

The National Museum of Australia as *danse macabre*: Baroque allegories of the popular

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Published as John Macarthur and Naomi Stead, 'The National Museum of Australia as *Danse Macabre*: Baroque Allegories of the Popular', in *South Pacific Museums: Beyond the New Museology?* Chris Healy and Andrea Witcomb eds., Macquarie University ePress, 2006.

Abstract:

Ashton Raggatt McDougall's architectural design for the National Museum of Australia (NMA) has had a reception as heated as the institution itself. In many ways the buildings and institution are identified, one with the other, to an extent that would seem praiseworthy if not for the fact that this identification is most often made by the NMA's vehement critics. Those who oppose the museum's presentation of Australian history see the buildings with their various symbols of atonement as built proof of what they take to be the deleterious effects of relativism in historiography. Meanwhile some architectural critics find that the building's general uncertainty as to its own status as an object ought partly to be blamed on postmodernist museology with its sometimes Jacobinical disavowal of artefacts and collections in favour of affects of citizenship to be found in a flux of pixels. Our aim in this paper is to introduce a gap between the institution and its architecture, to describe and to speak for the buildings as significant cultural works in their own right. We claim that to understand the NMA as a whole it is necessary not to see the buildings as equipment, as hardware on which to run the institution's software, or as a form that naturally and necessarily expresses the content of the museum, but rather to understand the buildings as art. The architecture of the NMA is a mimesis of the institution where the museum's problems are rearranged in semblance and extended into crisis by hyperbole. With the licence of art, the buildings can and do conduct a discourse with less constraint, and less responsibility, than the institution housed. Here we are making a supposition, that the category 'art' and architecture understood as art have a particular role in social history museums in presenting what is otherwise unrepresentable, because of lack of evidence, lack of agreement, horror or ennui. We aim to show that what non-architects might construe as matters of the discourse of cultural policy – that is, the meaning and value of the popular and of curatorial practice, and the occasioning of interpretation on the part of visitors – also become the material of an aesthetic logic in the buildings of the NMA.

Article:

Ashton Raggatt McDougall (ARM) and Robert Peck von Hartel Trethowan, architects in association, competed for and won the commission for the design of the National Museum of Australia (NMA) and its neighbour the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (IATSIS). The design team was lead by Howard Raggatt of ARM, and the buildings are located on Acton Peninsula on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra, the capital city of Australia. The project was completed on time, and within budget, and the buildings were opened in March 2001. Some early strategic decisions about the project underlie and constrain much of what we are about to describe, but two of these can be passed over. The NMA and IATSIS are quite small in floor area when considering the size of Acton Peninsula, which they were intended to occupy so as to complete the broader Lake Burley Griffin landscape. The architects' decision to design a relatively thin annular building, which pushed up as close as possible to the lake's edge, is their answer to the brief of contributing to this larger landscape. This is one reason ARM's design was chosen, as the competition jury realised that more compact designs on the centre of the Peninsula would be largely invisible from across the lake. This decision meant a long perimeter to the building, which placed pressure on an already meagre budget and culminated in one of the most remarked aspects of the building. It is constructed largely in metal sheet and plasterboard, not the stone and stainless steel of serious institutional buildings, and has the 'tinny' feel of a suburban shopping centre, because its cost is, in fact, comparable. A third starting point is more relevant to the present discussion. Paul Keating, during his tenure as prime minister resisted pressure to build the NMA, saying that it might be 'another marble mausoleum' in the Parliamentary Triangle (Ward 2001, 39). Clearly the NMA as built avoids this charge, and yet the manner in which it has done so raises as many questions as it answers. Although the building disavows the solemnity of the mausoleum and has what we will call the 'look' of populism, the NMA follows the manner for which ARM are well known and is packed with coded references to the politics of Australian history and to the history of architecture. There follows a double problem: first, the amount of cultural capital and sheer effort required to interpret the buildings is truly daunting, and thus has led to charges of elitism; and, second, even dipping into this interpretive space is enough for one to realise that the building is not as celebratory as suggested by its purely sensual reception of bright colours and jaunty angles: it has, in fact, a highly choleric attitude to Australia and to architecture.

The formal armature of the NMA's architecture lies in the proposition of a series of threads knotted together on the site. These threads constitute some buildings and cut through others. This way of generating the form of the buildings stands in relation to a body of techniques and debates about form and technique that are specifically architectural. Briefly, ARM like many architects of their generation are agnostic about concepts of 'good' form derived from function or from canons of proportion. They thus follow a strategy, which was common among progressive architects in the late twentieth century, of not designing the form of buildings directly, but rather designing formal systems, constraints and conceptual machines, which when made operational by the requirements of building, produce the form. Such 'machines' might be geometrical, based on architectural history, or analysis of the site; but in the NMA the machine is constructed out of an analogy derived from the brief. As an analogic device the threads that generate the form face in two directions. The first analogy is to Walter Burley Griffin's geometrical schema of axes governing the urban plan of Canberra, one of which was to cross Acton Peninsula. The second analogy is to the museum's exhibitions, which are structured as entwined narratives of geography, population, first Australians, private and familial life, and nation. The architects take

Griffin's axes, add an extra line that would extend to Uluru, and tie these in a knot that analogises the combination of the exhibition narratives. Here the architecture takes a less affirmative tone than the museum thematic where the threads are supposed to be 'entwined', one assumes harmoniously, into the strong rope of Australian nationhood. In the building they are tangled, knotted and, in the case of the line to Uluru, springing back, as if a cord under tension has been cut. The abstract lines and threads, as the analogy proceeds, become a 'string', which is a five-sided extruded shape, and it is this string that cuts through the bulk of the building volumes and produces the sculptural loop in the centre of the site, which acts as a landmark and signature.

The most dramatic and memorable space in the NMA is the Main Hall. The ceiling is a notional cast taken from a knot made with the virtual string. This knot is an allegory for the binding together of the threads of Australian history, and its virtual nature, its actual non-existence, mean that in the Main Hall it is the throngs of visitors who make this knot as they move through the space. This space can also be read as a built commentary on the Sydney Opera House. The grand ceiling is a series of intersecting shells in a complex geometry, which is at some level an imitation of Jorn Utzon's building, but this is made more explicit with the window wall and skylights being framed with steel mullions which replicate those framing the glass walls of the Opera House on the harbour side. Architects might then notice that the ceiling comes down onto columns remarkably like those of the TWA Terminal at JFK airport in New York, which was designed by Aero Saarinen at the time he judged the Opera House competition. After returning to the USA, Saarinen redesigned the shells of TWA, and the crucial twisting columns on which they sit, with the lessons he had learnt from Utzon's Opera House scheme. Perhaps only architectural historians will see as significant that the Opera House glass walls were designed by Peter Hall after Utzon had quit the project. These are widely admired but under threat from Opera House purists campaigning to restore the building to what can be deduced of Utzon's original intentions.

Count the readings of the Main Hall. With one's body, on the skin as it were, this is an affecting space; it feels like the secular cathedral that the brief required. With a few visual clues and hints at the concepts involved one can mentally unravel the space in two directions – first, as the space of an enormous five-sided thread tied in a double knot and, second, as a play on the history and criticism of the Sydney Opera House and the debate as to its future. Each of these rhetorical figures, the knot and the alluded Opera House, are then the basis for an allegory. The allegory of Australian history as tangled stories being formed in the purposeful knot of citizenship requires an exegesis of the kind the museum's guides and pamphlets will undoubtedly provide. The architectural allegory has the same structure. It is an occasion for storytelling but, in fact, most architects like the lay public would need some hints to begin the conversation. Already, this level of coding of the buildings might be distasteful to many, both in the idea of its meanings being hidden and the evocation of a knowledge of architecture that could be taken to be elitist. The NMA buildings contain references to Walter Burley Griffin, Le Corbusier, James Stirling and Daniel Libeskind. For objectors, the architecture of the NMA has worse in store, as we recount some of the other more particular significations of the buildings. But the first point to raise here is the objections that might be made in principle to a building that speaks, and when speaking requires interpretation.

To an extent the architectural coding of the NMA is an attempt to expose the ignorance of what is, in Australia, a largely literary cultural elite who think of architecture as a branch of real estate. However, there are many people including architects, who, on principle rather than in ignorance,

would hold that buildings could and should be completely non-semantic. The usual rationales for such a view are either belief in functionalism or an understanding of aesthetics as being strictly limited to sensory experience, and frequently these two ideas are combined. Those who do think that buildings can mean something and that sensory experience can open onto conceptual thought generally suppose that meaning should be imminent to the building and experienced in it, in some way particular to an architectural sense or media. Space has been reified in this way since the late nineteenth century, and the general direction of these ideas about architecture owe something to Hegel's understanding of architecture as a symbolic art, able to unify sense and concept, even as it is unable to symbolise any particular thing. Ashton Raggatt McDougall's whole practice and the NMA in particular could be viewed as an assault on such a view of architecture, and understood as a point-by-point negation. What concerns us here is not their views on utility nor their anti-aesthetic, but their insistence that architecture requires interpretation as an act exterior to it. We could generalise at this point and say that all culture, not just architecture, is various acts of interpretation in production and reception, and in this aspect the architecture of the NMA is thoroughly on song with the museum apparatus.

In western history the idea that buildings require a work of interpretation is, in fact, more common than the rigorously aesthetic or functionalist view. Architecture in the past had an iconography that overlapped with that of painting and literature, and was widely understood by a literate public, whose acts of understanding were exercises of a kind of franchise in culture analogous to, and often exchangeable with, political franchise. It is often thought that the rise of autonomous art from the late eighteenth century and the supposition that buildings required interpretation removed this common language and the intelligibility of architecture. However, this ignores two aspects. First, in past iconographic culture, interpretation was rarely conclusive; rather it was open, multiple and more about the display of the aptitude and wit of the interpreter than agreement as to the meaning of things. Also reading visual and spatial texts was not unmediated: buildings like paintings and poetry had published guides and indexes to their codes. Second, this practice has not stopped and, in present-day culture, buildings are opened to interpretation in guidebooks and by tour guides, and this is the typical way that lay people appropriate buildings as culture, even if they are trained, like good moderns, to feel the building affecting them after they have made the identifications. To object, therefore, to the knotted threads of the NMA either on the grounds of a refusal of an architectural semantics, or on the grounds of the present lack of common architectural language and unmediated legibility, seems to us invalid. The real challenge of the NMA is its particular view of interpretive practice, which is allegorical and what we might call baroque. Two aspects open from this name: first, the semiotics of allegory and, second, a certain cultural pessimism that will in a moment take us to the some of the political issues raised by the buildings.

In his study of baroque drama Walter Benjamin contrasts the structure of allegory and that of symbolism. The symbol is a theological concept of the unity of meaning and the thing, in contrast with the practices of allegory that tend to multiple and diverging significations. The design of emblems aims to produce the largest number of significations from the one device, the power of which lies in the connections that it can make. Allegory accepts that interpretations are infinite, which is not to say that any interpretation is possible or that meaning is arbitrary or subjective. Fundamentally, allegory is mundane; its delirium of accumulating referents assumes that symbolism, true unity and stability of meaning cannot be made on earth. The sense that the alternative readings of the NMA provoke is, as in baroque architecture, that culture is the act of

proliferating meaning in the face of disorder. If one begins, as the baroque did, with the fact that just about anything can come close to meaning something and that the most carefully wrought cultural artefacts fail to reach true significance, then the consequence is clear. One must either admit to the meaninglessness of existence or pile up stuff deliriously, without fear of contradiction or repetition, in the hope of the miracle of meaning.

While the operations of geometry at the NMA are palpable and apparent to any observer, this is impossible to understand without diagrams, and difficult even then. But once begun, an exegesis opens not so much to a solid truth as to an infinity of interpretation. As with the Roman baroque of the seventeenth century, this geometry is always felt but never, finally, understood. When Borromini designed S. Ivo della Sapienza, Rome, he used a six-pointed star both to generate the structural form of the segmented dome and to evoke the symbol of wisdom. However, the geometrical figure never aligns with the building elements that it has generated and thus it remains, not so much a secret, as a truth anterior to the building. The star remains behind the veil which (for a counter-reformation Catholic) properly separates life and durational experience from the absolute and timeless world of symbols. For Borromini, a five-sided figure would be the sign of Christ represented in His five wounds, and if one thinks, with the baroque, that interpretation is infinite, then the string that makes up the NMA can be the Redeemer as well as Griffin's axes.

Our description, concentrating as it does on the architecture of the NMA must make it sound as if it is addressed to an architectural cognoscenti; as indeed it is, in part. But if one accepts that meaning is a practice rather than a destination, and we consider some of the other kinds of coding, this is not the simple elitism that it is frequently held to be. One doesn't need to be an art historian, or even have good memory of the painting, to recognise Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* in the literal blue poles at the museum. The facade of large parts of the building is decorated with stipples that apparently form huge messages in braille. This does not mean that the building especially privileges giant, sighted braille readers, any more than it does architects; the ease with which one reads the braille or the architectural references is not the point. Traditional emblems have a *fatto* or a scene in which the iconographs are deployed, and if there is such a *fatto* at the NMA it is political. While much of the braille exists for the joy and humour of puzzling out messages such as 'she'll be right' and 'such is life', at one point the buildings reputedly say 'sorry'. This flouts the Australian Commonwealth Government's refusal to apologise for the past treatment of Aborigines, especially for the historical policies of forced adoption, which many believe to be a form of genocide. Other references to this issue include the cartoon-like use of the colour black as a referent, an internal stair in the Gallery of the First Australians which has the appearance of a gigantic black cross, a framed view of the parliament flag on axis with the entry hall to the Gallery of the First Australians, and a comparison of the fate of Indigenous culture to that of the Jews of Berlin under the Nazis.

As many in Australia now know, revisionist historians and their political patrons charge that this museum is institutionalising a 'black armband' view of Australian history that values mourning for the destruction of Aboriginal peoples and cultures over a celebration of the civilising process since the eighteenth century. Into this historians' debate about evidence and truth in history the architectural emblems glow red: like so many boils, these are hyperbolic versions of the revisionists' worst fears about the museum. In allegory the buildings bluntly say 'genocide' and 'sorry', words that the institution cannot utter without nuances, 'balanced debate' and euphemism – the inescapable consequence of Australian history not being resolved politically or culturally.

To the extent that the architects have got away with these references, we could say that their success has two aspects. The first is in the allegorical practice that we have been describing which values difficulty in interpretation over easy legibility. The second is the notion that architecture is an autonomous art and that architects have a certain licence or freedom in design. While this might be small and shrinking, there is a part of every 'high art' building that is generally supposed to be 'architectural', to be transcendent and which no one is obliged to understand except as an instance of the architect's genius. This romance has a certain tactical advantage that museums are not unaware of: artists can make works that say things that would be difficult to get through committee.

This is certainly the case with the design of the Gallery of the First Australians. This segment of the NMA takes the plan form of Daniel Libeskind's design for the Jewish Museum, an extension to the Berlin Museum. The building is actually nothing like Libeskind's, in appearance or use being different in size, materials and internal organisation. The actual plan of the First Australians involves a 'built shadow' in which ARM imagined that Berlin building cast a shadow that could then be enclosed as volume. This fanciful and arcane procedure is the way that the architects allowed themselves the use of the figure of the Berlin building while still fitting the brief. The result is that the reference to Libeskind's building is only recognisable in graphic presentations of the plan in publication, and to a lesser extent in aerial views. But representation is not at stake in synecdoche and the reference is clear. The revisionist historian Keith Windschuttle thinks that this is a coded statement that Aboriginal peoples of Australia suffered a genocide like that committed against the Jews of Europe by the Nazis; and this is a not unfair reading. In fact Libeskind's building is not a Holocaust museum but one dedicated to the cultural achievements of Germany's Jews. But by the time we argue about whether the referent is the celebration of a threatened culture or the process that left it so, whether genocide is cultural or actual, what degree of intent or body count is required, whether the Jewish holocaust is historically unique, and so on, then we have opened Pandora's box. With regard to architectural references, some spurious charges of plagiarism were reported in the newspapers and on radio after the building's opening, which certainly confused its reception. Libeskind, or his office, were reported to be briefing lawyers at some stage, but it is hard to believe that this is true. The transgression here is not theft of intellectual property; ARM's facile incorporation of such a recent, famous and some would say melodramatic and overly portentous building as the Jewish Museum is more like caricature. Libeskind's whole career is built around the persona of the architect auteur and the convergence this has had with the marketing concept of 'branding'. ARM's quotation is something of an attack on this phenomenon.

When the designs for the NMA were first shown, there was a degree of frisson in the architectural community, and many of us recognised the quotation of Libeskind's Jewish Museum. About the same time the rumour of the braille swept the studios, and tension mounted as we all wondered if it could be built before the government found out. At one level the buildings are a kind of whoopee-cushion waiting to make a fart in the drawing room of authorised culture. In the end, the politics of history is the occasion, not the point, of the architecture of the NMA. The discomfort awaiting all those who play the game of allegory there lies in arriving at the point where references to architectural history have a certain, and impossible, structural equivalence with the history of the subjection of Aborigines in this country.

In this reading of the Gallery of the First Australians, it is clear that we are not talking of some political awkwardness being sugar coated with art. Here two kinds of discomfort are thrown against one another and they do not chime. Putting the problems of artistic genesis in a metonymic chain with genocide risks exaggerating the former and trivialising the latter. Certainly one could question whether a comparison to the Holocaust is politically useful in getting recognition for the real history of Australia and the actual genocides committed here. It could be considered offensive that such a comparison should be made for reasons, not of justice, truth or Realpolitik but for form and obscure debates about the comportment of the architect and the relation of art and architecture. Despite a very real discomfort about this part of the NMA, a discomfort that underlies the whole experience of the building, it would be wrong to think that there is any equivalence of aesthetic and political problems claimed here.

This can perhaps be made clear with a less contentious example: the end elevation of IATSI's office wing. According to Howard Raggatt this is intended to appear as the mask of Ned Kelly. At the same time anyone with the slightest architectural education will recognise Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, the epitome of high modernism, but here reversed in colour from white to black. In the simplest signification, which courts a popular reading, we have an abstraction of a national folk hero, an anti-establishment figure not slow to violence. In a more complex reading, to turn the Villa Savoye black is to spin into the hyperbole of imagining a whole anti-enlightenment modernism, to see blackness as the universal potential for reversal and renewal. This is a kind of rebus, a device loved in the baroque and still a favourite in puzzles and children's games where, for example, the image of an eye can stand for the pronoun 'I' in a sentence. So, there are two possible readings, and although both are apparent, each excludes the other. Either Ned Kelly or Le Corbusier, and once both designations are known, each becomes unstable tipping into its alternative. In the end the NMA is not, under all its levels of coding about *something*, but rather about the impossibility of there being any core around which culture forms. It is neither politics in the guise of culture nor real issues of history and civics being made the occasion for the frivolity of art; rather it is about the ultimate futility of both. What critics of the NMA think of as the elitism and inaccessibility enacted by its double- and triple-coded references is something more radical, a general questioning of whether Australia actually adds up to anything much, and whether architecture, museums or culture as a whole are 'good for you'.

Thus far we might seem to have been building the case for the charge of elitism against the NRM. However, most of the comment directed at the NMA buildings centres on their apparent contravention of standards of taste and propriety in civic architecture on what is taken to be its 'populism'. In an institution charged with the weighty task of representing 'the nation', 'popularity' has implications at every level of the museum apparatus, from its projection of allegories of nationhood and citizenship to the nature and exhibition of museum contents and to museum architecture itself.

The NMA has been described by one detractor as 'a monument to lost opportunity' (Frith 2001), and by another as 'a monument to horrendous political correctness' (Akerman 2001, 91). These seem particularly interesting descriptions for a building that was explicitly requested by the organising committee to be 'anti-monumental' (Johnson 2001, 57). If monumentality is conceived as an undesirable characteristic, it is not hard to imagine what its attributes might be seen to be: dull, salutary, impersonal, sober and officious, a bastion of establishment values and authority, expressed in an architecture of unity and coherence. In opposition to this, the 'anti-

monumental' would presumably be fun, irreverent, engaging and unconventional, perhaps expressed in a deliberately contemporary architecture that was low-rise, 'incoherent' and open to interpretation. This seems a fairly accurate description of the NMA building. But while this may have overstated the opposition, what is really interesting about these two is that one is ostensibly 'popular' and the other is not. Asking for an anti-monumental museum seems at one level to be a simple request for a 'populist' building or, more specifically, for a building that looks popular. The NMA as a building and an organisation subscribes to the rhetoric and significantly to an aesthetic of popularity. The NMA opens an elaborate play on this 'look' of populism, and it does so by manipulating certain key aesthetic devices: the visual puns we have mentioned such as the 'blue poles', but also the simpler aesthetics of bright colour and non-orthogonal forms, usually associated with children's play equipment or the advertising of discount goods. Such devices carry a weight of expectation and association, they cause a building to be read or socially recognised as being populist, regardless of other measures of actual popularity. This look of populism relies on a pre-existing set of dichotomies, specifically between 'high' and 'popular' architecture, and between 'elite' and 'popular' culture more generally.

It is important to draw a distinction here between 'populism' and 'popularity'; populism has the negative connotation of deliberately seeking popular acceptance at the cost of quality, intellectual rigour, or formal aesthetic value. 'Popularity' retains its more neutral modern sense, either of actual public involvement, or of things that are socially recognised as popular – in the way that football is seen to be more popular than opera. The NMA will be successful if it becomes as popular as the Australian War Memorial, an immensely popular museum in terms of visitor numbers or public sentiment, even if its sepulchral form is the antithesis of the liveliness required by the brief for the NMA. But old systems of thought endure, and politics, museums and architecture all have their hierarchies: each is subject to an unspoken elitism that sees 'populism', if not actual popularity, as inferior. Given that, as Michael Müller has observed, contemporary museum architecture is characterised by 'ambitious efforts to consecrate or position architecture once again as a higher, indeed the highest, form of Art' (Müller 1996, 114), the question of aesthetic elitism is particularly pointed in museum buildings.

The very definition of Architecture with a capital 'A' is based on its distinction from and elevation above vernacular building. It is the very existence of architects, then, as interlocutors between people and buildings, that prevents architecture from being a truly 'popular' art in the sense of being made by the people for themselves. The distinction between high and low cultures is thus inherent in architecture perhaps more than any of the other arts, and it is not easily abandoned. Populism in architecture is also hedged about with proscriptions, springing from the view that a deliberately popular architecture is somehow fraudulent. Associated above all with commercialism and entertainment, such populism is seen to work against a particular ideology of architectural morality – truth to materials, structure and function – that was articulated by Ruskin and refined through the rationalist and functionalist doctrines of modernism. Even to a contemporary liberal sensibility, for which there is no problem with popularity per se, this doctrine demands that an art which cannot be truly of the people avoids attempting to look like it is. If a work of high architecture happens to gain popular acclaim, so the logic goes, then that is a happy accident. But a piece of serious, civic, monumental architecture should set out neither to be popular, nor to look like it is – that is, it should have neither the ideology nor the aesthetic of populism.

Now it is hardly surprising that the architects have breached this unspoken rule in the NMA, given ARM's previous work and their self-defined role as architect provocateurs. An engagement with both 'popular' taste and 'elite' conceptual approaches could indeed be seen as idiomatic of Melbourne architecture, but its logic is basic to avant-gardism. The concept of an avant-garde, which is 'ahead' of the main body or 'van' of a culture, involves a play of popularity and historical time. Avant-gardes are constituted, in part, by a lack of popular acceptance in the present – in order to connote the better future in which their works will be popular. A work such as the NMA, which draws elements from both low and high culture, is thus enacting a complex game, weaving together both vanguard and avant-garde positions. It is critical of the utopianism and futurity of the avant-garde position, and in its pop-ish colours and popular references claims a van-gardist, whole-of-culture-in-the-now position. But in its depth of architectural references, it imagines a future in which knowledge of architecture will be much more widespread in a population with a greater patience in engaging with it. If the NMA can be said to manifest this idea, then perhaps it is fair to describe it as an architecture that has the look of the popular, but without the intention of a simple or naive populism. The NMA instead undertakes a sophisticated discourse on the politics of popularity in architecture, revealing some of the contradictions inherent in the very idea.

Complaints about the NMA do not centre around its popularity in the positive sense of being liked by many people, but more around its apparent populism – that which connotes inferiority in material, form and finishes, and which furthermore sets out to win favour. This is the general position taken by Stephen Frith, reviewing the building for the *Canberra Times*. After first saying that postmodern appropriative practices such as those advocated by Robert Venturi, of 'high art using low art', are themselves 'dated, tired and conservative in their application in the National Museum', Frith (2001) complains that the building is a major work of civic architecture which in the end is not 'public' at all, but manages to speak to only a tiny minority. As he writes,

But why such tongue-lashings and breast-beatings over what has quickly established itself as a happy theme park to mediocrity? Surely its condoning of the ruthless kitsch of petty capitalism in its imagery and finishes provides for some spectre of merit? The problem becomes one of the civic domain in which architecture and its rhetoric is interpreted. For a supposedly public work, the museum is an intensely private building, privately encoded with in-jokes, and in the end hugely un-funny... The confection of cheap cladding and plasterboard is a spurious sideshow of magpie borrowings passing themselves off as cultural reference (2001).

Everything in this passage decries what Frith reads as the NMA's verisimilitude of popularity – the reference to theme parks, sideshows, commercialism – a confection constructed with poor quality materials and finishes, which nevertheless flirts 'pretentiously' with the canon of modern architecture. To Frith the building reads not as a cheap and cheerful reflection of the Australian vernacular, but as a demeaning attempt to raise a laugh from the elite at the expense of the uncomprehending masses. He concludes that the building isn't truly 'popular', but rather 'intensely private' and 'hugely un-funny'. Ultimately, Frith laments that '[s]urely the representation of our collective experience on such a beautiful site, and the potential for a shared account of our heritage with Australia's Aboriginal peoples, deserves more than the hollow laughter of architectural in-jokes and superficial mockery?' (Frith 2001).

As will be already clear we disagree with Frith on the nature of the coding, its privacy, and on the possibility he thinks the museum has forgone of a legible public culture in building. But what of his claims of its 'look of popular' being dissemblance and deceit?

There can be no question that the NMA sets out to be, and is, a work of serious Architecture. The objection is not necessarily with its appropriation of elements of popular culture for serious architectural reasons, but rather its indecorous treatment and appropriation of other works of high architecture as though *they* were popular architecture. Or, to put it another way, the problem lies in the NMA's appropriating both high and low art without distinguishing between them, and thereby flattening longstanding cultural hierarchies. Libeskind's affronted response to the 'quotation' of his Jewish Museum in the plan of the Gallery of the First Australians is surely a simple expression of this: the widely held belief that while popular culture is fair game, high art deserves a more dignified treatment. There is something of a *mise en abyme* in the NMA: it is a 'popular looking' work of high art appropriating other high art as though it were popular art, while simultaneously also employing genuinely 'popular', vernacular elements from the broader sociocultural milieu.

Throughout the critical reception of the building there is a complex interplay between questions of whether the NMA is too 'populist': that is, that it deliberately seeks to be popular, or whether the building isn't popular enough; that it plays at the 'look' of populism without actually achieving popularity. Effectively it has been criticised simultaneously both for being too popular and not popular enough. That these seem to be contradictory criticisms is itself an indication that the building challenges established notions of the place of architecture in civic life and its expected comportment in relation to 'the public'. Ultimately, the only possible conclusion is that the building is complex enough to be read on a number of levels: it is both populist and elitist, literal and encoded, private and public, and it confounds traditional binary oppositions between these categories. We would argue that the very uncertainty and indeterminacy of the NMA building is an appropriate representation of problematics that already exist in the material – not only in definitions of Australian national identity, but also in the very idea of a national museum, a popular museum and a popular museum building. That the design does not paper over these cracks but rather expresses them in formal architectural terms is an index of the courage of the architects, given that a less sympathetic reading such as Frith's sees this as a weakness of the architects, rather than an exposition of the problems of architecture, museums and Australian civic culture.

In conclusion, then, the NMA does seem to be a paradoxically offensive edifice. It is a building so populist as to question the possibility of public taste in buildings, and, at the same time, so loaded with cultural capital as to be a stern test of the credentials of the cultural elite. Having shown the near symmetrical opposition of these criticisms we are not attempting to have them cancel one another, nor would we want to claim that this is some kind of dialectic that is sublated or transcended in the building. The architecture of the NMA is contrived for such criticisms to meet head to head and the wreckage that results has something to tell us about the problems for architecture in the 'Re-birth of the Museum'. Calling on the spinning figure of the rebus we have tried to show how these problematics expose one another: moments of facile identification and simple sensuous pleasure, turn out to contain recondite messages of cultural poverty, and *visa versa*. Regarding the NMA as a *danse macabre* of Australian culture and history, we cannot

remain maudlin and in mourning without being made to dance, even though every joke concerns loss, death and the failure of meaning.

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