

**SYDNEY MODERN PROJECT
SUBMISSION ON MODIFICATION 4
LANDSCAPING
VERNON CURTILAGE**

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LANDSCAPING – VERNON CURTILAGE**

The current landscaping proposal for the “Vernon Curtilage” at the Art Gallery of NSW represents a significant improvement over the landscaping design incorporated in the initial Development Application.

This design prevented approaching the building, on axis, from the city with a stone bench and planting bed between the street and portico. An enlarged area of pavement in front of the building offered no shade and little delight. Parts of the low stone “heritage” wall were to be “cut flush with the pavement level and bench seats were proposed, in one instance, as little as a metre away from the monumental Gilbert Bayes equestrian statues.

It is pleasing to see that an axial approach, with disabled access is proposed from the city to the west, reflecting pools are incorporated and additional tree planting is added to the existing small clusters of palm trees.

The Vernon facade of the AGNSW is one of Sydney's finest public building frontages and deserves the highest level of quality in the design of its revised setting. It should offer as much amenity and enjoyment as is anticipated in the elaborate forecourt arrangements in the Sydney Modern building only some tens of metres to the north.

It is submitted that the design proposals are not resolved in the best possible manner and that a number of revisions of the various elements would allow the design to achieve its full potential.

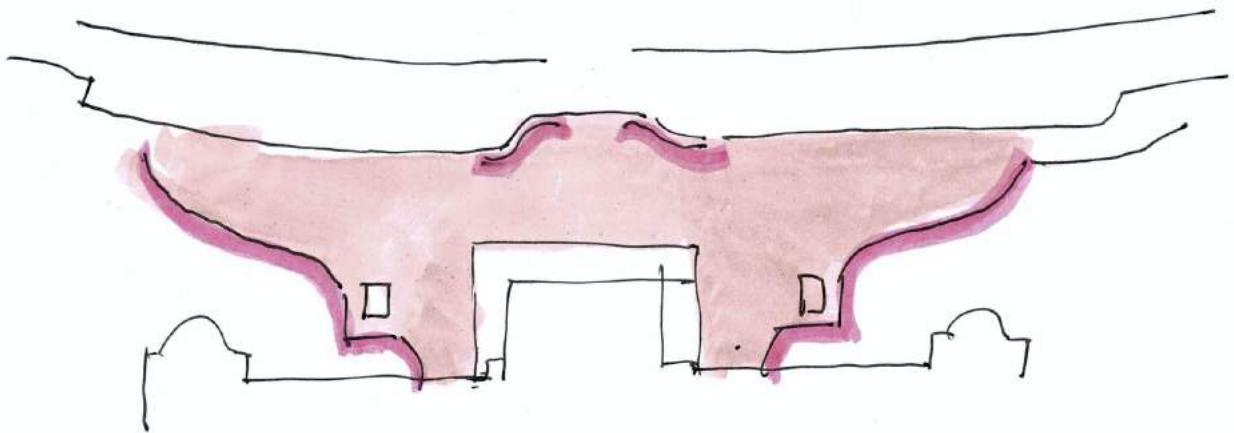


The inappropriate forecourt design in the original Development Application

GEOMETRY AND AESTHETICS

When compared with other designs by Vernon, the west facade of the AGNSW is an exercise of subdued classicism, complemented by the gently swept curve of the low sandstone walls, parallel to the street alignment and the quiet monumentality of the Gilbert Bayes statues. The pure Ionic design of the portico with its unadorned tympanum complete this timeless composition.

It is therefore surprising to see the Rococco sinuous line of the low walls marking the edge of the enlarged forecourt paved area. Simpler, less agitated geometry would be far more desirable.



The inappropriate “Roccoco” sinuous outline of the proposed design

STONE WALLS

It would appear that the existing stone walls are relocated within a similar, but not matching geometry. Adjacent to the Bayes statues, “matching” stone walls assume orthogonal geometry closer to Art Gallery they continue as “stone clad reinforced concrete walls”.

This mixture of geometrics and construction techniques is unlikely to achieve cohesive appearance and should be reviewed.

PROTECTION OF PUBLIC SPACES FROM TERRORIST ATTACKS

The layout of the various elements in the forecourt leaves the impression that the design has been driven by the desire to protect the public space from vehicular terrorist attacks.

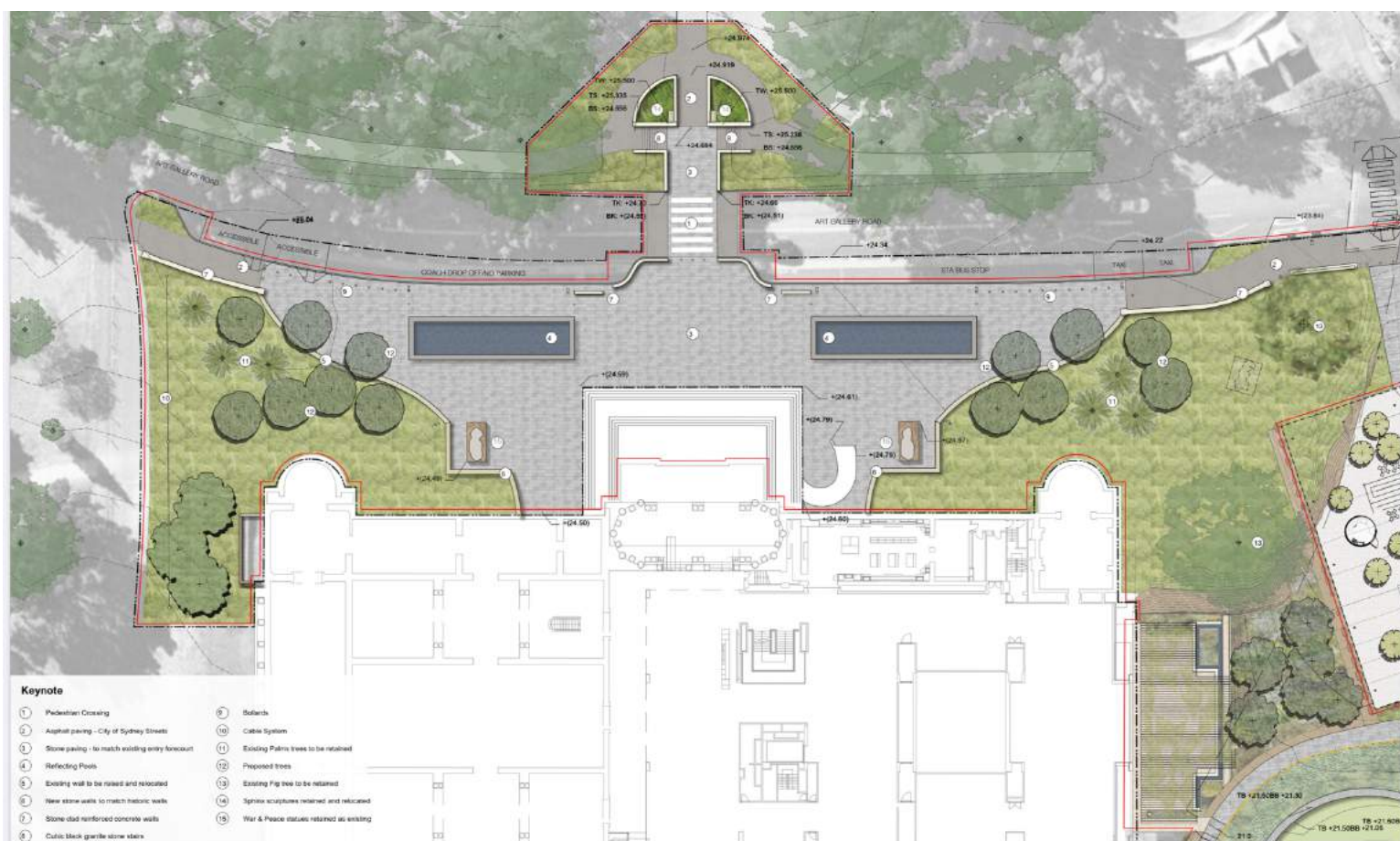
The bollards along the road alignment, the low walls adjacent to the pedestrian crossing and location of the reflecting pools all appear to be determined by the desire to prevent attacks by vehicles from Art Gallery Road.

While this may seem ingenious, it results in a number of unfortunate consequences. The low stone veneered walls, adjacent to the pedestrian crossing will be in the field of vision to the portico and detract from its appearance.

The location of the linear reflecting pools creates a 3-metre pinch point adjacent to the walls near the pedestrian crossing and 4 metres adjacent to the corners of the portico steps. While these dimensions are adequate for the needs of pedestrian movement they may appear mean given the overall scale of the forecourt.

The linearity of the reflecting pools has the effect of dividing the forecourt into separate roadside and building-side parcels reducing the appeal of the forecourt as a place for comfortable public gatherings.

It is felt that appropriate levels of security can be achieved by well-designed low stone bollards along the street alignment, freeing up the location of the reflecting pools and eliminating the need for the intrusive stone-veneered walls adjacent to the pedestrian crossing.



The exhibited design for the Vernon curtilage

REFLECTING POOLS

Fountains and reflecting pools have a long-established place in enhancing the curtilage of public buildings, although with the exception of Hyde Park, this has not particularly been the case in Sydney.

The AGNSW west-facing forecourt is benignly warm on a winter's afternoon but hot and glary on a Sydney summer's day.

The appeal of the New York Metropolitan Museums forecourt to Fifth Avenue owes much to the splendid water features flanking its monumental arrival stairs. Similarly, the lengthy bluestone facade of the National Gallery of Victoria gains immeasurably from its moat and fountains along St. Kilda Rd.

For these reasons, it is most pleasing to learn that reflecting pools are proposed at the AGNSW. However, it is suggested that they are in a different location, closer to the facade of the building and of a different shape factor as illustrated in the attached diagram.

The Bayes statues would rise from the pool, surrounded by water, but would be enhanced by their reflection. The greater east-west dimension of the pools would also make the reflection of the facade more effective. The edge of the reflecting pool should be designed to be suitable for sitting.

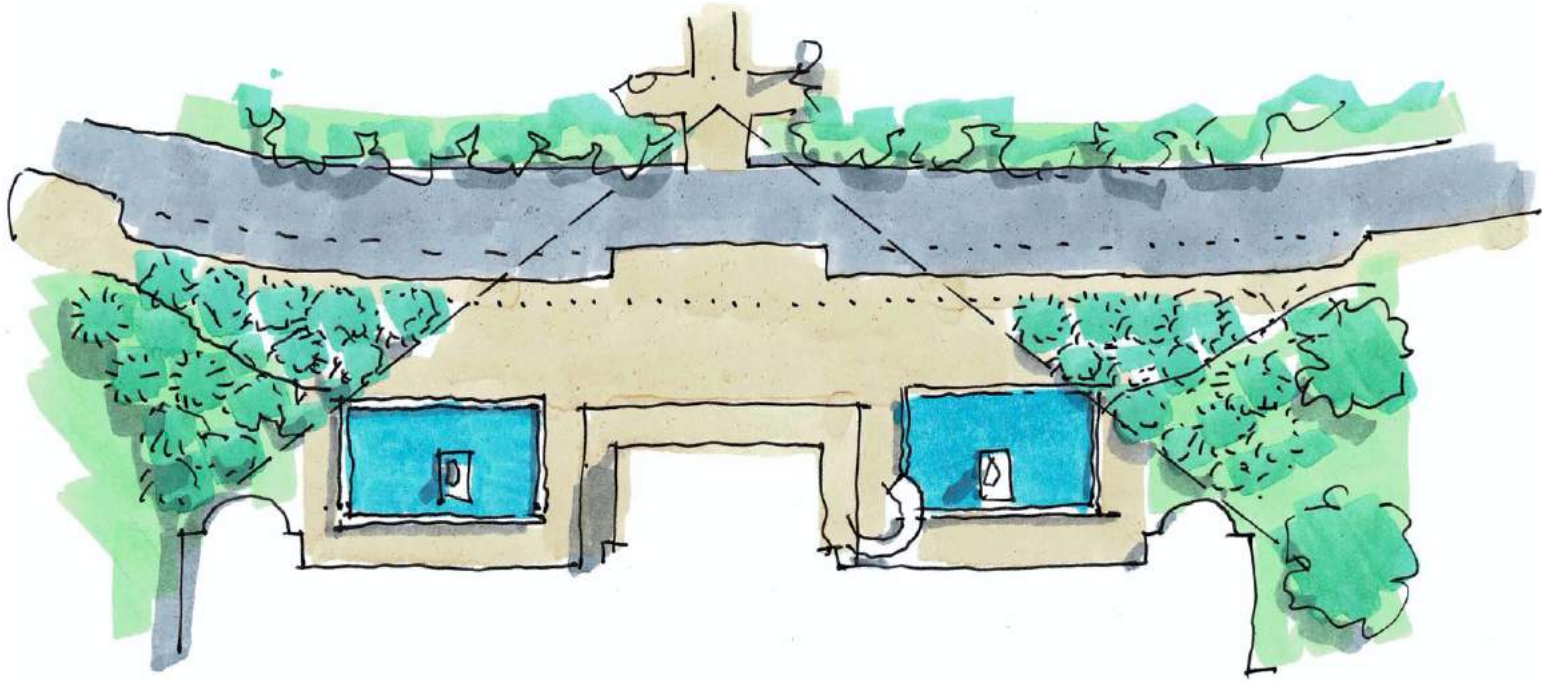


The polished granite edge to reflecting pool at “FORUM” St. Leonards provides comfortable informal seating.



The generous reflecting pools at the National Gallery of Victoria are an important element in generating a sense of place and attractive arrival at the building





Proposed rearrangement of pools and palm tree plants in forecourt to Vernon building

TREES AND SHADE

The proposed design triples the number of palm trees, currently located on either side of the Gallery building. This will enhance the visual impact of the two clusters of three trees but will do little to increase the amount of shade, highly desirable in the Sydney climate.

It is suggested that these clusters are increased to form substantial “groves” organised in such a way as not to obscure the view of the facade when approaching from the path on the west of Art Gallery Rd.

The attached diagram illustrates how this might be done.

One benefit would be to provide a degree of shade for patrons waiting for buses and taxis.

It would also be desirable to provide some bench seating for the public to enjoy the “theatre” of watching comings and goings at the Gallery.

It can be predicted with confidence that with these revisions the AGNSW forecourt will become one of Sydney’s best loved places.

STEPS AND RAMP WEST OF ART GALLERY ROAD

One of the most memorable views of the AGNSW is to be had at the point where pathways across the Domain converge on the west side of Art Gallery Road. The Vernon portico appears, dramatically framed by fig trees. However, an awkward change of level precludes disabled access at this point and the steep bank obscures approaching traffic, making this location dangerous for pedestrians.

The proposed solution of steps and ramps is good in principle but seems underscaled given the vastness of the Domain and the generosity of the AGNSW forecourt. It is suggested that the design be further refined to be in effect, a continuation of the language of the forecourt opposite.

COURTYARD TO ADJACENT TO NORTH FACADE OF CAPTAIN COOK WING

When the Captain Cook wing opened in 1972 it had a north facing courtyard, accessed from the temporary exhibitions' gallery on the basement level. Ribbed bush-hammered concrete wall defined the space on its eastern and western boundaries while a footbridge framed a view of Woolloomooloo Bay to the north.

The walls and angled footbridge formed an essential part of the architectural composition of the north face of the building. The flanking walls and footbridge were demolished when the "land bridge" over the expressway was constructed many years later.

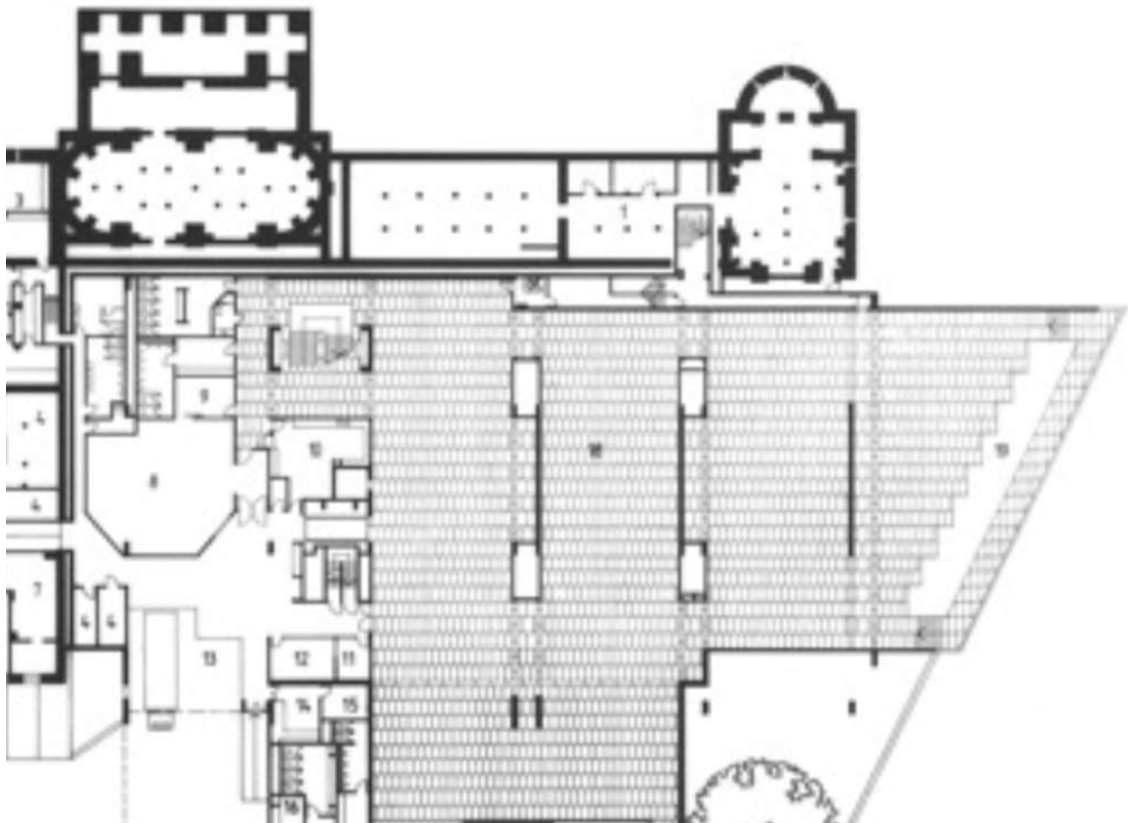
At the same time, the Gallery blocked the windows from the temporary exhibitions gallery and the ill-defined remnant of the space is now a blot on the curtilage. With the Sydney Modern project there is now a new focus upon this area, with the Gallery projecting up to open up views from the basement level below.

It would be most desirable that the landscaping design for this space could reinstate some of the lost spatial definition with landscaping elements such as trellises and vine covered screens for the architecture of the north facade to regain some of its meaning. It could be made secure to form an open-air display space through the vastly expanded display of Australian art now proposed on the basement and ground floor gallery levels.



Footbridge and concrete walls provided strong sense of enclosure for northern courtyard prior to demolition for land bridge.





The northern courtyard found a dramatic extension of the basement display areas



Pathetic remnants of west wall of courtyard



Suggested reconfiguration of courtyard adjacent to basement level galleries to reinstate composition of north facade of Captain Cook Wing.