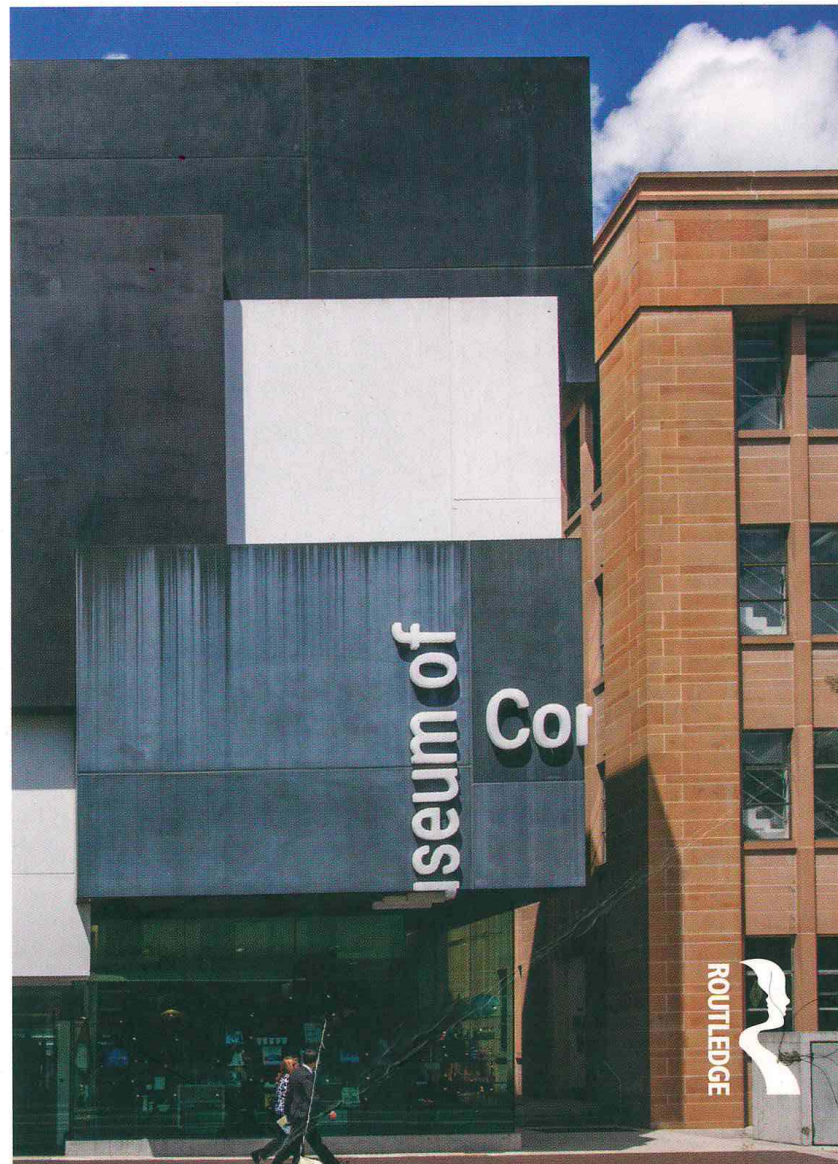




# THE USER PERSPECTIVE ON TWENTY-FIRST- CENTURY ART MUSEUMS

Georgia Lindsay



### 3

## Museum of Contemporary Art Australia's Mordant Wing

At the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, the building fades into the background in the galleries, helping visitors focus on the art. While some critics wanted a more iconic façade, the Mordant Wing successfully added amenities, created venues for rental income, and clarified the circulation, leaving the galleries in the old building to remain neutral and flexible spaces for art installation. The new wing demonstrates that a careful response to the context and an attention to user experience can create successful architecture that draws people in without distracting them from the art.

Until 2012, the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia was housed in a repurposed Maritime Services Board administrative building. The stairs were small, cramped, and confusing, and nothing about the outside indicated that the building held contemporary art; however, the historic building could not be extensively modified. After years of growing audiences, the museum hired local architect Sam Marshall to design an addition for the museum and a remodel of the galleries. The new Mordant Wing, named for the primary benefactor Simon Mordant, clarifies the entrance, opens views to Sydney Harbour, and increases the space in the museum for amenities as well as adding galleries. The design also included adding a double-height gallery, educational level, and rooftop rental venues to the old building.



**Figure 3.1** The Museum of Contemporary Art Australia's Mordant Wing seen from George Street

Source: photograph by Jennifer Soo, collection of Sam Marshall Architects

The Mordant Wing at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia  
Sydney, Australia  
Architect: Sam Marshall  
Director: Elizabeth Ann Macgregor  
AUD\$53 million  
49,500 square feet  
Opened 2012

The Museum of Contemporary Art Australia was founded by the University of Sydney to fulfill the will of John Power, who bequeathed his wealth and art collection to the university to bring the people of Australia into more direct contact with the latest art developments in other countries. In 1989, the New South Wales government gave the museum a long-term lease for the first four floors of an old government office building. The building—a sandstone office building in art deco style, completed in 1952—had previously housed the Maritime Services Board. It is a large institutional building in The Rocks district on Circular Quay, a historic area of Sydney that sits on the harbor directly across from the famous Sydney Opera House. The building was converted into a museum by Andrew Andersons of Peddle Thorp Architects, and this opened in 1991. In 2001, the museum negotiated a new funding model with the New South Wales government, and the Australia Council for the Arts, the Australian government's funding and advisory body, ceased its formal relationship with the University of Sydney.

By 2010, after a decade of steadily increasing visitor numbers, the need to expand the building was apparent and acute. The Maritime Services Board Building did not provide views and iconic architecture to match the distinctive location, and the museum was ready to expand beyond what was possible in the repurposed space. Some people advocated moving the museum, but the director and the board were reluctant to give up such a prime location. The underused parking lot adjacent to the existing building provided the opportunity for expansion. The Chairman of the foundation, Simon Mordant—who, along with his wife Catriona, had been involved with the museum from the beginning—made an initial pledge of AUD\$5 million, subsequently increased to AUD\$15 million, to start the fundraising. The rest of the funding was a combination of private and public sources including local, state, and federal governments.

The museum board engaged Sydney architect Sam Marshall to design the new building. The design brief included the requirements that the building have easily navigable circulation spaces, neutral and flexible galleries, facilities for education and events, and welcoming public spaces. Income generation was critical as the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia generates 70 percent of its income from non-government sources and does not charge admission, except to some temporary exhibitions. Marshall focused his design on ease of access to the

building, flexible gallery spaces, venues for events to generate revenue, technology and space to support both exhibitions and education, and architecture iconic enough to declare that this was a contemporary art museum.

To achieve those goals without disrupting the integrity of the old building, the Mordant Wing nestles against the north side of the Maritime Services Board Building. The galleries remain mostly in the old building, but they underwent significant renovation to improve circulation and flow. A new gallery was added on the side of the building away from the harbor, on the George Street side, and three rooftop venues were added. These venues are advertised as places that “take full advantage of their unique location and capture breathtaking views of Sydney Harbour, the Sydney Opera House and the city skyline” (Figure 3.2). They opened six months before the new wing; the first event held there was a capital fundraising dinner. In the first two years, revenue from rental has exceeded the budget predictions.

The Mordant Wing design began with the concept of the white box. Each programmatic space was assigned a box and an exterior color, and then the boxes were arranged to form the building's mass. Thus, the idea of gallery space was a unifying theme of the addition across the varying programs in the new space (Figure 3.3). Most of the Mordant wing is taken up with the National Centre for Creative Learning, which includes a 110-seat lecture hall, two creative studios, classrooms that face the Sydney Opera House, technology for remote learning, and a room dedicated to artist commissions that engage children with special needs.

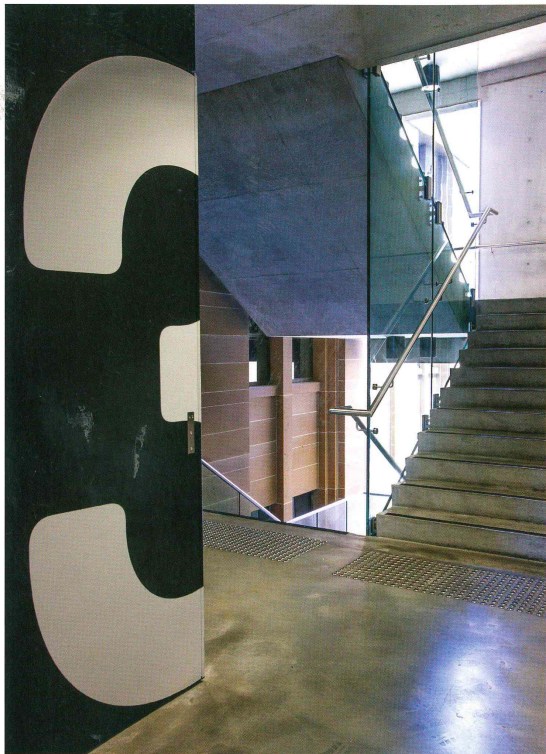
One of the main issues solved by the Mordant Wing is that of circulation. Before the addition, circulation was narrow and confusing. Now, the primary circulation is in the Mordant Wing, and the old building's stairs and elevator are reserved for people coming to functions in one of the rooftop venues. This allows for a separation of function such that, for example, wedding parties need not ride the same elevator as gallery visitors. At some museums, such as the FRAC Bretagne (Chapter 11), the rental program is used as a way to invite people to engage with the art, and even to entice them into the galleries. Here, though, the two user groups—rental venue visitors and art visitors—remain entirely separate. The main circulation is a set of wide stairs and an elevator in the new wing, right next to the old building (Figure 3.4). Windows in the foyer of each floor offer views



Figure 3.2 View from one of the new venues atop the old building  
Source: photograph by Jennifer Soo, collection of Sam Marshall Architects



Figure 3.3 Gallery spaces in the new wing are easy to display art in  
Source: photograph by Jennifer Soo, collection of Sam Marshall Architects



**Figure 3.4 The exterior of the old building is visible in the new stairway**  
 Source: photograph by Jennifer Soo, collection of Sam Marshall Architects

in both directions to help orient visitors and provide relief from museum fatigue, and the exterior sandstone of the old building is left uncovered and visible in the stairs. The floor and ceiling materials and ceiling heights are continuous across the new and the old building in order to respect the old building and to create a unified experience within the museum.

The museum projected 750,000 visitors a year after the opening (up from about 500,000 in the year before), but they welcomed 1.1 million in the first year and have had approximately 900,000 visitors each year since. Additionally, the demographic of visitors has shifted to be slightly older than before; more people over 40 visit than was the case before the new wing was created. The director attributes the difference to the new building, which creates an obvious museum presence, good flow, views, and visible entrances. The contemporary art that the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia shows is not as familiar to the general public as Old Masters might be, so the museum strives to insure that visitors are made to feel welcome by front-of-house staff and are given information to encourage engagement with the work. The café and sculpture terrace can be accessed without going to the galleries, but all the galleries are free apart from major exhibitions—both of these factors can help draw visitors into the building. The education center is located near the major floor galleries and has views of Sydney Harbour. Providing a quality experience for users of the center was critical to the design.

**Lesson: Respond to the Context**

The Rocks, the area of Sydney where the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia is located, is a historic neighborhood with streets lined with small Victorian shops. Roads in The Rocks run along the contours of the peninsula, with small, narrow alleys leading between them and towards the water. Just like one of those passages, the foyer runs perpendicular to the main road, connecting it to the harbor and opening up harbor views (Figures 3.5 and 3.6). Because the city of Sydney, with its tall office buildings, is only a few blocks from the harbor, the Mordant Wing can be seen from above. So Marshall designed the roof as carefully as the sides, thinking of it as a fifth elevation and using the same materials on the roof as on the façade. Thus, he was taking into account users who would possibly never enter the building, responding to the gaze of people in office buildings or on the nearby bridge.

From the harbor side, too, the views of passersby were considered with art commissioned to bring attention to the historical significance of the site (Figure 3.7). Beneath the Mordant Wing on the harbor side is the site of the first landing of Europeans and the docks used for centuries to connect Australia to the rest of the world. Because of the historical significance of the buried docks, they could not be destroyed. But to insure their preservation, neither could they be exposed to highlight their significance. The structure for the Mordant Wing, therefore, had to be inserted between the docks, and the museum commissioned a piece of art to highlight the history buried beneath the building. In addition, the new wing uses seawater to regulate temperature, collects rainwater, and uses other energy-saving technologies.

Another significant aspect of the site is the building's proximity to the Sydney Opera House and the Sydney Harbour Bridge, both iconic structures that consume visual space on the harbor. Instead of trying to compete with the Opera House for most muscular icon, Marshall focused instead on the visitor experience and allowed his façade to emerge from that. The museum building was not required to be a destination because Sydney Harbour already is one. In a reversal of a common trend, the modesty of the exterior was controversial. Often, iconic façades raise controversy, such as when the Sydney Opera House design was unveiled. But here, it is the fact that the façade is understated compared to the Opera House that caused the controversy. While Marshall's building does not disappear into the historical buildings around it, neither does it partake in the structural gymnastics of, for example, the Milwaukee Art Museum's Quadracci Pavilion (Chapter 5). Architecture critics such as Elizabeth Farrelly of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Alan Miller of the *Architects' Journal* lauded the competence of Marshall's handling of the visitor experience but panned the visual effect of the new wing, saying it lacked "spatial delight" or "a layer of fascination or emotion." The controversy over whether a building can be successful without trying to compete with the Opera House in iconographic terms was so heated that Make Space for Architecture—a local nonprofit promoting critical engagement with architecture—hosted a roundtable discussion "to openly discuss the manner in which both the profession and the community consume/critique architecture in Sydney" with the Mordant Wing as the focus and Sam Marshall and Elizabeth Farrelly as the primary debaters.<sup>2</sup> Director Macgregor defends the Mordant Wing from detractors, saying that the architecture



**Figure 3.5 The entry foyer looking towards Sydney Harbour**  
Source: photograph by Jennifer Soo, collection of Sam Marshall Architects



**Figure 3.6 The entry foyer looking towards George Street**  
Source: photograph by Jennifer Soo, collection of Sam Marshall Architects

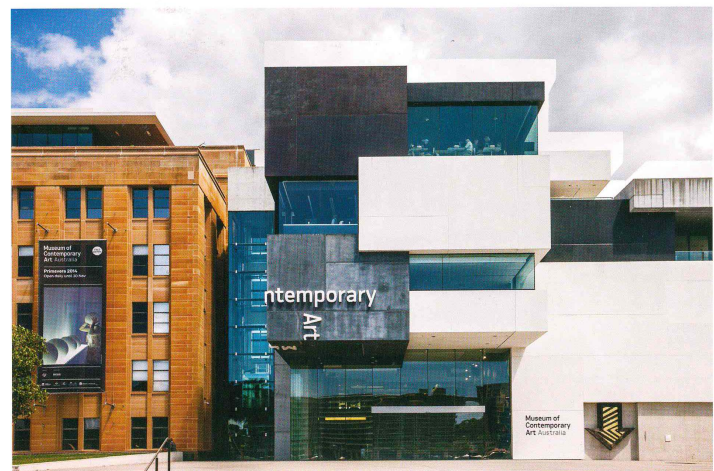
must work for the audience and the art, which the new building does. She says that architectural statements can be risky; the Mordant Wing signals contemporary art without asserting a new form in the already muscular architecture of the harbor. In spite of the negative critical response, Marshall says that the Mordant Wing "stands proudly amongst its strong neighbors" and the visitor numbers support the success of the building. Not all art museums must have iconic architecture to match the Guggenheim Bilbao; the Mordant Wing, while signaling "contemporary art" on the outside, was not trying to compete with the Sydney Opera House.

**Lesson: Help the Visitor Focus on Art**

With views of the Opera House, the water, and the bridge, the Mordant Wing acknowledges its setting without trying to compete, leaving visitors to focus on the art inside. While other additions in Part 2 had missions including things like increasing tourism to the city, the priority of the Mordant Wing was to help visitors focus on the art through easy entry and navigation. The art display spaces themselves are simple, so the curators have the maximum choice over how to display the art. Even with the addition looking different on the outside, the internal experience is of one unified building; people often do not notice the transition from the Mordant Wing into the gallery space in the old building.

Internal continuity is coupled with visual connections to external features to improve wayfinding. Gallery spaces have few windows, but non-gallery spaces, such as classrooms, the foyer, the shop, the café, the stairs, and the elevator, all have views to outside and sometimes into other interior spaces. Thus, visitors can orient themselves to the harbor or to The Rocks after emerging from any gallery. The curators did not want any views from within the galleries because they did not want to distract from the art.

Museum staff requested that it be easy for visitors to get into the galleries because the visitor experience had been negatively impacted by the confusing and narrow circulation of the old administrative building. To fulfill that request, Marshall moved the main entrance to the Mordant Wing. Two entrances, one from George Street and one from the harbor, lead into a single foyer, which resolves the issue of the change of level between the two sides of the building (Figures 3.8 and 3.9). The foyer is open and accessible to anyone at any time the museum is open,



**Figure 3.7** The Museum of Contemporary Art Australia's Mordant Wing seen from the harbor

Source: photograph by Jennifer Soo, collection of Sam Marshall Architects



Figure 3.8 Visitors entering from the harbor or from George Street arrive at the same foyer and circulation space  
Source: photograph by Jennifer Soo, collection of Sam Marshall Architects

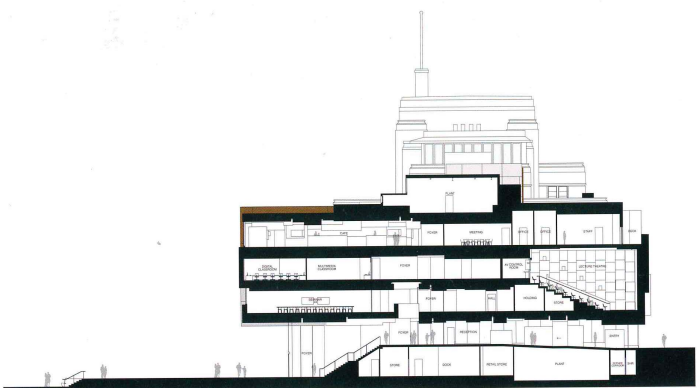


Figure 3.9 Section



and views of the harbor are visible from the George Street entrance through the foyer. In this way, the entrance foyer of the museum serves as a passageway from the street to the harbor as well as to the museum. The main stairs and elevator for the museum are off the foyer, as is a bookshop and the reception desk for the museum. With the exposure of the old building's sandstone in the stairwell, the location of the old building in relation to the new is immediately apparent. Thus, visitors entering either from the harbor or the street arrive quickly at the same location and at once gain a sense of how to navigate further into the museum, to the city, or to the harbor. The entrance adds clarity to museum wayfinding, freeing visitors to focus on the art without worrying about how to get to galleries.

#### **Lesson: Use Digital Videos to Help Visualize the Experience**

Throughout the design process, the architect generated short videos moving through the digital model of the design, instead of using more traditional paper-board models or relying on plans and sections, to help insure that the visitor experience was smooth and art focused. These digital fly-throughs helped communicate ideas and helped museum staff understand the design so they could identify problems in the experience. They also helped with fundraising, showing potential donors how the building would improve the image and the feel of the museum. Versions of the fly-throughs are available on YouTube, contributing to the museum's online presence.

The museum staff would use the computer model to test visitor experience, thinking about arrival, points of contact, circulation, and wayfinding. The architect set up hypothesis scenarios; for example, what happens if a child is crying on the third floor and needs to get to a restroom? Through these simulations, they realized that the foyer and public spaces should have art, so the museum commissioned some pieces for permanent display in the foyer and entrance and commissions a new piece for the sculpture terrace every 18 months. Thus, the computer models helped forestall some of the issues that arose after the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland (Chapter 9), for example, where visitors felt there was not enough art on the first floor when the building first opened. Here, museum staff noticed the lack of art in the foyer using one of the fly-throughs, so they could address the issue by commissioning art before the building opened.

#### **Conclusion**

The focus on the visitor experience has made the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia addition and renovation successful. People who might not like the way the building looks in pictures usually enjoy being in the space; visitors have given feedback via surveys that they did not like the way it looked in the newspaper, but really enjoyed the space when they were actually there. The user experience was kept at the forefront throughout the design process; fly-throughs were the main way in which the architect communicated ideas to the client. They showed how the building worked as opposed to how it looked—a focus of the project from the beginning (Figure 3.10).

Externally, the new wing stands out from the old; the façade signals that the building holds something contemporary and cutting edge. While some critics would have liked a more attention-grabbing façade, the museum chose to focus on the internal experience, and Marshall's design carefully responds to the old building for seamless movement through the galleries. Instead of adding another icon to the harbor, the Mordant Wing frames views of the icons already capturing attention nearby.



Figure 3.10 Views to the outside and to programmatic spaces help orient visitors, as here on the third floor outside the education space

Source: photograph by Jennifer Soo, collection of Sam Marshall Architects

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## Notes

- 1 [www.mca.com.au/about/venue-hire/](http://www.mca.com.au/about/venue-hire/).
- 2 The event is available to watch at <https://makespace4arch.wordpress.com/2012/05/09/open-conversation-mca-review/>. David Neustein summarized the discussion for the *Australian Design Review* in "MCA: Open Conversation or Guarded Debate?" Gillain Serisier overviews the controversy generally for the *Australian Design Review* in "Lines of Division: The New MCA in Sydney."