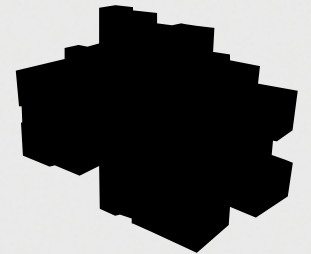
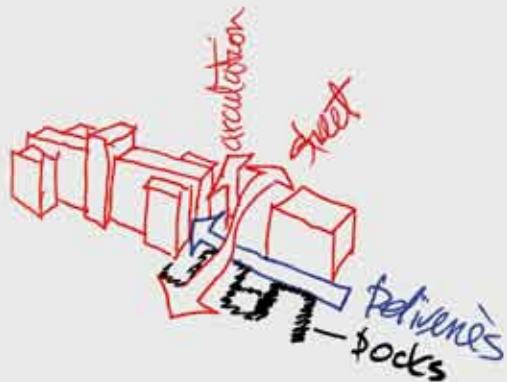
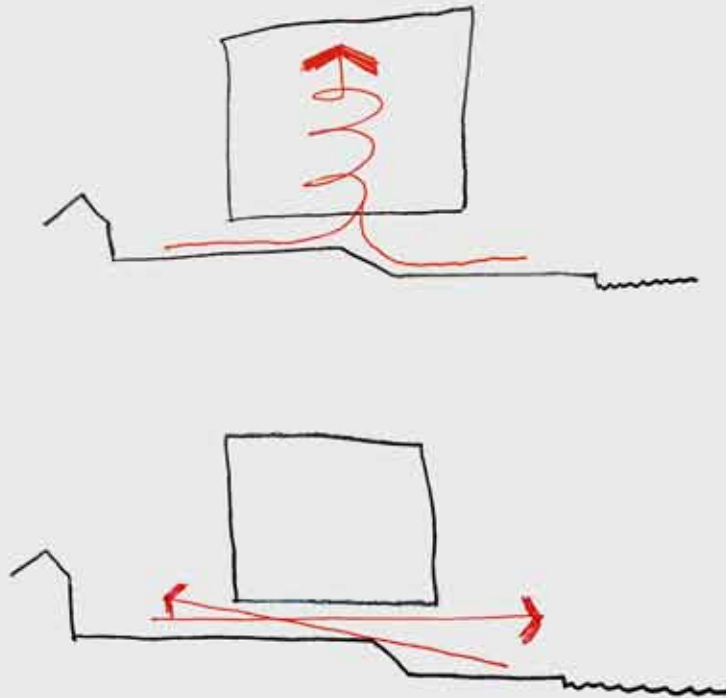


An architect's notebook

Sam Marshall





The ongoing creation of unique contemporary art never fails to amaze me. When you think it has all been done, new expressions arise.

It is this art that inspires me the most.

Any extension to the Museum of Contemporary Art would have to be an innovative solution – simple yet complex because of the existing building, the early colonial remains under the site, and the Museum's location within a heritage-protected precinct. As well as establishing coherent circulation throughout, dedicated education spaces and flexible gallery spaces, the new building had to be a contemporary signifier – readily identified as a contemporary art museum. And all of this had to serve the art and its undistracted display.

Analysis of the solids and voids in the built form of Circular Quay, particularly The Rocks, shows roads running along the contours of the peninsula with narrow passages threading down between these roads, providing pedestrian short cuts as well as vistas to the harbour. It is surprising how many passages there are.

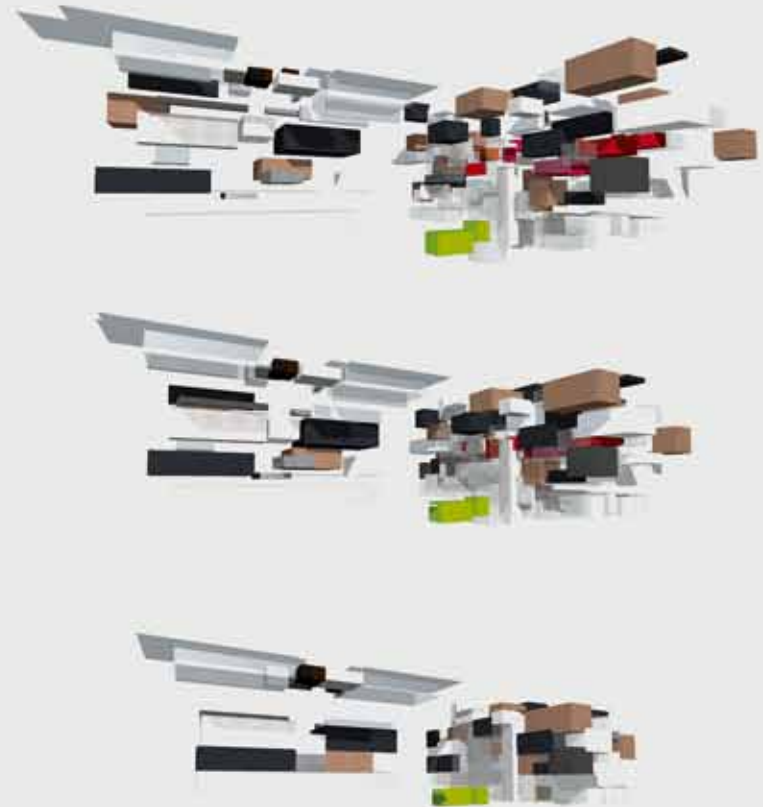
This device has been employed in the new building to reconcile the schism of entry levels from Circular Quay and George Street which are at different levels due to the slope of the land. An internal 'street' has been formed to allow easy access and to get visitors to a point from which the gallery experience can begin. Like the narrow passages, this 'street' maximises views and pedestrian traffic flow through the building.

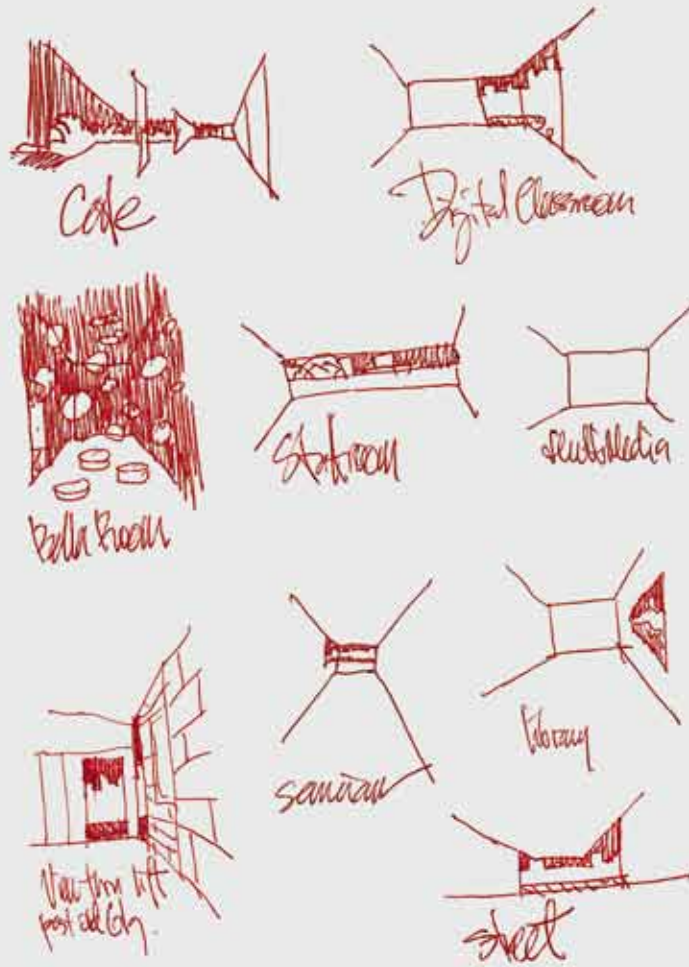
From this 'street', a simple circulation system can be accessed. Although the new building is intentionally pushed up against the old building, the main circulation stair and lifts act as the separation between old and new. Traversing either, one encounters old and new, as well as views in and out.

The key form generator was the ubiquitous 'white box'. The aim was to create spaces to accommodate all forms of art work: simple cube-like spaces that could be reconfigured to suit the demands of artists, curators and the requirements of display. The white box was the starting point in the design process. The double height gallery on the prominent north-eastern corner is the clearest expression of this idea: the white walls of the interior and the use of white GRC (glass reinforced concrete) on the exterior, separate the extension from the rest of the building.

The exterior walls of other rooms were designated colours and placed according to function. Spaces between these rooms offer views both inside and out as well as circulation. This is how I see the city: it is the space between built forms – the space created or, to some, the space left over, the 'unownable' space. Such is the 'street'...

External colours and finishes proceed beyond the glass into the interior, and visa versa. The glass is a screen: it enables the control of temperature and humidity, solar gain and keeps the interior dry.



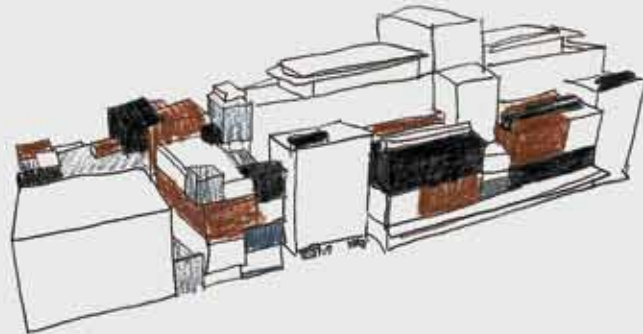


The value of 'the view' is questioned. Given the expansive views available, the incorporation of a glass façade was an obvious temptation. Instead, it is the gaps between boxes, or sometimes carefully placed cuts out of the boxes, that provide focus, giving each room a different view.

My analysis of the former MSB building is that it is a composition of forms (or boxes) arranged in a conventional and symmetrical fashion. This idea has been reinterpreted in the new addition whereby the boxes are similarly large scale but assembled in the opposite fashion – asymmetrically, a way of successfully addressing the Museum's brief for inclusivity, the old and new together.

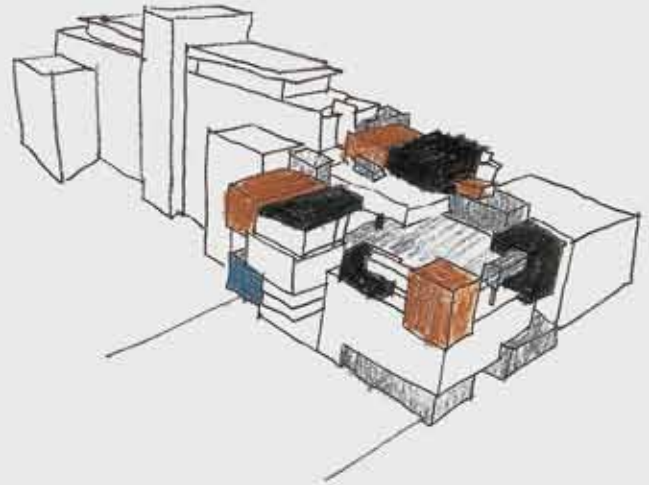
I have always been fascinated in dialogue between opposites and, in this case, solid and void, finite and infinite. Most of my work deals with this. Such gaps provide views out for orientation, interest and relief.

Scale was a crucial consideration in the design. The western side of George Street is a coherent wall of predominantly Georgian and Victorian buildings: the eastern side on the other hand, is a mix of later period architecture (including the MCA building) and open space. A contemporary gesture did not seem out of place – especially in contrast to the historic western side of the street. I like contrast. Especially when it comes to heritage. A highly contemporary building up against a historic building highlights heritage aspects and there is no confusion about what is historically significant. Trying to fit in or copying period styles would have been to vandalise the original heritage fabric.

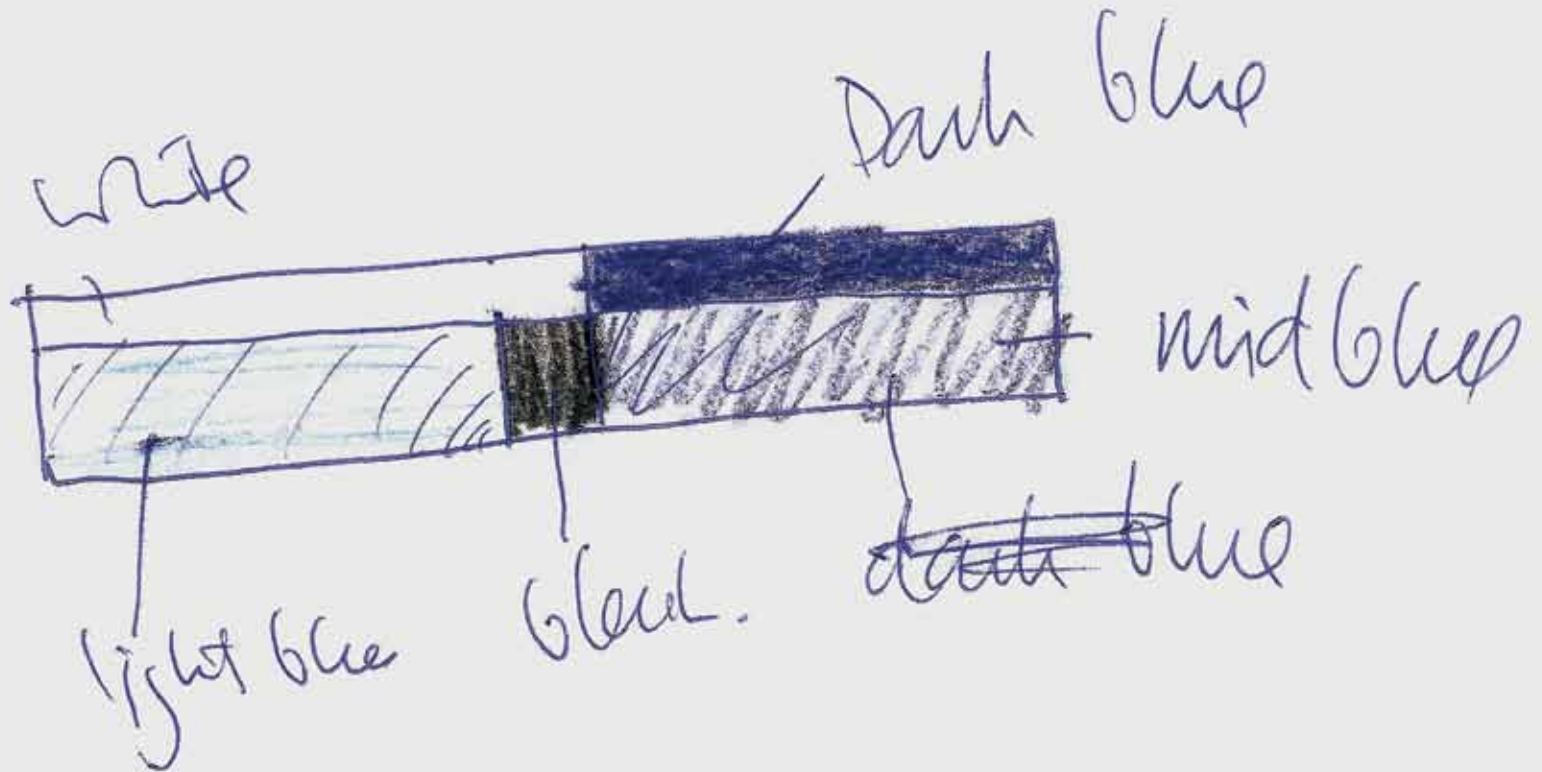


Surrounded by the massive scale of Circular Quay – the arching span of the Bridge, the huge simplicity of the Opera House, the ridiculous Luna Park face and competing CBD towers, what could be put alongside the formidable, neo-classical former MSB building? As Professor Tom Henegan noted on seeing the design, 'Yes, what do you put next to a gorilla – another gorilla'. The extension had to be strong.

Large-scale gestures have been used to articulate the external shape of the extension. Considering that the building is seen from all angles – including from above – an architectural expression that had neither front, back nor top was paramount.



Foreseeing that the design would change during the design process, a façade system was developed whereby change could easily be accommodated and the building's appearance not compromised. The asymmetrical array of boxes and their colours remained strong yet flexible.





GRC cladding was used because large-scale, cast three-dimensional panels can be fabricated out of a material just 12mm thick. GRC has the unique quality that allows it to be folded over from the vertical façade to form roofs and ceilings. Thus one cladding material could be used for most of the building – walls, ceilings and roof as one.

Generally materials retain their integrity by resisting being finished in surface coatings. Plasterboard is the exception: it can be continually adapted and transformed in the process of mounting exhibitions. In the construction, locally produced materials have been used wherever possible.

While wanting to have its own language commensurate with the large scale architectural gestures around Circular Quay, the earth colours connect with, and work in contrast to, the site so that the building does not get lost in its surrounds. Uninterrupted expanses of contrasting colours emphasise this: brown, white and black exterior panels act as bookends to the range of greys between. The interior is predominantly white providing a neutral background for the art.

Because of the nature of contemporary art and the way artists respond to issues, it is hoped the incorporation of environmentally sustainable design initiatives (that go well beyond statutory requirements) will be an inspiration to other architects and developers. The key innovation is a seawater exchange system that greatly reduces the emissions and running costs for airconditioning – an essential component for the conservation of artworks.

More important than the architecture is the way in which the building is used – the challenges contemporary art presents and the ways the galleries will be used by artists and curators, the many events in the function rooms with their great views across the harbour and the city; and the way that children and other visitors will be encouraged to explore the wonders of art-making in the classrooms and dedicated education spaces. All of this will become part of the weathering process of the building as it settles comfortably into the site.

An architect's notebook designed by
Sam Marshall February 2012

