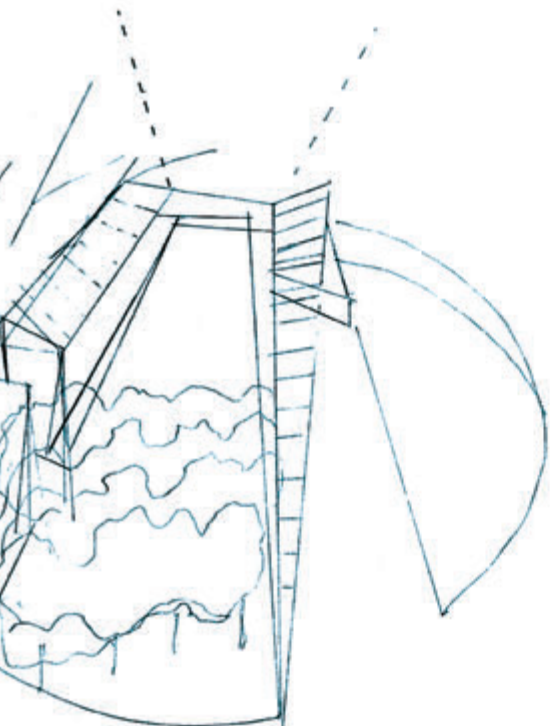




Conversations on architecture and the built world

# HAND & MIND



Edited by Ainslie Murray and Xing Ruan



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# 03

## COMPOSING

### IN PUBLIC:

#### SAM MARSHALL AT SYDNEY'S MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

The 2012 project to extend the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) presents an instructive intersection of client interests, architectural aspirations and a very Sydney site. Considered together, it tells the story of how an architect, educated at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and in the offices of key Sydney practices, brought a specific historical perspective to bear on a popular institution for the arts. The project was the largest and most complex undertaken by Architect Marshall to date. Despite its scale, and a staggered process of awarding the commission, it proved to be a fruitful collaboration between architect and client, and the resulting building has accommodated visitor numbers exceeding early expectations. The prominence of the project – fronting Sydney's premier public waterfront at Circular Quay – has demanded that the building make an urban statement, as well as play a role in promoting and representing an institution now firmly part of the cultural life of the city.

The extension was grafted onto the familiar but austere Maritime Services Board (MSB) building, which opened in 1952, but whose architecture betrays the origins of its design in the years preceding World War II. It is a good example of inter-war derivative classicism, which sought to rework the eclectic notions of the architecture of previous civilisations into something reassuring and enduring. In this case it produced a symmetrical, sandstone-clad office building that alluded to a generic classicism, with elements of art deco-inspired vertical fluting, and a reference to the pylons of the Sydney Harbour Bridge as designed by the British firm of Burnet, Tait and Lorne. The design of the MSB building emerged in the 1930s under the direction of William Henry Withers, with construction supervised by WDH Baxter. The project was halted by war, and delayed by post-war shortages of materials, being finally completed in 1952. When the MSB vacated the building in the 1980s,





### **Circular Quay entry and vertical circulation.**

Photograph by Jennifer Soo, 2016.

it was earmarked for conversion to an art gallery to house the collection assembled under the Power Bequest. This gift of about £2 million was made to the University of Sydney in 1961, and derived from the will of John Wardell Power, a doctor who abandoned medicine at the end of World War I to become an artist. The bequest set up a number of institutions in the Fine Art Department at the university, but the collection that it funded was still seeking a home. The intent of the bequest was finally realised with the conversion of the MSB building into a gallery to the design of Peddle Thorp and Walker (now PTW Architects) in the late 1980s.

Although initially established by means of the bequest, the MCA has evolved into an institution that increasingly raises its own money and directs its own program. It still serves the function, envisaged by Power, of exposing Australian audiences to contemporary trends in international art. However, the flourishing of Australian art since the mid-20th century, and indeed Australia's emergence as a source of unique and compelling artworks in its own right, has diminished the sense of importation and insularity that marked the inter-war years. The MCA's remit has shifted to the presentation of contemporary art to the widest possible audience, and to capitalise on its location at the tourist epicentre of Sydney.

The extension by Marshall opened in 2012, and is the second major reworking of the building as an art gallery, with its associated storage, offices, educational facilities and cafés. It brings to the gallery an ease of use initiated by the first conversion, but which had to wait for a more comprehensive solution for internal circulation and the use of the site as both an enclosed and a landscaped public space.

## Architecture at UNSW in the 1970s and '80s

When Sam Marshall commenced his studies in 1975, the architecture course at UNSW had undergone a number of revisions, in both structure and intellectual aspiration. The modern program grew out of the Diploma course offered by the Sydney Technical College, which itself had evolved from the architectural training offered by the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts from at least 1878. By 1922 the five-year part-time diploma of the Technical College was one of the two pathways of study leading to professional registration, alongside the Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Sydney. In the 1960s these were joined by the part-time course at the newly formed New South Wales Institute of Technology, but the earlier distinction between the UNSW and University of Sydney programs was well entrenched by then. The character of the two courses had been set by their respective origins.

The University of Sydney course rested on classical antecedents and a strong liberal arts foundation. Students studied full-time and were encouraged to read widely. By contrast, the diploma of the Sydney Technical College involved six years of part-time study combined with work in an architectural office. In 1950 the newly formed NSW University of Technology absorbed the Sydney Technical College, and in 1959 ceased offering the part-time option, following the College's conversion into the University of New South Wales a year earlier. Its full-fledged status as a university, with courses leading to degrees rather than diplomas, marked the emergence of the institution as it is known today.

But this history left its mark in the form of a technical bias, as distinct from the perceived academic bias of the University of Sydney course. UNSW graduates tended to be interested in the techniques of design as the basis of tectonic or formal expression, rather than constituting their architectural principles ideologically and then finding the means to express them. Sydney Technical College produced several seminal modernist architects whose effectiveness was rooted in sound building technique, including Sydney Ancher and Walter Bunning, both graduates from the inter-war years.

With the establishment of the University of New South Wales in 1958, and the conversion of its courses to offering only the Bachelor of Architecture, the emphasis on technique took on a greater significance. Among the early graduates was Glenn Murcutt, whose mastery of construction and attraction to a Miesian simplicity of expression has unfolded into an internationally significant career. Yet curiously it also became the crucible of a counter tendency, formulated by the dean, Tony Towndrow, as *Alto-functionalism*. Against the proliferation of modernist buildings in the 1950s, Towndrow argued that functionalism had clear limitations, and should take into account 'the emotional responses of ordinary but intelligent people', possibly through a new language of ornament.<sup>1</sup> Towndrow incorporated ideas from outside the rationalist tradition, including his notion of *Spirit* as a motivating force in design. This anti-rationalist thread proved enduring, particularly through Peter Kollar, who in his lectures and writings used terms like *Spirit*, *Truth* and *Perfect Function*, the last being a transcendent form of functionalism that incorporates beauty in a manner reminiscent of Kant's 'purposiveness without a purpose'.



**The MCA in the context of The Rocks.**  
Photograph by Harry Margalit, 2017.









**Entry stair from Circular Quay.**

Photograph by Jennifer Soo, 2016.

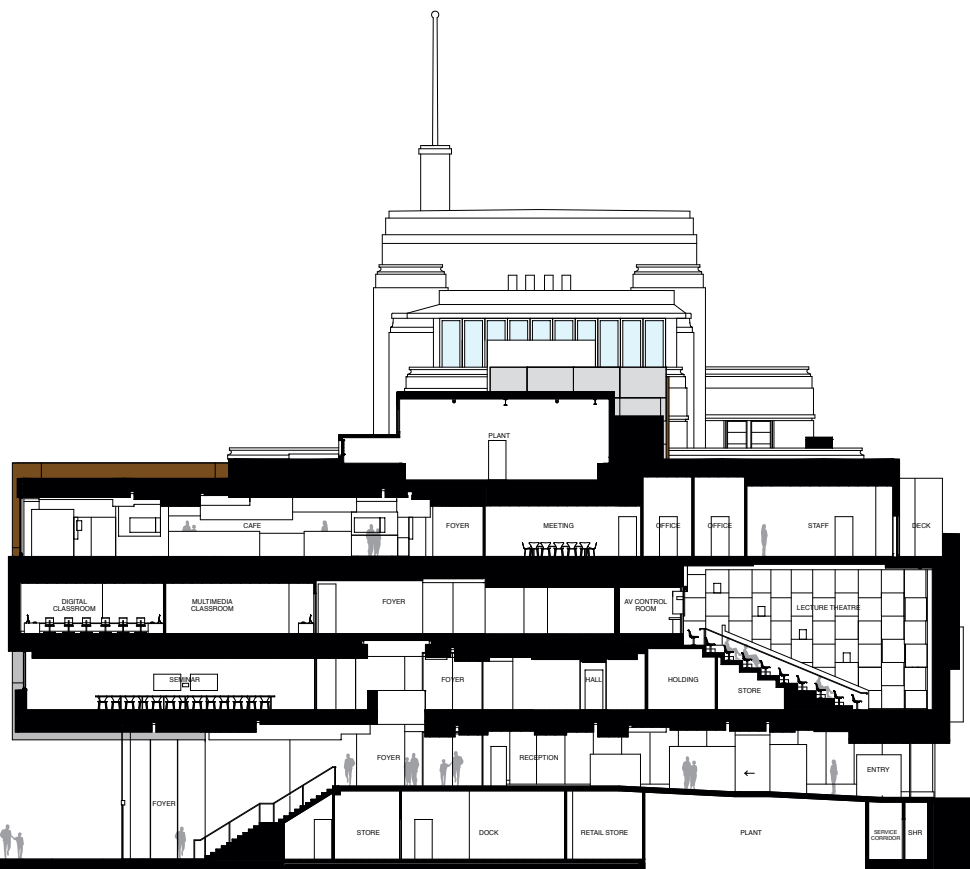
The resulting program embraced a wide range of influences, and was deepened with the 1957 appointment of Max Freeland, one of the founders of architectural history in Australia, whose influence continued through the research, publications and teaching of his younger colleagues Richard Apperly, Bob Irving and Peter Reynolds.

Henry 'Harry' Ashworth succeeded Towndrow as dean in 1964, and continued the tradition of distinct tendencies co-existing in the school. By the 1970s the architecture program at UNSW was indeed a broad church. The practical dimension of the program spawned the Construction Camps of the 1970s, in which first-year students constructed buildings. Ashworth's successor Gareth Roberts inherited, in 1972, a faculty offering degrees in construction and planning, and soon in landscape design. The architecture program offered a three-year Bachelor of Science in Architecture, and a two-year professional Bachelor of Architecture. The intake into the first degree in 1972 was 138 full-time and 22 part-time students – a very large cohort compared nationally. This no doubt contributed to its eclecticism, as the logistical problems of teaching worked against a unified approach.



**Above: Diagonal view of atrium.**  
 Photograph by Sam Marshall, 2014.

**Right: MCA section.**  
 Drawing courtesy of Architect Marshall.



## Sam Marshall's training and early career

When Marshall enrolled in the Bachelor of Architecture program at UNSW, the course retained the formative influences that had coalesced under the first three deans. Kollar was nearing the end of his academic career, but remained a potent intellectual force. Marshall recalls his influence, in providing one of the few coherent approaches to design philosophy. Marshall remembers Ken Wyatt, an engineer who taught construction and structures, as a gifted and cogent teacher. He also recalls the strong team of historians in Apperly, Irving and Reynolds, and the significant practitioners who taught design: Russell Jack, Neville Gruzman and Harry Seidler. This strong practice focus produced, in the 1980s, graduates adept at detailing and documenting architectural projects, who were sought after for these skills. This reflected the program's origins in the Technical College course and existed alongside the stream of critical authenticity espoused by Kollar, as well as the research conducted into local and Australian architectural history by the team trained by Freeland. This alliance of seemingly disparate approaches defines the identity of the school in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with no single part dominant. However, what did emerge was a critical stance towards the program's modernist underpinnings, based on both the expanded functionalism of Kollar and the awareness of pre-modern Australian architecture fostered by the historians. Thus – ironically – the school that educated so many of Sydney's early modernists now played a significant role in articulating the shortcomings of modernism itself. Marshall's final-year research thesis was on Luna Park, the amusement park in North Sydney whose

populist iconography provided fruitful material for investigating the relationship between popular building, representation and high architecture.

Marshall felt no imperative to side with any particular faction, since the easy absorption of these countervailing parts of the program lay in the prevailing approach among students. The end result was not overtly polemical, but rather held a sense of a position under construction, as it were. For Marshall the basic aesthetic inclinations of his later career had already been formed in his home: his mother had taken an active interest in contemporary art, and she communicated this to her son. He found himself with a ready vocabulary of high-modernist tropes and techniques, as well as a fondness for a particular mid-century abstract composition that he retains to this day. This was complemented by his father, a rational and practical engineer who could turn his hand to making or fixing almost anything.

After graduation Marshall was employed by the interior design firm of Marsh Freedman Associates, and this opportunity turned out to be seminal in allowing Marshall to clarify his architectural ambitions and hone certain skills. The firm was enormously influential in Sydney in the 1980s and '90s, and was not only responsible for key fit-outs and interiors, but also for articulating a distinctive aesthetic that encapsulated postmodern Sydney. As a partnership formed in 1973 between George Freedman and Neville Marsh, it operated at the bounds of interior design and architecture for more than two decades, and Freedman continued to work into the current decade.

The partnership built on Marsh's established interior firm, and blended Sydney's traditional Georgian taste as derived from the time of governor Lachlan Macquarie (1810–21) with a modern sensibility, a combination achieved with considerable taste. Freedman trained as an architect at Syracuse University and in 1969 was sent to Sydney by Knoll International to oversee construction of the Bank of NSW (now Westpac) fit-out in 1969. He brought to the partnership a willingness to experiment, and his strong colour-sense and unexpected combinations of taste and form allowed Marsh Freedman to exploit the postmodern rupture in Sydney architecture.

In a city whose tastes continue to emulate the colonial Georgian, Freedman riffed on both its expectations and its traditions. Marshall worked on the fit-out for the executive levels at the new State Bank of New South Wales headquarters in Martin Place, and soon took over as job captain. He remembers the project as formative, in that it exposed him to Freedman's inventiveness and taught him about meticulous detailing. Grafted on to his predilection for modernist, rectilinear composition, the years with Marsh Freedman defined Marshall in his ambitions and techniques.

When Marshall struck out on his own, he took with him not only the corporate experience of those years, but also a latent commitment to the principles of modernist architecture. What is perhaps surprising is that Freedman's occasional eclecticism did not take hold: without any overt reaction to it, Marshall's work was influenced by a different ethic, one more akin to the brutalist-influenced regionalism

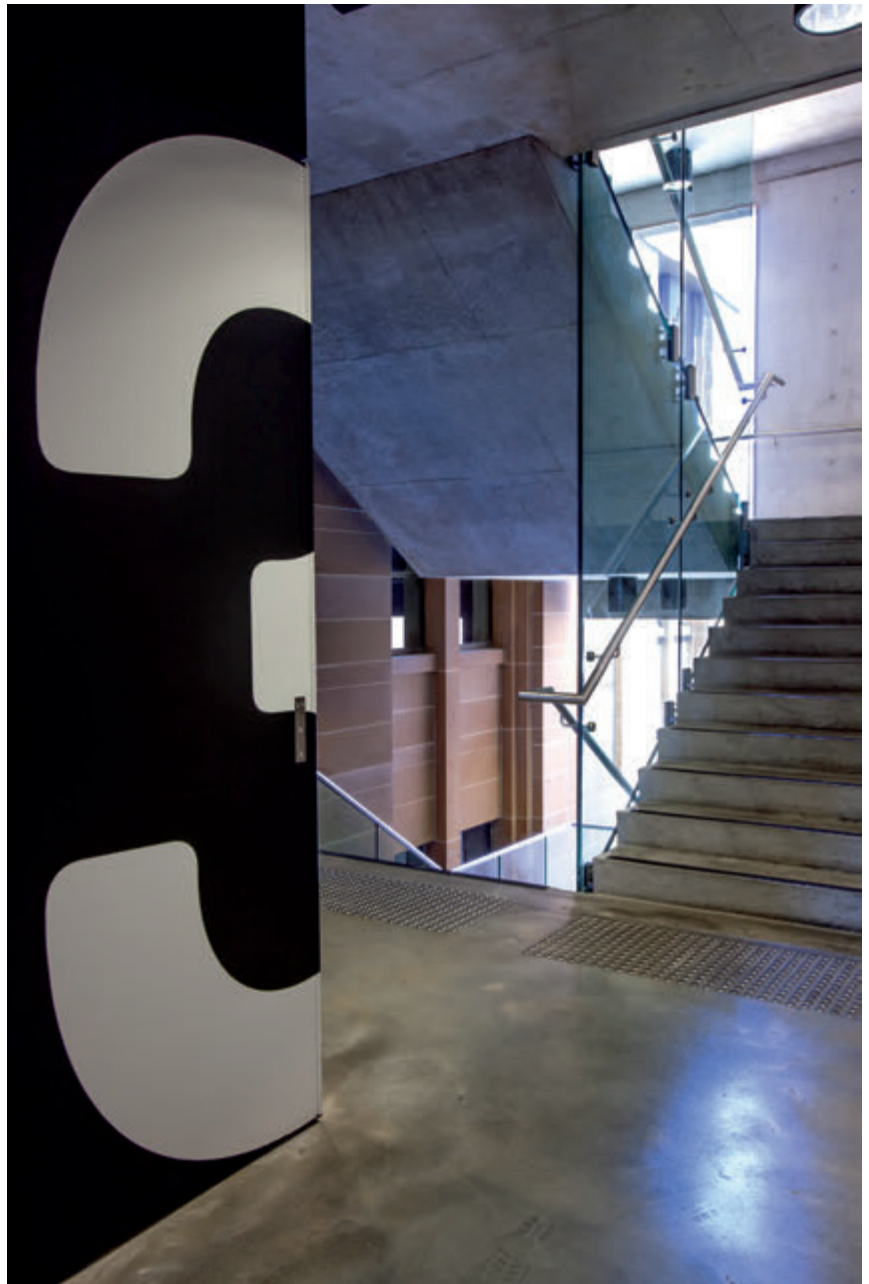


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emerging at the hands of Peter Stutchbury and Richard Leplastrier. Although formally different – Marshall bore the influences of Joan Miró, the de Stijl movement, and Russian constructivism – he was drawn to the ingenuity with ordinary materials, and the refusal to engage in the *poché* that marked the work of many of his local contemporaries. This was not only a matter of taste, but was also driven by the impulses behind the original brutalism. It was part of a search for authenticity that inspired much of Australian cultural production from the 1970s; even if the specific expression was elusive, the modernist ideas of truth in the use of materials, and structure as space-defining, remained compelling. This approach resonated with the wider profession: Marshall's conversion of a warehouse to his residence in Darlinghurst won the 2000 Wilkinson Award for Residential Architecture in NSW. The conversion has a light hand – a simple structure was inserted into the historic warehouse to hold an upper bedroom and fabricated metal bathroom, with a simple kitchen added below. The detailing shows an economy of means, overlaid with a restrained composition enlivened by decorative cut-outs that recall the work of Alexander Calder.

Marshall's partiality for graphic art and sculpture continued to inform his work. He cites as inspiration the rhythmic minimalist forms of Donald Judd, as well as the fluorescent art of Dan Flavin and Walter de Maria. The linking mode of these artists – the gentle amplification of repetitive elements – has a direct architectural extension. The distinctive glow of fluorescent tubes was the underlying motif for Marshall's simple box-within-a-box design for the Campbelltown Arts Centre. Its outer skin is translucent, lit from within by fluorescent tubes that throw into relief the oversized cut-out lettering. Its economy remains true to Marshall's modernist inclinations, transforming that which is necessary rather than overlaying additional elements.



**Opposite: Atrium volume.**

Photograph by Jennifer Soo, 2016.

**Above: Main stair detail.**

Photograph by Jennifer Soo, 2016.

### George Street entry and museum shop.

Photograph by Brett Boardman, 2012.

## The MCA commission

The MCA building, with its exposure to Sydney's premier promenade, gained prominence as a cultural institution into the new millennium. In 1997 an architectural competition was held for additions to the building, which included a cinematheque as part of a brief devoted to promoting the moving image and interactive media. This competition was won by Kazuyo Sejima working with Ryue Nishizawa. But execution of the design was hampered by many factors, including the evolving identity of the MCA and the emergence of the remains of naval docks dating to the early years of the colony. A new competition in 2000 had an expanded brief that included spaces for functions and retail. Mid-way through the competition a second option emerged, that of demolishing the existing building, and consequently the winner was judged on two proposals. But the State government withdrew support for the development, leaving the winning architectural team of Sauerbruch Hutton with no prospects.

As neither of these competitions was based on a clear and funded mandate to proceed with a brief, the MCA continued with its converted building, using the spaces designed by Peddle Thorp and Walker. Elizabeth Ann Macgregor was appointed as MCA director in 1999; as she shaped the institution its needs diverged from both competition briefs. Proceeding more modestly, the museum identified the poor circulation imposed by the former office use of the building as a factor constraining its public accessibility. The museum also lacked dedicated spaces for educating the public, especially school groups, in the themes and practices of contemporary art. An incremental approach was initiated, and six Sydney architectural firms were interviewed to solve the problems. Marshall was appointed, based largely on his understanding of contemporary art and his view that the museum should remain in the service of the artwork it displays.

Following initial studies aimed at solving the immediate problems of the building, it became clear that the circulation inadequacies could only be resolved through a more comprehensive reorganisation of the building. As the brief grew, the prospect arose of appointing Marshall to undertake this larger design. He had established a very good working relationship with the museum board and director, and he understood in detail the constraints and opportunities afforded by both the site and the institution. A group of prominent Sydney architects was appointed to advise on the subsequent design proposals produced by Marshall for the site.

The new brief called for a prominent entry and easy circulation, which logically were moved to the northern part of the site. It also added a set of educational spaces, additional gallery space, a lecture theatre, shop, café, and loading docks for artwork, and respected the requirement to preserve the remnant naval docks below ground level.

Marshall's approach was as consistent as it was simple. His basic technique was to deal with internal volumes called for by the brief as distinct spatial entities, which could be enclosed and manipulated as parts of a linked composition. The cue was taken from Donald Judd's sculptures, with their knitted volumes delineated in various colours. Marshall stretched the technique by breaking the regularity of the volumes, so they grew larger or smaller depending on their internal function. The colour palette became contextual: the external colours that defined the volumes were distinctly urban, drawing on shades visible from the museum. They included those of the Cahill expressway, the Sydney Harbour Bridge, and the various hues of the rendered or facebrick buildings in the surrounding area known as The Rocks.





Museum of Contemporary Art

Museum of Contemporary Art Australia

Three people are standing near the glass entrance of the museum.

A large glass display case on the ground floor contains various art objects, including books and small sculptures.



The design was a logical extension of the project itself. The MCA director and board were keen to work with an architect familiar with the complexities of the site, who could accommodate the many constraints that became evident during the design and documentation. These included not only the remnant docks underground, but also the need for careful joining of the new with the old. The government architect, Peter Mould, added his expertise to the project and its detailing, working with Marshall as he detailed and directed the careful shaping and weather-proofing of the new facade where it met the complex profile of the existing building. The museum was familiar with some of the less successful results of high-profile architectural firms adding to existing buildings. Studio Libeskind's addition to the Royal Ontario Museum was a case in point, its inclined walls working against the hanging and viewing of artworks.

The new volumes of the MCA are structured around the new entry and circulation space, which incorporated a wide public stairway from the waterside that linked with a ramped entry-corridor off George Street. This became the public entrance: its directness was perhaps testimony to the influence of Kollar, who abhorred counter-intuitive sequences of spaces where one had to go down in order to ascend. The new part included an educational section on the prime north-east corner, with views to the Bridge, in a statement of the importance of this function to the MCA program. Above this are the café and roof deck, again with unmatched views of key elements of Sydney Harbour: the Bridge and the Sydney Opera House. A lecture theatre, seminar rooms, library, new gallery and service areas round out the new facilities, with a new shop adjoining the entry. The stair and lifts give access to both new and old galleries, leaving the original stair and lifts to serve the more private spaces, including function areas, of the southern building.

The compositional schema of the exterior continues at a smaller scale in the interior. The ceiling of the entry is worked in a reiteration of the staggered volumes of the new building, into which are incorporated the many services of a contemporary art museum. The junction between old and new is dealt with in the negative: glass cut to profile connects the two as far as possible, so the integrity of the form of the old is kept intact.



## Modernism and its revival

The result – the new plus the old – realises the wishes of the MCA board and directors. The design process itself, with the intense involvement of Marshall, was closely tied to the needs of the museum and the intricacies of its site. More interesting from an architectural point of view is the iconography or symbolic content of the new building work. The motif of staggered volumes is not simply a reworking of the sculptural precedents of Judd; it is a technique that incorporates several key compositional modes of modernist art and design. It could be termed soft abstraction, in that its modernist references are stripped down to the interplay of geometry itself. This in turn is an analogue of rationalist design, where the intent is to filter out sentimental or historical associations to solve the functional problems presented by the brief for the building. This is not to say that abstraction is purely rational design unmediated, but rather that it is the aesthetic mode for representing rational design.

The persistent illusion in the period of high modernism was that modernism and rationalism were somehow linked in a common fate determined by history. Modernism was rationalism, with its reductive sense of composition somehow innately wedded to modern modes of thinking. But with the decline of modernism in the 1960s this linkage was seen to be culturally made, and that rational design could find many modes of expression. The exposing of modernism as just another style, rather than as the end of style, was the final blow to the credibility of the movement.

Yet despite the brief flowering of post-modernism, with its freedom to experiment with all historical styles, the association of modernism with contemporary life continued. The UNSW architecture program in the 1970s played its role in both the unpicking of modernism through its work on Australian history and its many styles, and the reformulation under Kollar of a mode of design that tried to both imbue modernism with its original tenets, and add a spiritual dimension.

Marshall's position on design, as evidenced in the MCA, is indicative of this. The building is clearly not a reiteration of high-modernist principles, which demanded a close association between form and function, but rather a knowing nod to those principles – which are then employed in an exaggerated fashion as an aesthetic device. Without evidently transgressing them, Marshall imbues the building with enough modern architectural devices for the viewer to understand that it is somehow symbolic of modernism itself. This requires a careful balance in the work, to avoid any sense of parody.

The balance is determined by the institution of the MCA itself. As a body that raises the bulk of its operating budget from its exhibitions and activities,<sup>2</sup> it is mindful of the historical role that contemporary art has played. The political role of the avant-garde has declined, along with the presence of radical politics itself. Rather than shocking the public, the MCA aims to educate the public about the role of contemporary art as part of a progressive view of everyday life, one that has been de-radicalised and enmeshed in broader cultural activities. It is no accident that people from the advertising industry, for example, are heavily involved in commissioning and collecting contemporary art. It is a way of keeping a finger on the pulse of current concerns as viewed through an aesthetic lens, as well as being a source for ideas in art direction, colour and graphic style.

The MCA today is a popular destination for locals and tourists alike. The building plays its role in this success: the director, Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, considers that the design accurately projects the character of the institution it houses. For Marshall, the building's continuity with his earlier work, and the sense of integrity that it engenders, have made the project particularly fulfilling. He is conscious of its prominent location and recounts how the architectural advisory panel early in the project remarked that the MCA needed a robust presence. However, in a survey of the sweep of buildings from the Opera House to the Harbour Bridge – Harbourside Apartments with its mannered colonnade, the singularly ordinary 2 Albert Street, the muscular classicism of the Cahill Expressway and Circular Quay railway station, and the glazed-steel framing of the Overseas Passenger Terminal – the tenor and scale of the MCA addition seem pointedly contextual, knitting together elements from the locality and the program with a signature modesty that shifts to an intimacy when one enters the building itself. This seems to be its greatest virtue: the comfortable movement of users, and cascading scales of visual and spatial interest that Marshall has choreographed as part of his humanist understanding of the role of art to speak to the everyday.



***Seymour Centre forecourt – restrained  
yet reassuring, circa 1980s.***  
Photograph by Tim Hixson.