

the  
material  
city

DENSITY AND DESIGN IN CONTEMPORARY  
AUSTRALIAN ARCHITECTURE

EDITOR AND CURATOR  
RON RINGER





Museum of Contemporary Art Australia

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# museum of contemporary art

SAM MARSHALL

**Project:** Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA)

**Location:** Circular Quay, Sydney

**Function:** Gallery

**Project Architect:** Sam Marshall

**Architects:** Architect Marshall in association with NSW Government Architects Office

**Project Managers:** Root Projects Australia

**Structural Consultant:** SDA Structures

**Services Consultant:** Steensen Varming (mechanical & ESD) Haron Robson (electrical)

**Landscape Consultant:** NSW Government Architects Office

**Main Contractor:** Watpac

**Photographers:** Jennifer Soo, Brett Boardman, Sam Marshall

**URBAN CONTEXT** The task was to design a building strongly recognisable as a museum of contemporary art in a sensitive heritage area yet stand up proudly next to an overpowering existing sandstone building. This was all in the forum of Circular Quay - being surrounded by large-scale buildings such as the Sydney Opera House. The result reconciles the small historic scale on George Street with the massive scale on Circular Quay.

The new wing takes its prompt for form from the existing building being a collection of colossal boxes. Unlike the severe ordered symmetry of the old, the new is seemingly random to best express welcome and inclusion. Its presence is made known by contrast of colour and material.

The boxes also represent what is inside them - the highest corner brown box, for example, houses the Bella Room being a room for one-on-one teaching for children with special needs as a symbol of the MCA's commitment to education. The white box below is the large gallery on entry. Gaps between the boxes allow views out as well as glimpses of the activity within.

Being viewed from all angles of the city, the building has no back, side or services on roofs - all is unified and can be viewed from all angles. These forms continue inside as articulated ceilings to provide maximum height and to discretely accommodate services and conceal lighting.

A large forecourt (part paved, part grassed) provides for meeting, relaxing, as front door mat to the MCA and as well as external gallery space for

the display of large sculpture and events such as Anish Kapoor and Vivid Sydney. This civic plaza agglomerated piecemeal landscapes that had outgrown their use and now widens the promenade around Circular Quay to the Opera House.

**DESIGN** Entry is open and welcoming as an expression of the Director's egalitarian vision. A wide passage through the building reconciles entry on either side being on different levels. This passage continues the pattern of pedestrian access through the steep topography throughout the historic Rocks area as established in the early days of the colony.

The entry foyer collects visitors for information, ticketing, cloaking, waiting, retail, gallery experiences and easy access to the main circulation system. Vertical circulation was intentionally easy via lifts and a stair so all focus is on accessing art. The stair and lifts culminate in a cafe with expansive Sydney Harbour and city views. This is a key gathering space for anticipation of the art, a break from the art, casual MCA meetings as well as tourists. Between the amazing view and the cafe is an external sculpture terrace which accommodates an annual sculpture commission. This terrace and café are used for corporate functions as well as key events such as Art Bar.

Visitors then filter down through the galleries. Galleries were intentionally simple to allow the MCA flexibility to reconfigure the spaces for the specific atmosphere of each exhibition. The unobstructed display of art was paramount.







One level of the new extension is devoted to education with workshops, digital classroom, 117 seat theatre, multi-media and teacher preparation rooms.

A vast array of environmental initiatives were adopted that went far beyond statutory controls as a commitment to the environment - the boldest being a seawater exchange system to heat and cool the building saving 30% on electricity.

**MATERIALITY** The building is clad in GRC (glass reinforced concrete) panels that allowed massive singular panels that fold without joints around corners, under as ceilings and over as roofs. This, along with bold signage, further expressed the box forms.

Interiors are articulated painted forms for economy and future flexibility. The off form concrete super structure is revealed wherever possible.

**Title page** George Street entry.

**Left** Old and new abutting and facing Circular Quay.

**Above** Circulation stair and National Centre for Creative Learning to the right.

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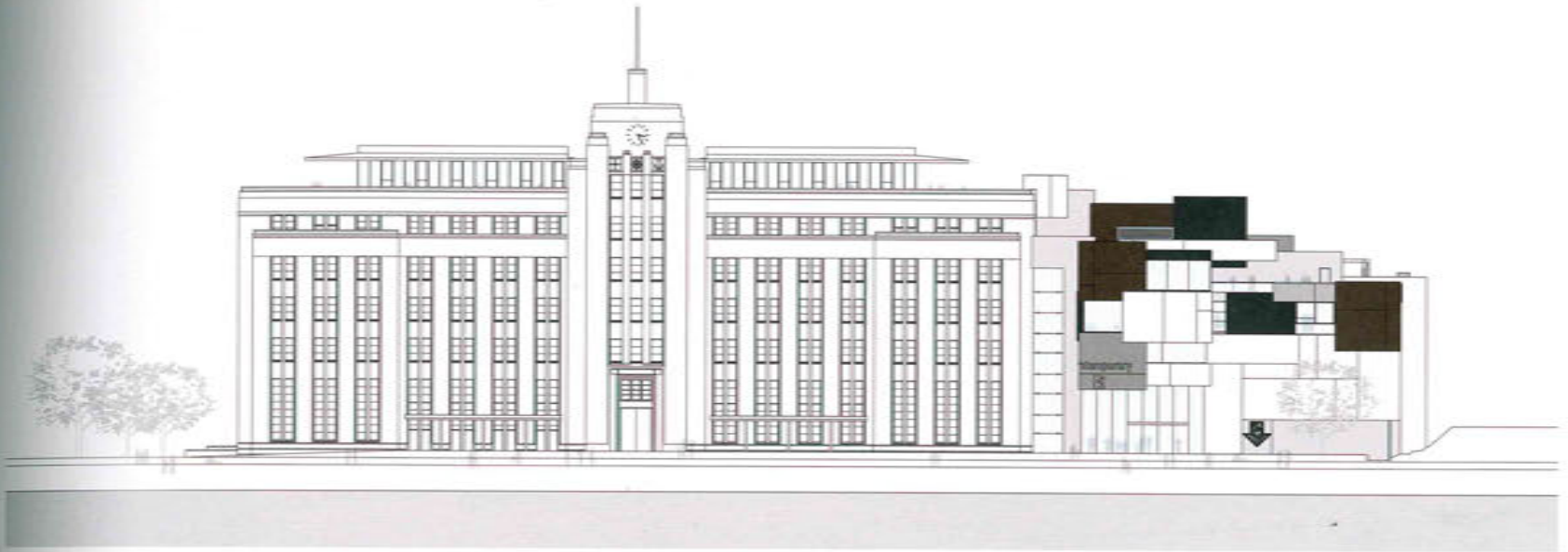
**Above** Generous entry stair from Circular Quay. Artwork by Daniel Boyd.

**Left** Articulated ceilings in central void down to entry level. Artwork by Maria Fernanda Cardoso (above) and Helen Eager (below).

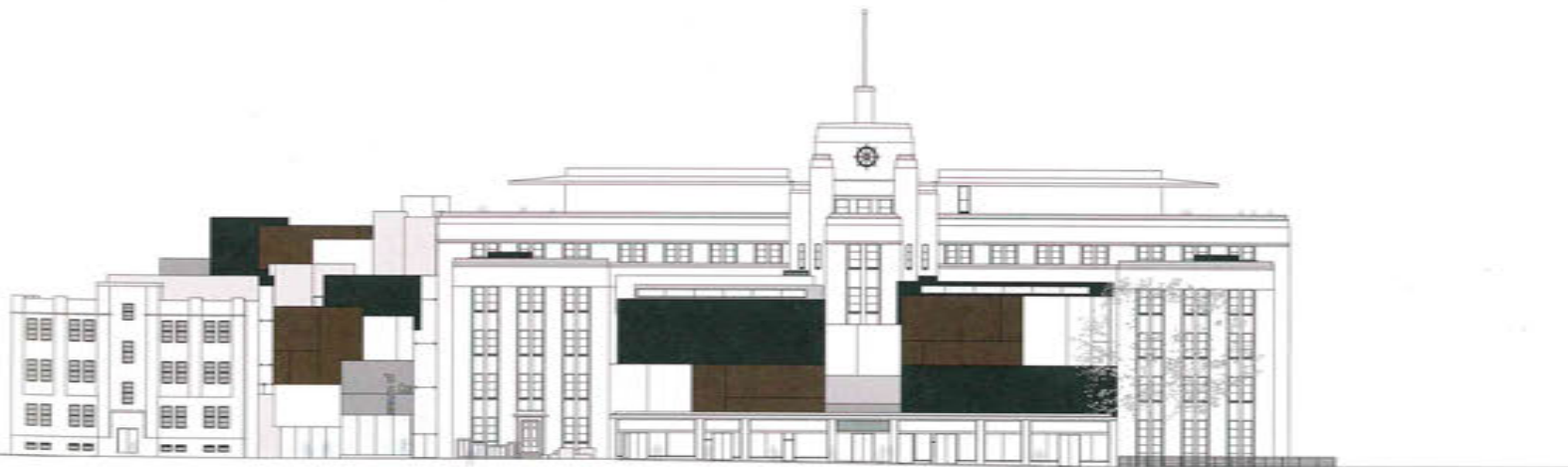
**Far left** Articulated boxes to Circular Quay entry.



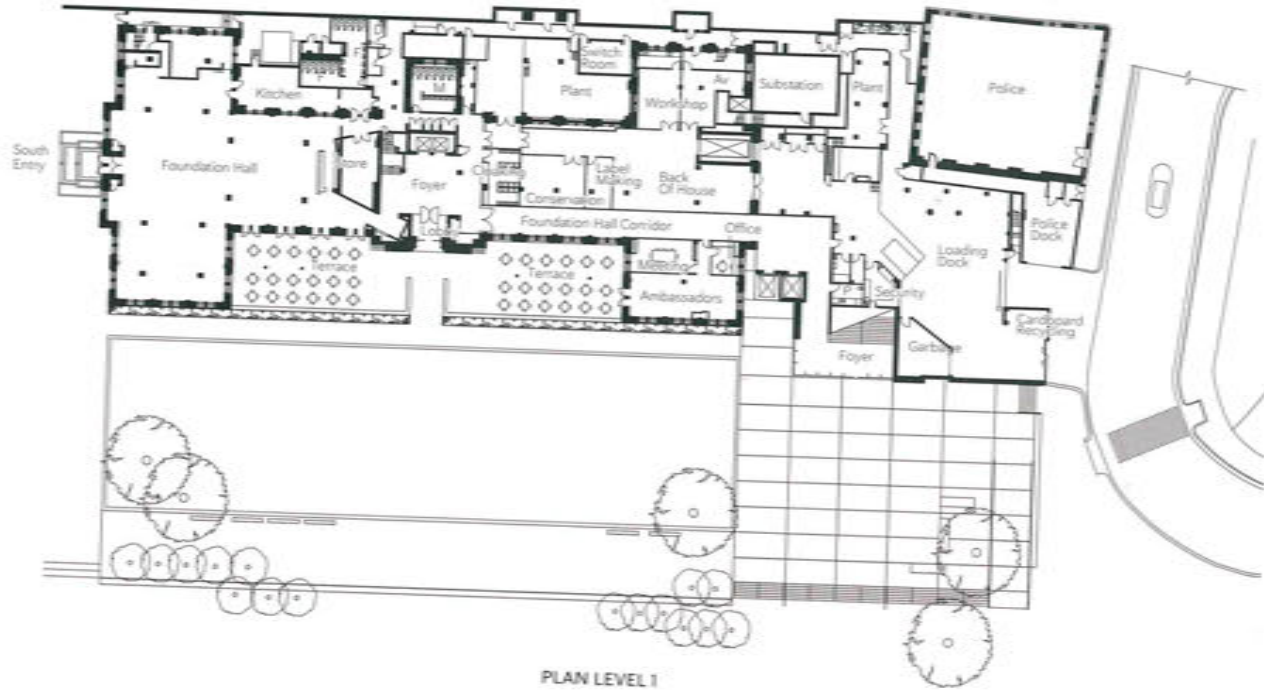




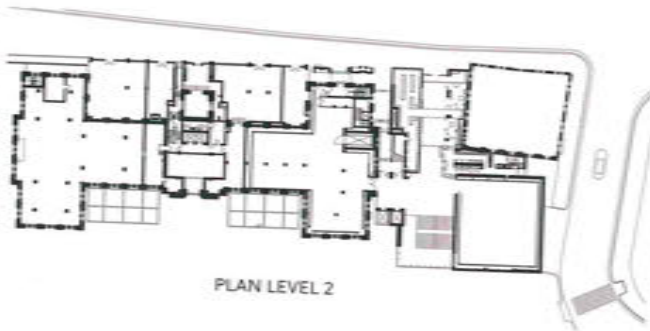
EAST ELEVATION



WEST ELEVATION



PLAN LEVEL 1



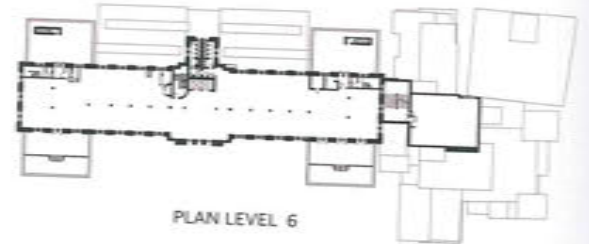
PLAN LEVEL 2



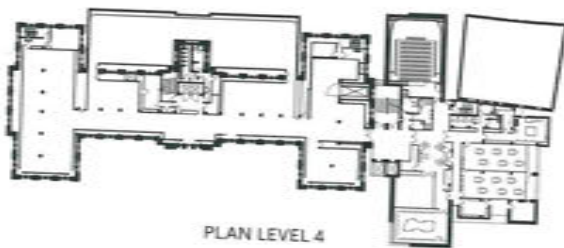
PLAN LEVEL 5



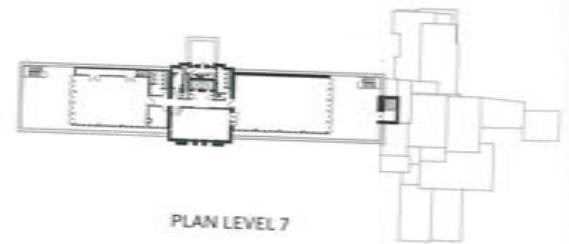
PLAN LEVEL 3



PLAN LEVEL 6

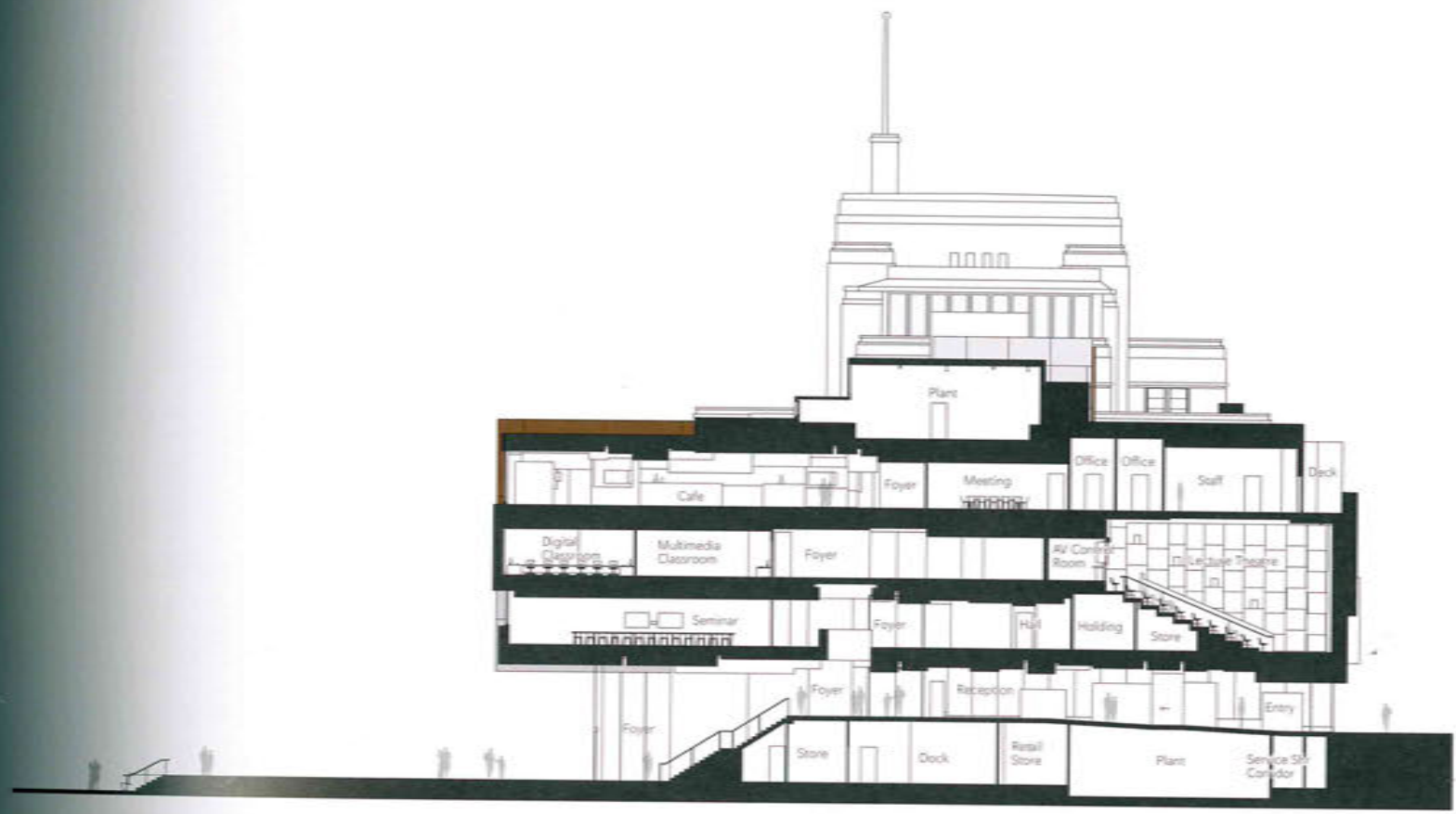


PLAN LEVEL 4

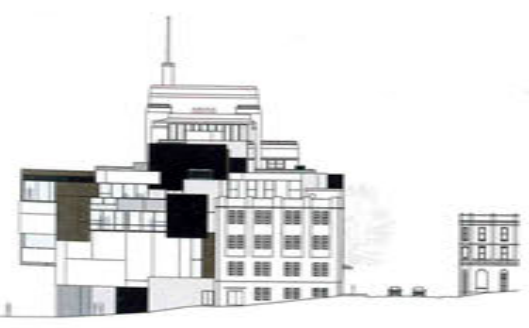


PLAN LEVEL 7





SECTION



NORTH ELEVATION



PLAN LEVEL 1