

## Building review

# The semblance of populism: National Museum of Australia

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### Introduction

The commission for the National Museum of Australia (NMA) was won in a competitive process by Ashton Raggatt McDougall (ARM) and Robert Peck von Hartel Trethowan, architects in association, with a design team led by Howard Raggatt. The building was completed on time and within its tight budget, and opened in March 2001. It is located in Canberra, the Australian national capital, as famously planned and laid out by Walter Burley Griffin. The site itself is Acton Peninsula, which protrudes into Lake Burley Griffin within sight of the national parliament building, and the various other sober monumental buildings which make up this most institutional of cities. Understanding this context is important to an ability to see why the NMA building has been so controversial in Australia, why it is so startling, and so odd. Although much smaller and certainly much cheaper than the other national institutions dotted around the parkland shores of the lake, in architectural terms it is much louder, more gregarious, and more deliberately contentious than any of them.

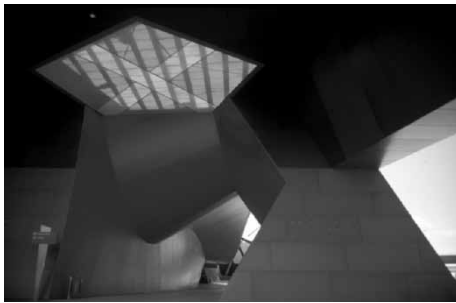
In this context, and even before its opening, the museum served to polarise the architectural community in Australia. As a building, the NMA is highly complex in both physical and conceptual terms. From its controversial strategy of literally appropriating elements from other canonical modernist and contemporary architectural works, through the coded messages of the giant Braille patterns on its

surface, to the conceptual device of the extruded string and red 'knot' which passes through and around and thus generates the building's form, it is relentless in its challenge to conventional institutional architecture (Figs 1 and 2). The issues it raises, sometimes incidentally but most often in a deliberate and provocative manner, are also complex and significant. There is little clear distinc-



Figure 1. Calligraphic symbols and 'braille' patterns on the surface of the NMA building.

Figure 2. The main entry to the museum, showing the passage of the five-sided red string around which the building's form has notionally been 'cast'.



tion here between the museum as a work of architecture, and the museum as narrative and institution. This is particularly true in terms of the overriding allegory – of Australia as many threads tangled together – which informs both the architecture and the museological strategy. But it is also true of the architecture itself as public culture – the building insists upon participating boldly in a critical discourse about Australian history and identity. For a national institution located in the national capital, this is a particularly high-risk strategy, and of all the remarkable aspects of the NMA, perhaps the most astonishing is that it was ever constructed in this form at all.

Much of the energy of the NMA as an institution seems directed towards undoing the totalising expectations carried by national institutions in general, and national museums in particular. It is determinedly pluralist, offering many individual stories and narratives rather than an overriding authoritative metanarrative of 'nationhood'. There is also little that is grandiose in the architecture: in its messy vitality it works against false notions of

completion, unity, and wholeness. In its exhibition policy, the NMA abandons an authoritative version of history in favour of multiple stories, of ordinary as well as extraordinary people; and the nationalism embodied there is of the most diffident, self-effacing type. Where a museum's contents are not solely cultural 'treasures', there is also less need for the 'museum as vault' typology, and the contents of the NMA are decidedly mixed in this respect. Indeed, if a national museum is seen to 'house' the stories of the nation, there was good reason for the NMA to make allusions to domestic architecture, the architecture of the familiar, mundane, and everyday. This strategy is particularly clear in the relationship of the NMA building with its own 'backyard'. Given the building's relatively small scale, both upon the Acton peninsula site and as viewed from across the lake, the architects have designed a thin and annular building, pushed towards the perimeter of the lake shore. On the inside, this has created a semi-enclosed 'Garden of Australian Dreams', with a remarkable (and equally controversial) landscape design by the Perth firm, Room 4.1.3 (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. The constructed landscape of the Garden of Australian Dreams, designed by the Perth firm Room 4.1.3.



So there is much that remains to be said about the NMA, as a building and as a museum. To its detractors it is a collection of quotations, borrowed devices, and stolen motifs, itself a 'museum of architecture'. While ARM are somewhat notorious for this practice in their earlier works, the stakes are higher in the National Museum, not least because of the choice of subjects, which includes part of the plan of Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin in the design of the Gallery of the First Australians. The connections this draws between the Jewish Holocaust in the Second World War, and the consequences of white settlement for Australian Aborigines, are as clear as they are contentious. There is also a whole range of other issues raised here, about the availability of architecture for literal appropriation, and whether this is in fact plagiarism, about appropriation as a strategy in postmodern art, about the currency, or lack thereof, of postmodernism itself in art and architecture, about design processes and methods of form-finding in contemporary architecture, and about architecture as political discourse and representation more generally. These questions and their implications have yet to be fully explored.

In this rather overheated critical atmosphere, my approach to the building here will necessarily tread a fine line. On the one hand this will be a very general treatment – less of a detailed evaluation of the architectural object itself, and more of a broad-ranging examination of the larger theoretical and cultural context that it sits within, and bears upon. In that sense this might be seen as a kind of precursor to further critical work. But

on the other hand, my conceptual approach to the building here will be through quite a specific aperture – namely, the question of its supposed populism. While a significant proportion of the critical comment the building has received in Australia has centred around its apparent contravention of standards of propriety in civic architecture, it has also been widely read as 'populist'. For a national museum to set out to be 'popular' seems quite logical in the common contemporary meaning of the word, that it should be liked by a large number of people. But while 'popular' seems an innocent enough term, its derivatives 'populist' and 'populism' have decidedly more ambivalent implications. This is especially true when these words are used to describe the high arts, including architecture, and even more so when that architecture is for a museum. Just because early museums were *public*, at least nominally open and accessible to all, clearly does not mean they were also *popular*. The fact that contemporary museums are often now framed as being both public and popular institutions is therefore as curious as it is important, and the NMA is located at the nexus of such developments.

There is an important distinction to be made here, then, 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' still 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. Old systems of thought

endure, and politics, museums, and architecture are each subject to an unspoken hierarchy that sees 'populism', if not actual popularity, as inferior.

So what is truly interesting, and I would argue also significant, about the architecture of the NMA is that it refuses a simple or uncritical representation of popularity. While it is possible to read the building's challenge to conventional institutional architecture, its colour, its playful and obtuse character, and its avowed 'anti-monumentality', all in the light of this supposed 'populism', the building also seems to me both to present and to problematise the question of populism in formal architectural terms.

### Theme parks and mausolea

These problematics are all manifest, appropriately enough, in the popular reception of the building, and it is worthwhile to note here how some elements of this discourse were played out in the popular press. First, then, Peter Ward – writing shortly after the opening of the NMA in the *Australian* newspaper of 9 March 2001 – observed that former Prime Minister Paul Keating had been dubious, whilst in power, about the idea of building a national museum in Canberra. Keating was purportedly concerned that 'it might be "another marble mausoleum" in the Parliamentary Triangle'.<sup>1</sup> Implying that Keating favoured a 'populist aesthetic' because it was more closely aligned with Labour party policy, Ward went on to describe the now completed NMA as 'theme park Australia'.

Ward's article is most interesting, for my purposes here, in its proposition of two possible

models for the museum: on the one hand a 'mausoleum', and on the other a 'theme park'. Ward is not the first to use these terms in opposition, and contemporary museums can be seen to range across a scale which runs from the older 'mausoleum' model on the one hand, to the ascendant but still not universal 'theme park' model on the other. It is notable that both of these terms can and have been used as insults, with varying degrees of vitriol, by critics positioned at both ends of the scale. It should also be noted that there is nothing new in this – throughout their history 'serious' museums have sought to distance themselves from their populist counterparts, namely circuses, fairs and freak shows, of which the theme park is merely the most recent and technologically advanced example. Significantly, it was not the actual popularity of such menageries that was the problem, but their emphasis on spectacle, on the freak or curious object rather than the exemplar.

So what seems most significant here is that the 'theme park' and 'mausoleum' models correspond with a parallel scale of popular appeal, that is to say a theme park is self-evidently populist, while a mausoleum is not. The two models are primarily distinguished by their explicit *signification* of popularity. The stake here is a notion of civic decorum or propriety, which enacts prohibitions over what kinds of institutions can be explicit in their display or representation of popularity. What makes museums particularly interesting in this context is that they seem presently to be undergoing a shift in definition, moving away from the earlier 'edificatory' model, towards the twenty-first

century immersive museum, with its generalised notions of 'edutainment'. But there is more at stake here than a simple reversal of the value system that formerly positioned the museum as the collector and keeper of high culture, such that it is now a facilitator of a popularised mode of 'cultural experience', and, one might add, seller of cultural merchandise.

On the face of it, the NMA seems to fit the 'theme park' model in a relatively uncomplicated way. To state the obvious, a museum in the theme park mould might be expected to have an emphasis on entertainment, possibly directed at school-aged children, and to reflect its light-hearted tone in spectacular or at least unconventional architecture. It might be expected, in a word, to be populist. The mausoleum model, on the other hand, implies an institution that is solemn and educational, perhaps reflected in a conventionally monumental institutional architecture. But I would argue that taking the NMA as a simple exemplar of the 'theme park' type would be a misapprehension, or at least an oversimplification, and indeed that the building problematises the very question of popularity in aesthetic terms. This leads to a proposition: that there is a 'look' of populism that exists independently of any intended or actual popularity, or even a connection with popular culture. I would argue that the NMA opens an elaborate play on this 'look' of the popular, and that it does so by manipulating certain key aesthetic devices: bright colour, literal and figurative elements, visual jokes and non-orthogonal forms, for instance; and I will return to some of these in more depth (Fig. 4). Such devices carry a weight of expectation and association, they



Figure 4. Visual jokes in the museum include the 'Uluru line', a 'string' heading from the museum towards Central Australia, which has snapped and recoiled.

cause a building to be read or socially recognised as being populist, regardless of other measures of actual popularity.

Another instructive example of a reading of the NMA as populist, and once again in the 'theme park' mould, can be found in the work of the Canberra-based academic Stephen Frith, who reviewed the NMA for the *Canberra Times* newspaper of 20 March, 2001. After first saying that post-modern 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 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.

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. . .<sup>2</sup>

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, a 'happy theme park to mediocrity', 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. Ultimately, Frith lamentingly wonders 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?' His complaint is thus two-fold – that the building has insufficient *gravitas*, and that this is compounded rather than redeemed by the fact that it is not truly popular at all, but rather 'intensely private'. Frith's polemical attack on the building is based on the criticism that it *appears* to be popularly accessible – appears to be *populist* – but in fact is *not popular enough*. Needless to say, while Frith reads this as a breach of faith and a broken promise, it seems to me a much more critically ambivalent gesture, one

which undermines these very categories and oppositions themselves.

### **The monumental and the anti-monumental**

The title of Frith's damning review is 'A monument to lost opportunity', and the NMA has been described by another detractor – this time in the tabloid press – as 'a monument to horrendous political correctness.' These seem particularly interesting descriptions for a building that was explicitly requested by its organising committee to be 'anti-monumental.' At one level, the demand for an anti-monumental building would seem an extension of Paul Keating's comments which I noted at the beginning of the review – the desire to avoid another 'marble mausoleum'. If monumentality is conceived as an undesirable characteristic, it is not hard to imagine what its attributes might be seen to be: salutary, impersonal, sober and officious, a bastion of institutional authority expressed in an architecture of unity and coherence. In opposition to this, the 'anti-monumental' would presumably be irreverent, informal and unconventional, perhaps expressed in a deliberately contemporary architecture that was low rise, 'incoherent' and open to interpretation. This seems a fairly accurate general description of the NMA building. So while I may have rather overstated the opposition, 'deathly' monumentality and 'lively' anti-monumentality seem to be the conceptions at play. What is really interesting about these two, however, is that one is ostensibly 'popular' and the other is not. Asking for an anti-monumental museum can be seen as a simple request for a 'populist' building – a deliberate

departure from the general tone of the architecture of the national capital.

But given that this particular civic building is a *museum*, the idea of anti-monumentality is more revolutionary than it might appear. There is, after all, a deep historical connection between museums and monumentality. Museum buildings have traditionally been monumental by definition, where 'monument' is used as an adjective for anything that is large, secure, and monolithic, appropriate to the storage of cultural 'treasures'. They have also been monumental in the much older sense of the monument as gravestone, of having borne witness to passing time and mortal finitude in a solid, durable, relatively unchanging form.

In the light of this history and tradition, the idea of a museum embodying anti-monumentality is curious indeed, since it necessitates a significant departure from the traditional role and function of the museum apparatus, as well as its expression in museum architecture. The idea of 'anti-monumentality' seems to set up a binary opposition between the traditional museum institution, represented as elitist, culturally irrelevant, and boring, and the brave new museum – popular, egalitarian, entertaining, relevant, and 'lively' in every sense of the word. While the former was traditionally represented in architecture by monumental historicist styles, the latter seems to have shaken off the 'mausoleum' association, and is expressed in a distinctively contemporary architecture, of which the NMA can be seen as an exemplar. This trend towards the new, 'lively' museum model also shifts emphasis from the inanimate museum object to the highly animated human subject,

the museum visitor. This is further manifest in the NMA, I would argue, in a de-emphasis of the building's object character in favour of *practice*: both in the design process and in the actual experience of the museum visitor.

### **The look of the popular**

So all this is to state that if the NMA does have the critical aesthetic of populism that I am arguing, then it relies on a pre-existing set of dichotomies. Foremost amongst these are the entrenched opposition between 'popular', 'vernacular' or 'low' culture, and 'high' or 'elite' culture. High culture has historically been the privileged term in the opposition, the value system of which is so pervasive that anything which is 'popular' is often immediately assumed not only to be inferior, but gaudy and unsophisticated as well. High culture is specifically celebrated and enshrined by institutions, of which museums are among the most powerful, and traditionally represented by expensive, prestigious, and enduring architecture. Making a direct reversal of this logic, a populist architecture might be expected to use low-status or 'cheap' materials, and give the impression of being flimsy. It is no coincidence that these are all criticisms that have been directed at the NMA.

The question of aesthetic elitism is already particularly pointed in museum buildings. Purpose-built museums are amongst the most complex and prestigious buildings being constructed today. They have come to be seen as something of a forum for virtuoso or 'signature' architecture; as Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani has written, '[c]ontemporary museum buildings tend to be

astonishingly pure materialisations of their authors' corresponding attitudes towards architecture: they are seismographs of the architectonic culture to which they belong'.<sup>3</sup> It is clear that this so-called 'iconic' architecture has an important role in museum marketing, very often providing the institution's logo, being strongly identified with the institution as a 'brand', and even functioning as an international tourist attraction. But perhaps more importantly, all of this is also related to notions of architectural avant-gardeism, and the idea that a large part of the attraction of such buildings is that they are themselves explicitly framed as art. 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'.<sup>4</sup>

It is in this sense that museum architecture in general, and the NMA building in particular, takes on the particular complications of populism in the high arts. Successive waves of the aesthetic avant-garde have long incorporated and redeemed elements of low or popular culture in their work, but the result is almost inevitably still regarded as high art, appreciated by aficionados whose taste is affirmed by their ability to see through the pop cultural references to the serious intent. Conversely, an artist who is perceived to have 'sold out', making their work more 'accessible' in order to achieve popular approval and commercial success, is described as 'populist' in a much more pejorative way. This is based upon the assumption that high art is aesthetically demanding, whereas popular or vernacular art is facile to produce and easily understood.

Populism in architecture, in particular, is also hedged about with prohibitions springing from the view that a deliberately populist architecture is somehow fraudulent. Associated above all with commercialism and entertainment, such populism is seen to work against a particular and pervasive ideology of architectural morality – truth to materials, structure and function. A piece of serious, civic, monumental architecture should neither set out expressly to *be* popular, nor to *look* like it is, so the logic goes: if a work of high architecture happens to gain popular acclaim, then that is a happy accident. Of course it is in fact an ideal outcome for both architects and clients: a respectable work of architecture which is also well liked by the public. But there are significant reasons why such popularity must be seen to be incidental to other, more lofty concerns.

Now the fact that in the NMA design, architects ARM have breached many of these unspoken rules is hardly surprising, given their 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 to a certain school of Melbourne architecture (which is where the firm is based), and distinctive to its particular mode of avant-gardeism. This is a lineage which passes through Robert Venturi, the American Pop Art of figures like Andy Warhol, the more politicised British equivalent in the Independent Group, and earlier modernist incarnations such as Dada. In the high arts, avant-garde postures in general are characterised by a lack of popular acceptance in the present, and indeed to a certain extent must seek this unpopularity – as both the

cost and the sign of an acceptance to be gained in the future. 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. But more than this – a work that uses elements from popular culture at a formal level must deliberately remain ‘unpopular’ at the level of taste if it is to retain its avant-garde status. The NMA thus undertakes a sophisticated discourse on the politics of popularity in architecture, revealing some of the contradictions inherent in the very idea. It can be described as an architecture that has the look of the popular, but without the intention of a simple or naive populism.

### **Coloured architecture: flirting with the flippant**

This is nowhere more evident than in the use of colour in the NMA building. Of all the architectural devices or motifs that I have specified as causing the NMA to be read as populist, colour is perhaps the most emblematic. It is clear that certain aspects of the building’s reception – as playful, obtuse, and flippant – have been profoundly coloured, so to speak, by its colour. Part of the reason for this can be found in architectural history, which is marked by many of the same, largely unspoken, prohibitions against colour that can be traced across other cultural realms – that which David Batchelor has described as a history of ‘chromophobia’.

The mode of chromophobia particular to architecture can be summarised thus: colour in architecture has been associated with illusion and

frivolity, and thus with decoration – it has been seen as being excess or supplementary to ‘real’ architecture. Colour is not necessarily a problem in itself – it is acceptable, for instance, when it is inherent to the material or to its weathering process, as in the bright green of copper verdigris. It is the application of colour, in the form of paint or stain, which raises questions of authenticity. In the twentieth century and beyond, a work of ‘serious’ Architecture (as opposed to vernacular, commercial, or ‘popular’ architecture) has most often either been white, or coloured in the subdued palette afforded by the inherent characteristics of ‘natural’ materials. This is nowhere more true than in monumental architecture generally, and museum architecture in particular.

Much of the dignity and status of institutional architecture is taken from prestigious materials, valued for their expense, rarity, or durability. Museum buildings are required to last, and thus traditionally have not only used enduring materials, but materials which demonstrated their durability by being self-finishing in their natural, apparently neutral, state. The very idea that ‘natural’ materials are also somehow ‘neutral’ opens onto another, more ideological investment that the museum has in avoiding colour. Museums have long held a stake in the idea of an objective stance, and maintained the pretence of an unmediated presentation of historical fact. The notion of the museum as ‘white cube’ embodies all of this – the idea of the white cube, with its aformal form and achromatic colour, signifies purity and transcendence. Just as Mark Wigley has argued the whiteness of modern architecture to be a continuation of the hygienic

Figure 5. The NMA viewed from the Garden of Australian Dreams, showing the coloured steel 'Mexican Wave' balustrade.

whiteness of doctor's coat, bathroom tiles, and hospital walls, the whiteness of the museum signifies clinical objectivity. It also, perhaps more significantly, stands for the ideal of the *tabula rasa*, the clean slate upon which the documentary evidence of art, history, or any other metanarrative could be methodically examined and arranged. For the museum, abandoning the neutrality of its public presentation may also mean a symbolic abandonment of objectivity. It would mean, if not a *surrender* to partiality, at least the *admission* of partiality – and the renunciation of universal whiteness for the particularities of colour. In the postmodern period, it is still a courageous museum that is willing to cash in the chips of its cultural authority, of which prestigious monumental architecture remains a powerful source. Most museums are still, if not white, at least respectably neutral, inside and out. But not so the NMA.

In its polychromatic formal complexity, the NMA could hardly be further from a 'white cube' museum – externally, there is hardly a neutral tone in sight. For that matter, there is hardly a 'natural' material in sight either – the majority of the building is constructed from pre-formed aluminium panelling in grey, yellow, red and khaki, crossed in places by sweeping calligraphic symbols. The dramatic aerial loop at the museum's entry is white and bright orange. There are walls of black dimpled pre-formed concrete, blue painted poles, a 'Mexican wave' of multicoloured steel sheets, and of course the richly cacophonous Garden of Australian Dreams (Figs 5 and 6). There are also some deliberate plays on the connotations of colour – Le Corbusier's gleaming white modernist classic, the Villa

Figure 6. Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye is reversed and reconstituted in black corrugated steel, as part of the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.



Savoye, is reversed and reconstituted in black corrugated steel. The fact that this forms part of the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies is a hint of the building's clear, even dangerously frank, employment of colour symbolism.

So it seems to me that some of the reception of the NMA as populist could in fact be the symptom of a deeper reaction against its apparent frivolity, a frivolity signified most strongly by its colour. Colour is inescapably associated with the flippant, the frivolous and, above all, the populist. In this conception, a highly coloured building is assumed to be 'lowering' itself in order to appeal



to popular taste. But it seems to me that the NMA, turning the modernist prohibition on its head, uses colour as the deliberately frivolous disguise of a profoundly serious intent. Rather than concealing an absence of meaning, it conceals an overabundance of meaning – a despairing accumulation of piled up allegories, codes and fragments. It is thus deeply ironic that the NMA has been read as a light, flippant, and populist confection, since I would argue that it could hardly be further from those things. Rather than taking the usual path, of seeking cultural authority through allusion to traditional monumental architecture, the NMA makes perverse references to the seemingly trivial, commercial, and populist. The reasons why the architects might want the building to be (mis)read in this way are complex. But by renouncing the aesthetic trappings of a serious institution, the NMA reveals the very superficiality of such trappings. Furthermore, by renouncing the 'look of authority' in favour of colour, frivolity, and apparent populism, it introduces a note of doubt. Could the building, and thus the institution – a national museum, remember, charged with representing the nation and placed in the national capital – really be as flippant as it seems? Or is there some more subtle game afoot, a subversive questioning of accepted notions of Australian national history and national identity? This latter seems to me the more likely, and also more interesting, possibility. In the NMA, then, colour is the sign of a critical engagement. It positions the building itself as a discourse or discussion, not only of architectural colour as conferring inferiority and flippancy, but of neutrality as conferring authority and legitimacy.

### Conclusion

I have, by now, drawn upon a whole series of binary oppositions: between high and low, elite and popular culture, the museum as entertainment and edification, monumental and anti-monumental, 'lively' and 'deathly' architecture, and vanguard and avant-garde approaches to art (Fig. 7). This series threatens to expand interminably. But while up until now I have proceeded as though the oppositions were loosely synonymous, and gathered their terms under the sign of the 'mausoleum' and 'theme park' respectively, this in itself calls for further examination. There is not sufficient space here to make the necessary fine distinctions between them, but it must be said first, that the terms of the oppositions are not entirely synonymous, and more importantly, that there is a convergence between the two ends of the spectrum. This, then, is my point: that the NMA manifests both sides of many of the oppositions I have mentioned, not in an attempt to resolve or to smooth them over, but in order to problematise and render them explicit. This is proven by the fact



Figure 7. The representation of monumental solemnity: interior view of the Gallery of the First Australians with 'cross' stair.

that throughout the critical reception of the building, it has effectively been criticised simultaneously 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. A rather equivocal, textbook postmodernist type of observation, you might say. But I 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 in the very idea of a national museum, a popular museum, and a popular museum building. That the

architecture does not paper over these cracks but rather expresses them in formal architectural terms is a tribute to the courage of the architects, given that a less sympathetic reading would see this as a weakness inherent in the architecture, rather than in what it represents.

#### Notes and references

1. Peter Ward, 'Enigmatic theme park', *The Australian*, 9 March 2001, p. 39.
2. Stephen Frith, 'A monument to lost opportunity', *The Canberra Times*, 20th March 2001.
3. Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani, 'The Architecture of Art: The museums of the 1990s', in Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani and Angeli Sachs eds., *Museums for a New Millennium: Concepts, Projects, Buildings* (Prestel Verlag, Munich and London, 1999), p. 13.
4. Michael Müller, 'The shopping arcade as a museum: on the strategy of postmodern aestheticisation', in Michael Speaks ed., *The Critical Landscape* (010 Publishers, Rotterdam, 1996), p. 114.