural tectonics with which works of art may relate. There is no real indication of the architectural character of these key spaces other than a verbal description of "removable ceiling panels for access to services". Are temporary walls of plasterboard, with a bland aluminium ceiling really a "new way of seeing art"?

The side lit areas with attendant high light levels and direct solar penetration will be severely limited in terms of suitable display material. The central circulation space with its somewhat busy character will also be limited in terms of what will resonate with its surroundings. It is difficult to see how this equates with "seeing art in a new way".

### **JUSTIFICATION FOR BUILDING ON THIS SITE**

On 23 MAY I wrote to you saying if SYDNEY MODERN is to be built in the vicinity of the AGNSW it must be justified by the following:

- It must be an ARCHITECTURAL MASTERPIECE
- It must read as a FREESTANDING BUILDING FROM KEY VIEWPOINTS
- It must make the PARK AND PRECINCT A BETTER PLACE

Since the presentation in May obviously there has been useful design development, however many issues remain. These are the direct result of the design approach which may be likened to a “Japanese scatter-pattern in three dimension”. Solving all the real functional and aesthetic issues I have raised has the potential to reduce the sense of immediacy arising out of the accidental effects generated by the design approach.

SANAA have achieved notable results elsewhere with the light-weight minimalist “pavilion” approach flourishing on large unencumbered sites. Unfortunately, this design approach does not assist in the solving complex architectural issues posed by building on this difficult site in a most sensitive location

### **WILL THE DOMAIN BE A BETTER PLACE?**

With its large footprint and extensive street frontage, SYDNEY MODERN significantly distracts from the appeal of the Domain as parkland. The building obliterated one of Sydney’s memorable views yet doesn’t strongly optimise these views from within. The “scatter-pattern” approach generates awkward residual spaces between the forms of the building and important new elements like the entrance. There is little indication as to how the “sculpture garden” over the freeway will be more attractive than the existing area with its extensive harbour views.

### **WILL THE BUILDING BE AN ARCHITECTURAL MASTERPIECE?**

The only currently available view of the proposed building is the birds-eye view from the north east. This shows a loosely-colliding composition of unremarkable glazed pavilions with lumpen sloping fascia boards giving drooping demeanour to the building as a whole.

The accessible roof terraces, shown to a larger extent on the plans and sections, seem like an afterthought behind the curved mound of landscaping that has no apparent relationship with the architecture of the building.

The building lacks the kind of formal elegance associated with galleries by architects like Renzo Piano and Jean Nouvel, nor does it demonstrate the sculptural qualities associated with Zaha Hadid or Frank Gehry. If SYDNEY MODERN was to achieve the “Bilbao Effect” for AGNSW it has demonstrably failed. The design is not “iconic” like the Sydney Opera House and is unlikely to put AGNSW on the world map.

There are many other options to serve a flourishing visual arts community. There is no need to co-locate what is now a totally autonomous building in this irreplaceable piece of



parkland. There is no attempt at compensating for the loss of parkland by, for instance, demolishing the Electricity Sub-Station to the north or a section of the Domain Car Park. A building in the middle of a park, over a kilometre from public transport is not an ideal location for an Art Gallery and would never be chosen, in the first instance today.

A new, more commodious TEMPORARY EXHIBITIONS GALLERY could easily be accommodated on the site to the east of the AGNSW between the freeway and railway portal. A minor addition to the north of the Captain Cook Wing could optimise functions such as better food outlets and break-out spaces with negligible impact upon parkland.

The needs of CONTEMPORARY ART could be splendidly accommodated in the vast space under Headland Park at Barangaroo at a fraction of the cost of SYDNEY MODERN; adjacent to the imminent METRO STATION in Hickson Rd, adjacent to the Walsh Bay Arts Precinct and entered from Sydney's unique waterfront, "Cultural Ribbon" promenade. This would be a far better outcome than the somewhat modest facility being offered in SYDNEY MODERN.

The drawings that have been presented are still lines on paper, which sadly fail to enthuse. What is necessary is a genuine consideration of alternatives. It is difficult to understand why the AGNSW will not release such studies which presumably were part of the JPW master plan.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'A. Andersons', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Andrew Andersons

**Addendum:**

The shade structures at Paddington Reservoir



# Sydney Modern: High-risk move fails to pay off for Art Gallery of NSW



**Elizabeth Farrelly**

**Published:** November 18 2017 - 12:05AM

Minimalism is a ruthless style, unforgiving and implacable. It is seriously hard to pull off and even harder to live with. Why, then, are we so beguiled by it? Why must every new building proposal, from trashy resi-tower to trashier casino to high-art gallery, seem to glow like diaphanous silk against the sky, with as much texture as a Ken doll and as much embodied emotion as a stick of parboiled asparagus? Why in particular must our new galleries partake of this limp self-loathing?

The AGNSW's Sydney Modern (by Kazuyo Sejima of SANAA architects, Tokyo) and the University of Sydney's Chau Chak Wing Museum (by JPW architects, Sydney) are two major new ultra-minimalist galleries. Each is by an architect of distinction and briefed to display otherwise closeted treasures. Each augments, but is physically separate from, a revered sandstone institution. Each, instead, occupies significant public green space – and it's this that attracts the ire of the august.

How should we parse this trade of art for parkland? Where does the path of wisdom lie? What deserves to be built, where? And what, a couple of centuries on, will we love?

Last week's opening of the Art Gallery's new Rembrandt show brought this home for me. The old Vernon building, at once noble and welcoming, sat astride its knoll, confident in its skin and drenched in evening sun. Crowds streamed through, the stone honeyed as much by their affection as the sunset; the inky shadow and sculpted detail making the glorious portico almost a Rembrandt in itself. Instinctively we know it. Such a building is a thing to love.

Behind the arras, though, Sydney Modern lurked like an anorexic ghost. At last, chirruped Arts Minister Don Harwin, the government (having flogged everything in the larder) can afford Sydney Modern. Yet the most interesting thing he could say about it was it could double visitor numbers.

The same rot appears on the Department of Planning website, which inexplicably sees its role as propagandising for Sydney Modern – so many jobs, so many visitors, so many schoolkids. Talk about missing the point. This is absolutely not about numbers. This is quality versus quality. Only the very finest architecture should be allowed to alienate beloved parkland. But how to get it?

And that's the thing about minimalism. It's high risk. Very high. When it's good, it's sublime. Mies van der Rohe springs to mind. Still impossible to inhabit of course (ask Edith Farnsworth), but sublime to look at. When minimalism is not very good, however, when even microscopically off the mark, it gets mean very quickly. Then there's not a lot to be said.

So why does it persist? Why, 100 years after its inception and 50 after its death, does it characterise every development ad across metropolitan Sydney? Several explanations suggest themselves. One, delusion: we're so accustomed to virtuality, so hypnotised by its weightless faux-life, that we forget

there's even a difference. Two, self-hate: a kind of collective guilt about the immensity of our environmental impact seduces us into pretending the opposite. Three, relentless primate competitiveness: we love minimalism precisely because it is all but impossible to achieve, and this makes it rare.

Delusion, self-hate, competition? In my view, it's all of the above. And yet, if minimalism is appropriate anywhere, it's in a gallery – which is more about delusion and less about reality than almost any other building type. So how do these two museums, SANAA's Sydney Modern (final designs released this week) and JPW's CCW check out?

Of the two, somewhat embarrassingly and notwithstanding the Heritage Council's uncharacteristically trenchant critique, the CCW is better. A strongly horizontal floating concrete box, it sits nestled among mature trees, turning a single-storey face towards the quadrangle building but at a respectful distance. That's the entrance, offering a composition echo to the low portion of Ken Woolley's very fine Fisher Library. The rest of the museum digs into the slope to house the staggering collections in a series of airy and light-filled interior terraces.

Its worst flaw is the loading dock, which gapes opposite the little gatekeeper's cottage, Baxter Lodge, and should certainly be rethought. Otherwise, though, it is simple, confident and resolved. In stark contrast to the jejune incoherence of the other Chau Chak Wing building – the Gehry – this is serene, self-possessed and quietly, confidently, present.

As to Sydney Modern? I want to like it. I do. SANAA is a female-led partnership that, after the 2009 Serpentine Pavilion and the 2010 Pritzker, deserves its world renown. But if this building does not blow our collective minds we should withhold the site and send Sydney Modern to the vast and unused Barangaroo Cutaway instead.

Sejima's trademark strength is her conceptual clarity. But clarity is what this proposal lacks. Intimidated, perhaps, by the red-carpet hoo-ha, the grand sandstone neighbour and the staunchly beloved site, the building drops into profoundly casual demeanour, strewing its eight pavilions like so many tatami mats down the hill to Woolloomooloo Bay.

This compositional looseness reflects also in the plan, which attempts to shift people between pavilions across major level changes with no clear diagram, becoming simply messy.

I like the new pedestrian link to Woolloomooloo, and applaud in principle the re-use of fuel-bunker as gallery, although its realisation seems grim. Less persuasive is the "entry plaza" – a large egg-shaped space distancing the new gallery from the Vernon. Plus, there's a certain deceit in the drawings. Concrete walls seem to shimmer into nothingness and roof terraces (a poor compensation for lost parkland) will be, perforce, balustraded, and all lightness lost.

Sejima is a fine architect, but this is not her finest moment. There's a feeling among the cognoscenti that she deserves a Sydney job, having lost the MCA years ago. But we should be more concerned with what Sydney deserves; a building that repays our gift of this glorious site with confidence, ennoblement and genuine, enduring warmth, rather than going all casual, wearing thongs to dinner.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/sydney-modern-highrisk-move-fails-to-pay-off-for-art-gallery-of-nsw-20171116-gzn12n.html>

