

# ar

## National Gallery of Australia

Then and Now

Clinton Murray  
NMBW  
MGT Architects  
Stutchbury Pape & Suters  
Museum of Contemporary Art  
Mecanoo



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The National Gallery of Australia provides a complex subject for 'Then and Now', given the significance of the building within Australian architecture, an inevitable need for refurbishment works after its first 20 years of operation, and the significant changes in gallery expectations over that period. Furthermore, the recent death of Harry Howard (designer of the highly regarded and much-loved landscape at the NGA) has prompted an urgency among those close to the 80-year-old Col Madigan to campaign for his involvement in the redevelopment of the building.

■ Furthermore, the NGA has recently come sharply into focus due to the controversy surrounding plans for this redevelopment. One has to ask at this point, what is it about the redevelopment of major gallery spaces in Australia that is proving so difficult? How is it that the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA, also featured in this issue of *ar*) can have selected an architect of the calibre of Kazuyo Sejima, with whom to work collaboratively on a range of development options some four years ago, only to now be lumbered with 12 responses to two ill-conceived questions, and the possibility of still no resolution to the development issues at the site?

■ The debates surrounding both the NGA and MCA redevelopments have again exposed a major problem in this country (only a year ago we were discussing Federation Square in similar terms) – that of the way in which major public buildings are commissioned and procured. The MCA debacle is, in my view, not so much about the quality of the architect or the scheme – one could even suggest that, given their fundamental briefing flaws, a discussion of the schemes is a spurious distraction from the real issue – but about the quality of the questions asked by the architects, project managers and client representatives who develop these briefs and who sit

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# National Gallery of Australia.

Having suffered at the hands of fate twenty years ago, the NGA again finds itself the subject of heated debate, with controversy surrounding its plans for redevelopment. The pivotal question is what, if any, relationship should exist between the architects of its past and the architects of its future? We examine the issues Then and Now.

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National Gallery of Australia.  
Canberra ACT

Edited by Gerard Reinmuth.  
Photography courtesy of the National  
Gallery of Australia.



on the juries to assess the designs. The development of briefing documents and the participation in juries of this stature is a serious task, but one that seems to be taken too lightly and for which those involved appear unaccountable, given the status of both projects at present.

■ One can only compare these situations with the management of the Opera House redevelopment where Richard Johnson of Johnson Pilton Walker (formerly DCM Sydney), upon winning the commission, proposed that any refurbishment should only occur after the development of a management plan for the site, respectfully undertaken in association with the original architect, Jorn Utzon. Johnson is a rare breed of architect in this country, backed by a fearlessness and perspective that comes with a true sense of the place of his actions and works within the greater realm of architectural history. Aware that he is not the first and will not be the last to work on Utzon's masterpiece, the development of some clear principles for later work is seen as a far more important task, in many respects, than that the work itself. One can simultaneously admire Johnson's humility in deferring to Utzon in the first instance and the strategic genius that leaves him space to undertake the detailed design 'unencumbered' by questions of authorship and the previous architect's involvement in the new work.

■ With this as a model, we can only turn our gaze to the NGA and wonder how it is that respected, multi-award-winning practice Tonkin Zulaikha Greer (TZG) can find themselves in the firing

line as an increasingly mobile and motivated group demands a halt to the works amid accusations of 'vandalism' of Madigan's difficult masterwork. It would seem that TZG's error was simply to have won the selection process in the first place – a process entered eagerly by nearly all major practices in the country. Yet again, the actual process of procuring the building comes into the spotlight.

■ One would suppose that the guardians of the NGA would find their task relatively simple when compared with the goings on at Circular Quay, where the intersection between a major site, two governments in disagreement, and the ever-present necessity for 'commercial feasibility' that accompanies any development within Sydney, will all play out to a disappointing end. The National Gallery, in comparison, simply required a medium scale 'alts and adds' project.

■ Yet it just all seems too hard. Plagued by a series of pragmatic shortfalls (air-conditioning, waterproofing and BCA compliance for example) a 'refurbishment' project was mooted that would address these issues. However, as has been noted by the commentators below, either the

gallery has never worked or, as boldly suggested by Richard Goodwin, the collection has never been curated appropriately for the space. At best we can enjoy the magnificence of a 'great failure' but can never truly enjoy it as a fine space to go and look at art.

■ Enter NGA Director Dr Brian Kennedy. Ever-present in the media of late, Kennedy has become the focus for a series of 'blunders' such as the mishandled cancellation of the 'Sensation' show and now the redevelopment of the gallery itself. Kennedy saw the potential for this refurbishment to become a major architectural intervention – perhaps 'another Bilbao', such is the nirvana of the contemporary gallery director. A number of international architects were invited, but their polite refusals suggest the NGA is of little interest to the non-Australian practitioner. Left to the locals, Tonkin Zulaikha Greer – masters of political persuasion and experienced campaigners in the Canberra context – won as 'best of the rest', thus continuing the peculiarly Sydney-based connection with this building. At the time of the announcement, I reflected upon this as an excellent result – TZG's heavy-handed detailing and formal bluntness suggested they may well be candidates who could hold their own against Madigan's gloriously insane concrete hulk.

■ It is not the purpose of this review to analyse this situation further, other than to say that, with Johnson's success at the Opera House as a model, the NGA's method of dealing with Madigan must be questioned. The opacity of Kennedy's process – discussed widely in the press by John McDonald – has become a victim of its own ability to undermine even the best intentions, if such intentions do in fact exist.

■ However, as is the case in our profession, the test of how well you play the game lies exposed in the reality of what is built – and so TZG's completed work will provide us with evidence of their success or otherwise in dealing with this situation. No further discussion will be needed. Madigan suffers the same fate.

Yes, he was well-snookeyed by the intricacies of the peculiarly Canberran decision-making process that saw the road system switched at the 11th hour but, as noted in the commentaries below, while one can revel in 'the craft of architecture' and 'professional commitment' inherent in his work, few can say that the building is anything but difficult.

■ I should conclude this introduction with a special note of thanks to Peter Tonkin and Brian Zulaikha of Tonkin Zulaikha Greer for their contribution. Constrained by confidentiality agreements and so on, they have made little response to the many (and sometimes hysterical) accusations made in the popular press since this furor broke. TZG's agreement to comment in this review is therefore gratefully appreciated.

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In 1999 he was engaged for a short period as an adviser to the Australian National Gallery to assist in the formulation of some key principles for the proposed refurbishment, and to liaise with Col Madigan in this regard. When it became clear that Madigan was to be excluded from this process he amicably terminated his involvement in the process.