

modern architectures in history

'In this outstanding book, Harry Margalit explores how the history of Australian architecture is also the history of Australian society, and vice versa. He recounts key events and complex ideas with clarity, shining a light on essential points, but never omitting "the story behind the story". An engaging narrator who is also an excellent scholar, Margalit leads us through the past and into the future, showing us why architecture continues to matter.'

— Tom Heneghan, Professor of Architectural Design, Tokyo University of the Arts

'With the acumen of a cultural archaeologist, Harry Margalit unravels the state of architecture caught among the myriad forces of class interest, nation-building geopolitics, and above all allegories of continuity and change. A first-class account of the history of architecture in Australia.'



— Gevork Hartoonian, Professor of History of Architecture, University of Canberra

This book tells the story of the architects and buildings that have defined Australia's architectural culture since the founding of the modern nation through Federation in 1901. That year marked the beginning of a search for city forms and better buildings to accommodate the realities of Australian life and to express an emerging distinctive – and, eventually, confident – national identity. While Sydney and Melbourne were the settings for many of the major buildings, all states and territories developed architectural traditions based on distinctive histories and climates. This book covers the flowering of these many variants, from the bid to create a model city in Canberra, through the stylistic battles that opened a space for modernism, to the idealism of post-war reconstruction and beyond to the new millennium. It reveals a vibrant and influential culture, at its best when it matches a civic idealism with the sensuality of a country of stunning light and landscapes.

Harry Margalit is an Associate Professor at UNSW Sydney. His recent publications include *Energy, Cities and Sustainability: An Historical Approach* (2016).

With 213 illustrations

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Front cover: Rolf Jensen with the Commonwealth Department of Works, Reserve Bank Building, Adelaide, 1965. Photo: Eric Sierins; main image: Jørn Utzon, Hall Todd & Littlemore (interiors and glazing), Sydney Opera House, 1957–73. Photo by Paul Carmona on Unsplash.

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AUSTRALIA

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The result is a series of powerful spaces marked by coffered structural ceilings and a circulation path that is purposefully obscure. The iconography is loosely post-industrial, supporting a collection shaped to provoke, but with a curatorial reluctance to give historical context to this intent. This is exacerbated by the generally veiled nature of Australian philanthropy, where private money is given quietly but with strong preferences. The intent at MONA is to revive something of the countercultural mission of art and to strengthen Hobart's cultural credentials. It has proven hugely popular with locals and visitors alike, but the vague discomfort of hidden circulation and curatorial nihilism reinforce that this is an institution of private will intended as public utility.

Sydney added a new gallery devoted to contemporary art in 2012, as an extension to the institution that had been operating since 1991 in a converted government building fronting the city's waterside centrepiece of Circular Quay. The extension, by Sam Marshall of Architect Marshall, drew its cues from the textures of the surrounding urban collage of

Johnson Pilton Walker,
National Portrait
Gallery, Canberra,
2006-8.



Fender Katsalidis,
MONA, Hobart, 2011.
Serendipitous
circulation marks
the building.

expressway, stone-clad structures and the Harbour Bridge itself. The building used the language of abstract, geometric modernism to accommodate exhibitions and educative events, in a composition that symbolizes the socially progressive rather than radically subversive programme that now attaches to contemporary art.²⁰

One senses in these new public or semi-public galleries – Brisbane's GOMA, the National Portrait Gallery and Sydney's MCA – a profound shift in the exhibition and reception of art. There is no abetting of the mystification of art, as the National Gallery achieves in its more dimly lit galleries with highlighted individual works. All three newer buildings aim for a more accessible display of work, with views to the outside and natural light, where possible, combined with clear entrances and circulation paths. Art, and contemporary art in particular, has been democratized as a well



Sam Marshall with NSW Government Architect's Office, Museum of Contemporary Art extension, Sydney, 2010–12.

for culture at large, as the progressive programme of the early millennium devolves its concerns to individual consciences and tastes.

Contexts Large and Small

The large project that filled the gap created by the demise of class politics was the environmental one. It had the distinction of being agnostic to class, with both working-class suburbs and corporate operations and buildings coming under criticism. The new suburbs had accommodated the domestic life of all classes in the post-war period, although the old urban cores of Australian capital cities had not experienced the abandonment suffered by many American counterparts. Nonetheless throughout the 1950s and '60s working-class communities were decanted to new housing tracts, where space allowed a version of detached-house suburbia for most working families. While some lacked amenities and had little tree cover, they provided a degree of control over tenure and space use that

is historically unusual for working-class families. The environmentalist critique of suburbia – its inefficient use of space, the reliance on cars and the extent of infrastructure needed to service it – generally overlooks the relative autonomy it engenders for each household. This point was made explicit by planner Patrick Troy in 1996, but the shift to higher densities is now an article of faith in all jurisdictions.²¹

The environmentalist critique also extends to city offices, as evident in the brief and design for 'Council House 2'. Indeed, the building serves as a summary of those concerns and as one version of how they might be addressed. It is a distinctive feature of environmentalism that it can easily be allied to old social critiques that view capitalism as blindly growth driven, and exploitative, but it can also be folded into corporate capitalism itself. In other words it is not, at its core, founded on class concerns but on a broader disquiet with modernity itself. Thus it can serve as a universal critique of contemporary life and can manifest in many ways.

The corporate sector has moved to embrace this view slowly but relentlessly. The model of 'Council House 2' was too fragmented for the tastes of a refined corporate sector, which aimed for a seamless object that conveyed a sense of compressed value in its form and details. Renzo Piano's Aurora Place in Sydney, completed in 2000, had demonstrated one version of a soft corporatism. The Italian practice has long had a reputation for technical sophistication and for developing facade details and glazing systems for individual projects. The Sydney complex comprises an office tower and a lower set of apartments facing the Botanic Gardens. The building is distinguished by a curved, glazed eastern facade that extends beyond the floor plates in an implied wrapping, with chamfered edges that reference the curves and counter-curves of the Opera House. The refinement of the practice shows best in the several cladding systems visible at lower levels. The terracotta finish had been tested on earlier projects, and its remarkably precise tolerances convey both durability and precision.²² The louvres to the apartment balconies are set within a structural system made of glass, whose transparency hints at an architecture for climatic control both sophisticated and dematerialized.

The appeal of these systems would exert an influence on subsequent Sydney architecture. Richard Francis-Jones, for one, had worked with Romaldo Giurgola since 1989 in the firm of Mitchell/Giurgola & Thorp, established for the design of the new Parliament House. The office was subsequently divided into Sydney and Canberra branches, with Sydney transforming into ffmt, a practice led by Francis-Jones, Jeff Morehen and Richard Thorp. As a designer Francis-Jones has aimed for reconciling the organic, understood as climatically responsive building systems or quasi-organic forms and materials, with the corporate imperative of seamlessness.