

In Plain Sight

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The huge roof, the black façade and the sheer wall of glass at the entrance to the gallery look down imposingly as I sit in the quiet courtyard out front; the noise of the traffic seems far away as I enter the gallery through the glass doors, and it feels as if I have had a bucket of cold water thrown over me—not some cruel experiment of some contemporary artist but rather the uncomfortable artificial cold of the foyer air conditioning and the dead neutrality of the colour scheme; white, black and grey. This is the physical reality of the recently opened Queensland Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) the 'hub and anchor' of contemporary art in Queensland. The gallery opened in late 2006 as a key part of Brisbane's cultural precinct at South Bank and was designed in response to the natural setting of the surrounding area. But to me the cold and lack-lustre design seems to reflect a Queensland that I have never experienced.

My own experiences at the Gallery of Modern Art were crucial in confirming my opinion that the gallery did not seem to fit the 'Queensland' I knew and that the design created an uncomfortable atmosphere. I have visited the gallery on a number of occasions and each time when approaching the building I have felt that it looked daunting and even uninviting, a result of the black façade and the huge canopy which continually casts the building in dark shadows. Walking inside however was like jumping into a pool; the entrance hall was expansive and pure white and must have been at least eight degrees colder. It was the complete opposite of the green and natural looking courtyard I had been in moments earlier. This contrast made me feel uncomfortable and as though I would be unable to experience the exhibitions properly; the warmth and pleasantness of the space outside made me unable to transition into the atmosphere inside the gallery. I felt that the best area in the gallery was the section where several lounges overlook the river. The architectural design places the view of the river and city as a kind of 'focus room'—a sort of viewing gallery of the city. The vista seemed to fill the huge space but when I turned away from the window and looked into the gallery it seemed comparatively empty even though the room was filled with artworks. The building worked well as an exhibition space and the viewing lounge was an interesting alternative to the art on display but I felt that a few design elements such as the overbearing entrance hall and exterior, colour scheme and climate control detracted from the overall experience of the exhibitions and made the gallery itself seem plain.

Many elements of the design of the Gallery of Modern Art are reflected in the purpose of the gallery, and could possibly explain the plainness of the design. In July 2002 the Queensland Government began looking at several designs for a new gallery that would act as a podium for contemporary art in Queensland and would reflect Queensland's emerging cultural identity. The gallery would need to be big, to accommodate all the exhibitions of modern art that would take place, such as the Asia-Pacific Triennial or the Premier's National New Media Art Awards. The gallery would need generous amounts of space not only for galleries, cinemas and storage but also for features like cafes, function areas, shops and sitting areas that would enhance the experience of the visitor. More importantly, the new gallery had to have a modern aesthetic, an aesthetic missing from many of Queensland's civic projects before this time. The design eventually selected was the vision of an architectural firm based in Sydney, Architectus, which had formed just before this project, in association with another Sydney firm, Davenport Campbell. The project team was made up of many award winning architects like the husband and wife team Kerry and Lindsay Clare who together have collected twenty-eight local and national awards; everything about this new project screamed modernity and cultural awareness, just what the Queensland Government wanted for its new gallery. It is clear that in

accommodating the requirements set by the Government the architects may not have had the freedom to create a more memorable design.

The design of the Gallery of Modern Art is certainly different to anything else in the local environment but would hardly be considered revolutionary to the wider global audience. However, the relative simplicity of the aesthetic belies some fairly clever design qualities. The gallery sits squat, sweltering in the sub-tropical climate on a green bend of the Brisbane River, alongside some parkland and opposite the city centre. The primary theme of the design is the 'light box' and 'black box'. The black box, seen as the black façade on the exterior, was incorporated into the design as the space for the artwork, a safe and protective environment whereas the 'white box' would be the space in which the public could interact and be exposed to the experience of the city. This element of the design is further explained in the architect's statement: 'It is a gallery building utilising walls for the presentation and protection of art (black box) without losing its transparency, readability, and openness to the city and the surrounding landscape (light box)'. (QAG website, 2009) The design also utilises a huge umbrella-like roof which addresses the issue of climate control inside the building. During the daytime the giant roof shields the building from around 90% of the inherent heat of a Queensland summer, which in itself is a considerable feat. However, the roof looks flimsy and awkward and is another example of the design's lack of punch.

Aside from the unique black box/white box concept, the architects have incorporated few design elements that set the gallery apart, let alone design elements that involve the natural setting or lifestyle of Queensland. The widespread use of timber as ornamentation or as awnings on the exterior could be found in most examples of contemporary architecture. Whilst the huge white spaces of the entrance hall, corridors and exhibition spaces are hardly innovative or even contemporary, reverting back to the International style of architecture of the early to mid-twentieth century, or in particular the work of French architect, Le Corbusier. In utilising aspects of the Queensland environment in the design, the architects were slightly more successful. They did this by dedicating an entire wall of the building and a veranda to providing a view of the river and the city skyline. However this gallery would work just as well if it were built on a similar site in any other major city, also revealing a considerable lack of influence that Queensland culture has had over the design.

A good example of a building that espouses the qualities of Queensland life is the State Library building next door to the Gallery of Modern Art. The Queensland lifestyle is relaxed and in tune with the environment around us but above all open to everyone. This lifestyle is exemplified by the design of the State Library of Queensland (SLQ). The State Library building was opened in November 2006 and was designed by Donovan Hill and Peddle Thorp, a Queensland based group. Not surprisingly, the design of the building shows this. The design is open and involving, whilst the natural tones are inviting and comfortable. The judges of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects agreed, giving the design several awards, stating 'The State Library is culturally and climatically a Queenslander—partly grand library and part community hall with its interiors opening like the chapters of a good book'. (SLQ website, 2009) It is clear that a building that truly embraces Queensland must embrace its nature, culture and most of all must capture its personality.

The Queensland Gallery of Modern Art was intended not only to be a place for contemporary art to be displayed and appreciated but also to be an expression of Queensland culture, *our* culture. In my opinion, the architects misinterpreted what Queensland is and was. Instead of designing a space that reflects our relaxed, friendly, and rich culture, the resulting space is imposing, cold and a bit plain and has only one real connection to Queensland: the view. To be fair, the Gallery has had a lot of weight put upon its shoulders; it has been created to be Queensland's link to the world of contemporary art and the global art community. It also serves its purpose well; the exhibitions that have been held there have been interesting, enjoyable and have raised public interest in art. Maybe we should focus more on the art that fills a

gallery rather than the gallery itself because the real measure of a gallery is actually the quality of its artwork.