

In the Vernacular: On the architecture of the National Museum of Australia
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Abstract:

The recently completed National Museum of Australia (NMA) in Canberra, designed by architects Ashton Raggatt McDougall, has polarised the architectural community in Australia.¹ While much of the critical comment centres on its apparent contravention of standards of propriety in civic architecture, this paper examines the building's playful and obtuse character in light of its supposed 'populism'. The NMA's avowedly 'anti-monumental' building has been widely read as being 'populist'. In examining the veracity of such claims, the paper finds instead that there is an aesthetic of populism which exists quite independently of actual popularity, or even a relationship with popular culture. The paper argues that the NMA presents and problematises the question of populism in formal architectural terms. This strategy is particularly significant, and controversial, in a museum charged with the weighty task of representing 'the nation', given that 'popularity' has implications at every level of the museum apparatus. Drawing from a background in architectural theory and criticism, but crossing the disciplines of museology and cultural studies, the paper speculates on how this building manifests broader issues in the history and theory of museums. It examines the politics of the popular in museums, architecture, and the NMA: a specific work of museum architecture.²

The public and the popular

The modern museum is public by definition - it has been described by one critic as a product of 'Renaissance humanism, enlightenment rationality and 19th century democracy'.³ It is a commonplace of museum history that the origin of the modern institution was the forced opening of the French Royal collection in 1793, during the popular uprising of the French Revolution. In fact, critics had called for the Louvre to be opened to the public as early as 1747, and this had become official policy under Louis XVI.⁴ While these plans were overtaken by the tumultuous events of the Revolution, it is important to note that the King's motivation for planning the opening of the royal collection to the public was similar to that of the later revolutionary government - a public museum was a political instrument which conferred legitimacy by representing national identity through the transcendent ideals of art.⁵ The political power of museums had already been recognised by other governments, and the Louvre was not the first European state collection to be opened to the public. But the drama and violence of its opening provides a potent symbol of democracy winning out over sovereignty, and of the museum as a founding pillar and instrument of democratic ideals.⁶ Unlike earlier, pre-modern versions of the museum, the newly opened Louvre was 'neither private, nor royal, nor religious,' it was 'open to the public, overtly secular, and aggressively national.'⁷ All of these characteristics have, in varying degrees, been transmitted to the museum as we know it today.

Australian museums were 'born modern', as Margaret Anderson and Andrew Reeves have noted; 'no revolutions, either intellectual or political, were required to break down their doors.'

But, as they continue, such museums 'were unquestionably also creatures of their times and of the class of their creators - open to the public, free to all, and yet until the beginning of the twentieth century open only during the hours when most people were at work.'⁸ The origins of Australia's museums may have missed some of the revolutionary fervour of their European counterparts, but in them endured a subtle lesson in civics. In spite of pretences to democratic equality, early modern museums were instruments for inculcating reverence for certain high cultural forms, reinforcing class and value systems, and perhaps most importantly for constituting 'society' and 'the public' as such. Such museums played an important role as edifying and educational institutions - the 'people', that is the working classes, were explicitly intended to be 'improved' by their contact with the products of the 'elite' ruling classes. This is further demonstrated in the fact that such museums also excluded the artefacts of 'popular' culture, the culture of the people. The exhibition of popular culture runs against the grain of the museum's traditional focus on canonical, high cultural paragons of excellence, as well as its long-held hegemony over standards of quality and value, both aesthetic and historiographic. Historically, museums exhibited only the most exemplary artefacts produced by a culture, whether authentic masterpieces or authentic historical artefacts.⁹ Popular culture was seen as spurious or inferior history, and as such was mutually exclusive from the museum's objective: to provide an ideal to which the populace could aspire.¹⁰ The idea of the museum as a 'disciplinary' institution, engaged in social control and the constitution of a 'public' made up of 'citizens', has been pursued to influential effect by Tony Bennett, following the work of Michel Foucault.¹¹ He finds that much of the museum's power, as an instrument by which citizens can both identify *with* and be identified *by* nation and state, derives from its being both open to and symbolic property of the people.¹² But just because early modern museums were public, at least nominally open and accessible to all, does not mean they were also *popular*.

The revolution which marked the opening of the first modern museum was merely the first step in a long process of further 'democratisation', which acts against both the explicit and implicit workings of power in the museum in the hope of producing a more truly public institution.¹³ That process continues to this day. But the fact that museums are often now framed as being both public and popular institutions marks the occurrence of another – this time *populist* – revolution. That this one has been largely silent and unremarked only proves its significance. Museums have never been as popular as they are today, neither with politicians, nor cultural commentators, nor architects. But this itself is a telling statement – museums have become increasingly popular with the elite. It also reveals the value of the popular as an analytical tool – popularity means something quite different when used in the context of politics, aesthetics, or broader cultural discourse. The fact that it does intersect all of these varied realms, and yet is generally ignored, is both curious and significant. 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. In order to explore these further, I will turn now to the example of the National Museum of Australia.

Theme Parks and Mausoleums

Peter Ward, writing shortly after the opening of the NMA in the *Australian* 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, concerned that 'it might be "another marble mausoleum" in the Parliamentary Triangle'.¹⁴ Implying that Keating favoured a 'populist aesthetic' because it was more closely aligned with left wing Labour party policy, Ward goes on to describe the now completed museum thus:

As it has emerged, it is an elaborate, theatrical stage for sometimes chimerical concepts of national identity and an astonishing range of high and low art, kitsch and ephemera. Its 4000sq m of displays range from such drolleries as Phar Lap's pickled heart and Azaria Chamberlain's savaged baby clothes to the very serious art and artifacts of the Gallery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Taking all together, it's theme park Australia.¹⁵

Ward's description ranges across both the exhibits and the architecture of the new museum, and indeed there is a high level of cohesion between architectural and museological strategies in the NMA. But for the purposes of this paper, Ward's article is most interesting 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.¹⁶ It is also no coincidence 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 are presently undergoing a shift in definition, moving away from the earlier 'edificatory' model, towards the twenty-first century immersive museum, with its generalised notions of 'experience' and 'edutainment'.¹⁷

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. The NMA has, with a few exceptions,¹⁸ been unproblematically assumed to fit the former, theme park mould. But I would argue that this is a misapprehension, or at least an oversimplification, and indeed that the NMA presents and problematises the question of popularity in formal architectural 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. 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. In fact this look of populism relies on a pre-existing set of dichotomies, specifically between 'high' and (for want of a better term) 'low' architecture. The existence and inherent value system of such dichotomies has been identified by the field of popular culture studies. It is worth examining the general conclusions of that discourse, and defining the terms of the debate – popularity, populism and popular culture – more specifically, before returning to the example of the NMA.

The politics of the popular

Dominic Strinati, following Raymond Williams, has noted the changing meaning of the complex term 'popular culture', especially following a 'shift in perspective' it underwent between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He writes that:

Popular culture ... still carries two older senses: inferior kinds of work (cf. popular literature, popular press as distinguished from quality press); and work deliberately setting out to win favour (popular journalism as distinguished from democratic journalism, or popular

entertainment); as well as the more modern sense of well-liked by many people, with which, of course, in many cases, the earlier senses overlap. The recent sense of popular culture as the culture actually made by people for themselves is different from all of these; it is often displaced to the past as folk culture but it is also an important modern emphasis.¹⁹

The ambivalent connotations of the term centre around a series of binary oppositions, foremost amongst which is that 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 quite likely 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 which have been directed at the NMA.

'Populism' has a similarly negative connotation when used in political discourse; McGuigan writes that it is commonly used to accuse rivals of 'the mobilisation of political majorities around a set of simple ... disingenuous slogans'.²⁰ The accusation of populism, he writes, 'implies reckless and unscrupulous demagoguery'.²¹ Here the connection with national identity is clear - populist politicians are accused by their political opponents of using nationalism as a cheap ideological tool. Politically, the opposite of populism is 'elitism', but there is no salvation to be had there, since 'being thought an elitist is just as bad as being a populist, if not worse. Both 'populist' and 'elitist' are, in effect, terms of abuse, used by intellectuals...'²² Nevertheless, it is not hard to see that many of the pejorative implications of the 'popular', the 'populist' and 'populism' stem from a silent elitism, which continues to value 'high' culture over 'low', in spite of the breakdown of these hierarchies undertaken by postmodernism.

This is nowhere more evident than in the high arts, including architecture. Successive waves of the aesthetic avant garde have 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. Incursions from 'above' are frequent, as intellectuals, artists or historians take some element of popular culture and re-value it according to new criteria. This is a common enough form of radical chic, but it only serves to illustrate the legitimating power that high culture holds: the traffic is almost exclusively one way. 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 pejoratively as 'populist'.²³ This is based upon the assumption that high art is aesthetically demanding, whereas popular or vernacular art is facile and easily understood.

A similar criticism has been levelled at museum exhibitions of popular culture,²⁴ which have been associated with the 'dumbing down' or 'stupidification' of the institution to the 'lowest common denominator'.²⁵ The rhetoric is familiar: criticism of commercial television, film, and indeed much of the mass media employs similar expressions, which are countered in turn with accusations of elitism. Nevertheless the exhibition of popular culture goes hand in hand with populism, and popular accessibility, and has emerged as a driving force in contemporary exhibition culture and policy - from the prevalence of interactive educational devices aimed at school-aged children, to the new emphasis on the museum as entertainment venue, and the phenomenon of the travelling, 'blockbuster' exhibition. There is more at stake here than a simple reversal of the value system that positioned the museum as the collector and keeper of high culture, such that it is now a facilitator of a generalised, popular form of 'cultural experience', and, one might add, seller of cultural merchandise. But for this paper the real relevance of the museum's newly popularised position lies in its implications for museum

architecture. If the rise of populism is marked in the *contents* of museums, I would argue that it is possible to identify a parallel trend in their *form* – that is to say, in museum architecture.

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 which 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. 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,’²⁶ the question of aesthetic elitism is 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 writes, ‘[c]ontemporary museum buildings tend to be astonishingly pure materializations of their authors’ corresponding attitudes towards architecture: they are seismographs of the architectonic culture to which they belong.’²⁷ 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.²⁸ Museum architecture has long had an important role in framing and representing the museum’s ideology and apparatus, as well as its contents. In recent years that role has become more explicit, and more highly valued, even as museums have come to question and challenge their traditional role and purpose.²⁹

Architecture and populism

The very definition of Architecture with a capital ‘A’ is based on its distinction from and elevation above ‘mere’ building, and, I might add, the vernacular. It is the existence of architects, then, as reflexive, educated design professionals, 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, and is not easily abandoned. Populism in architecture 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 ideology of architectural morality – truth to materials, structure and function – that was articulated in the late eighteenth century and refined through the rationalist and functionalist doctrines of modernism. 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 and subscribed 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 architects Ashton Raggatt McDougall 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 of a certain school of Melbourne architecture, and distinctive to its particular mode of avant gardeism. 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 which 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.³⁰

The monumental and the anti-monumental

The NMA has been described by one detractor as 'a monument to lost opportunity',³¹ and by another as 'a monument to horrendous political correctness.'³² These seem particularly interesting descriptions for a building that was explicitly requested by the organising committee to be 'anti-monumental'.³³ At one level, the demand for an anti-monumental building would seem an extension of Paul Keating's comments quoted above – 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 between the two, '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 counter to the general tone of the architecture of the national capital. In fact the museum is already known by some as the 'enema', and this seems an amusingly apt way of describing its treatment of the earnest and inhibited civic architecture of Canberra.³⁴

But given that this particular civic building is a *museum*, the idea of anti-monumentality is more revolutionary than it might appear. There is, I would argue, a deep historical connection between museums and monumentality.³⁵ 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 sense of being a symbol of community - an expression of gathering, of the institutions that are central to the communal nature of society.³⁶ So not only has museum architecture traditionally been conservative, historicist and generally funereal, but it has also manifest the most fundamental meaning of monumentality, one generally out of currency today - that of the monument as gravestone, commemoration for events past and people dead.³⁷ Museum buildings have thus also been monumental in this older sense of having borne witness to passing time in a solid, durable, relatively unchanging form. The massive presence of the monument stands as a corrective and consolation, testifying to the endurance of culture in the face of human finitude and the annihilating effects of time. The museum building as monument also acts as counterpart and metonym for the objects within, artefacts that make past events present simply by their mute physical existence.

In light of this reading, then, 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 the actual experience of the museum visitor.

Of course, I am doubtless (and indeed deliberately) reading more into this idea of anti-monumentality than was originally intended. For one thing, the NMA building does retain some of the older nuances of monumentality - as a symbol of community, here manifest in a 'vernacular' rather than an 'official' mode, but especially the idea of the monument as gravestone: principal designer Howard Raggatt's 'mordant sensibility' is everywhere evident.³⁸ But the requirement for anti-monumentality remains instructive, since it seems to encapsulate the ideology of the museum, and to provide a direct link between the ideology of the museum apparatus and that of the building itself. 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 nothing 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 only 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.³⁹ 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', the Garden of Australian Dreams.

The National Museum and the National War Memorial

But I would like to return again to the mausoleum and theme park opposition, invoked earlier, through one last example. If the NMA seems at least ostensibly to be a 'theme park', there is another building in Canberra that seems to be a 'mausoleum' – the National War Memorial (NWM). The relationship between these two buildings is instructive to an understanding of the rhetoric and aesthetic of populism manifest in the NMA. For many years the NWM acted as a surrogate national museum, and some commentators have seen its existence as one reason for the long deferral of the NMA project.⁴⁰ I would also contend that the purpose and program of the NMA has been strongly conditioned by the presence of this predecessor, which already enshrines many of the most emotive threads of Australian history - the two world wars, and the corresponding ideas of sacrifice, hardiness and masculine heroism that frame mainstream Australian national identity. Where the memorial is solemn and monumental, the NMA is lively and anti-monumental – each appears to be everything the other is not. But I would further argue that the two institutions are more closely intertwined than they would appear, and that their relationship is not a dichotomy, but something closer to a dialectic.

There is a symmetry here that, perversely, proves my argument: the war memorial, the most literally funereal and mausoleum-like of all Canberra's edifices, is extremely popular in the sense of being well subscribed and frequently visited by the public. The difference – and it is not a large difference – is that it doesn't present that popularity as a spectacle. It would clearly be inappropriate if it also had the aesthetic trappings of popularity, amongst which I have already listed bright colour, figurative elements, and visual jokes. The crucial point here is that

the prohibitions which prevent the NWM from pursuing a populist aesthetic are precisely the same ones that *used* also to be applied to museums. The NMA building itself demonstrates that these are now under review, and that what the NMA committee was really requesting in its requirement for an anti-monumental building was one that *looked* popular, and which therefore re-defined the institution away from the NWM model, and towards a brave new museum: popular, entertaining, and lively.

I have, by now, set up 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. 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 firstly 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 final point: that the NMA manifests both sides of many of the oppositions I have mentioned, not, I would argue, in an attempt to resolve or smooth them over, but in order to problematise and render them explicit. This is proven by the fact 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 conclusion, 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 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.

¹ This paper was written with the support of the School of Architecture at the University of Queensland. The author wishes to thank Dr John Macarthur for his comments on an earlier version of the text.

² The paper will be neither a critical analysis nor a summary of the building's critical reception. It will rely on the topical currency of the project to avoid detailed description - there are excellent reviews and descriptions to be found elsewhere. See for example, in the architectural press, John Macarthur, 'Australian baroque', *Architecture Australia*, vol 90, no 2, March/April 2001, pp 48-61; Peter Kohane, 'Review', *Architectural Review*, vol 75, Autumn 2001, p 53 ; James Weirick, 'Landscape and politics: the museum and its site', *Architectural Review*, vol 75, Autumn 2001, p 63; Anna Johnson, 'Knot architecture', *Monument* 42, June/July 2001, pp 54-60; Peter Droege, 'Australia's hyper-museum in context', *Architectural Review*, vol 75, Autumn 2001, pp 60-61; Conrad Hamann, 'Enigma variations: the National Museum of Australia and the AIATSIS Centre', *Art Monthly*, no 138, 2001, pp 5-9; and many others. In the popular press see for example Stephen Frith, 'A monument to lost opportunity', *The Canberra Times*, March 20, 2001; Steven Brook, 'Azaria's black dress view of history', *The*

Australian, 8 March 2001, p. 5; S Brook, 'Elite clash over museum for the ordinary', *The Australian*, 13 March, 2001, p 3; N Day, 'Tangled map of the national psyche', *The Age*, 21 February, 2001, p 7; S. McCulloch-Uehlin, 'Making an exhibition of ourselves', *The Australian*, 13 March, 2001, p 13; R Usher, 'Australia, you're standing in it', *The Age*, 21 February, 2001, p 7; P Ward, 'Enigmatic theme park', *The Australian*, 9 March, 2001, p 39

³ J. Mordaunt Crook, *The British Museum*, Allen Lane / the Penguin Press, London, 1972, p 32

⁴ Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, 'The universal survey museum', *Art History*, vol 3, no 4, December 1980, p 453-454

⁵ See Duncan and Wallach, 'Because the state is abstract and anonymous, it is especially in need of potent and tangible symbols of its power and attributes. Art can be used to realize the transcendent values the state claims to embody. It can make good the state's claim to be the guardian of civilization. It lends credibility to the belief that the state exists at the summit of mankind's highest attainments. In the museum, the visitor is not called upon to identify with the state per se but with its highest values. The visitor inherits this spiritual wealth but only on the condition that he lay claim to it in the museum. Thus the museum is the site of a symbolic transaction between the visitor and the state. In exchange for the state's spiritual wealth, the individual intensifies his attachment to the state. Hence the museum's hegemonic function, the crucial role it can play in the experience of citizenship.' Duncan and Wallach, op. cit., p 457

⁶ Edward P Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*, American Association for State and Local History, Nashville, 1979, pp 22-23

⁷ Crook, op. cit., p 34

⁸ Margaret Anderson and Andrew Reeves, 'Contested identities: Museums and the nation in Australia', in Flora Kaplan (ed), *Museums and the Making of "Ourselves"*, Leicester University Press, London and New York, 1994, p 82

⁹ See Kevin Moore, *Museums and Popular Culture*, Cassell, London, 1997, p 4, where he writes: 'If museums exist simply to reflect high culture, even if this involves bringing this to a mass audience, then broadly speaking popular culture is invalid. Material has a place in the museum as high culture, either as an authentic masterpiece (art) or as an authentic artefact (science, history, archaeology, etc.). The material culture of popular culture, what we might term 'popular material culture,' is considered non-authentic, [not] belonging among ... 'proper' museum material.'

¹⁰ The idea of a national museum for Australia was first proposed as early as 1902, but as Anderson and Reeves write, 'it was not until after the First World War, with its blood sacrifice and influence on the industrialization of the Australian economy, that the idea of a national museum became a possible metaphor for Australian nationalism.' Up until that time, especially in the early years of the colony, there was a perception that Australia didn't have any 'real' history yet, a sensibility which took no account of either Aboriginal history (as opposed to ethnological collection of Aboriginal artefacts) or the artefacts and stories of the common people of the colony. Anderson and Reeves, op. cit., pp 92-93

¹¹ See Tony Bennett, 'The exhibitionary complex', *New Formations*, no 4, 1988, pp 73-102; and Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: history, theory, politics*, Routledge, London, 1995. The work of Eileen Hooper-Greenhill has also been influential in this area. See Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, 'Counting visitors or visitors who count?', in R Lumley (ed), *The Museum Time Machine: Putting Cultures on Display*, Routledge, London, 1988, pp 213-232; and 'The museum in the disciplinary society', in S M Pearce (ed), *Museum Studies in Material Culture*, Leicester University Press, London, 1989, pp 61-72; and E Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992

¹² Bennett's work is central to the thesis of the paper, since he has also drawn a link between the public and the popular in museums. See Tony Bennett, 'Introduction: popular culture and 'the turn to Gramsci'', in Colin Mercer, Tony Bennett, and Janet Woollacott (eds), *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1986, pp xi-xix; Tony Bennett, 'The politics of 'the popular' and popular culture', in Colin Mercer, Tony Bennett, and Janet Woollacott (eds), *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1986, pp 6-21; and Tony Bennett, 'Museums and 'the people', in R Lumley (ed), *The Museum Time Machine: Putting cultures on display*, Routledge, London and New York, 1988, pp 63-85

¹³ As Kevin Moore writes, '... a significant movement from within the profession over the past two decades [has sought] to 'democratize' museums. Opening access to a redefined canon of high culture is seen as only half of this process; equal stress has been placed on the need to redefine the subject matter of the museum to include the lives of the mass of the population, to reflect the ordinary as well as the extraordinary, popular culture alongside high culture.' Moore, op. cit., p 1. See also Ivan Karp,

Christine Mullen Kreamer and Steven D Lavine (eds), *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, 1992.

¹⁴ Peter Ward, 'Enigmatic theme park', *The Australian*, 9 March 2001, p 39

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ 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. Indeed as David Goodman has shown, many museums defined themselves in specific opposition to such attractions. 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. Attempting to establish their basis in rational, empirical observation and categorisation, early museums could ill afford to be associated with such flippancy. See David Goodman, 'Fear of circuses: Founding the National Museum of Victoria', in David Boswell and Jessica Evans (eds), *Representing the Nation: A Reader: Histories, heritage and museums*, Routledge, London, 1999, p 267

¹⁷ As Barbara Hershenblatt-Gimblett notes, the term 'experience', taken to mean 'an engagement of the senses, emotions, and imagination,' has now come to be ubiquitous in both tourism and museum marketing. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998, p 138. On education in new museums, see Lisa Roberts, *From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, 1997.

¹⁸ Notably Ian Perlman, "'Not a themepark" (National Museum)', *Architectural Review*, vol 75, Autumn 2001, pp 56-57

¹⁹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Fontana, London, 1976, p 199, quoted by Dominic Strinati, *An introduction to theories of popular culture*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995, pp 2-3

²⁰ Jim McGuigan, *Cultural Populism*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992, p 1

²¹ *ibid*

²² McGuigan, *op. cit.*, p 2

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ In popular culture studies today, debate still rages around the question of whether popular culture arises from the people themselves, or whether it is in fact foisted upon them from 'above' by an intellectual elite. The former would be a means by which the people might subvert or resist the dominant 'high' culture, while the latter would be an instrument by which this same dominant culture would keep the populace quiescent and subordinated, in what might be called the 'bread and circuses' model. This debate is made even more pointed by the fact that the intellectual or academic study of popular culture is *by definition* not populist - herein lies the paradoxical nature of popular culture: it was and is identified and defined by intellectuals. Jim McGuigan identifies the origins of the study of popular culture in the late eighteenth century, contemporaneous with the rise of industrial capitalism and the French and American revolutions. In his view this new focus on popular culture was partly motivated by aesthetic concerns, but was also political: 'The discovery of popular culture was... an expressly political move, related to ideas of nationhood; thereby linked to a third constitutive feature of modernity, the formation of national identity, in addition to industrialisation and democratisation.' McGuigan, *op. cit.*, p 10

²⁵ See the Fall 1990 issue of *New Perspectives Quarterly*, dedicated to 'The Stupidification of America'.

²⁶ Michael Muller, 'The shopping arcade as a museum: On the strategy of postmodern aestheticization', in Michael Speaks (ed), *The Critical Landscape*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam, 1996, p 114

²⁷ 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

²⁸ The two most obvious examples of this would be Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, and Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin. On the museum as a tourist attraction, see Barbara Hirschenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998.

²⁹ See Susanna Sirefman, 'Formed and forming: Contemporary museum architecture', *Daedalus*, vol 128, no 3, 1999, pp 297-320

³⁰ It is in this sense that the building might be described as vernacular. The concept of the vernacular crosses several of the terms at play here: in language, the vernacular refers to the colloquial, informal, idiomatic vocabulary of a particular region or place. In architecture, it has the related meaning of a style or method of building which has arisen from the climatic or cultural conditions specific to a place. In both of these senses, the vernacular arises from the lives and concerns of the common people. In its specificity, inventiveness, and lack of adherence to convention, it embodies many of the positive attributes of 'popular' culture, and can indeed be seen as a corrective to orthodox or official modes both of speech and of building. I would argue that the NMA building, rather than being populist in the sense of deliberately seeking favour, makes allusions to the aesthetic, and more significantly to the subversive potential, of the vernacular. In this way it steps outside of the binary opposition between high and low, elite and popular, and introduces a third term.

³¹ Stephen Frith, 'A monument to lost opportunity', *The Canberra Times*, 20 March, 2001

³² Piers Akerman, 'Museum is an original imitation,' *Sunday Telegraph*, 8 April, 2001, p 97

³³ 'The NMA committee wanted a building that would be anti-monumental, that would reflect Australia's social and cultural history and present Australia as a kind of work in progress.' Anna Johnson, 'Knot architecture', *Monument* 42, June / July 2001, p 57

³⁴ My thanks to Trina Day for this anecdote.

³⁵ This position is also taken by Carol Duncan, who notes that the architecture of art museums prior to the 1950's was stylistically indebted to Greek classical temples. See Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: inside public art museums*, Routledge, London, pp 7-11.

³⁶ See M Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1994

³⁷ On this older meaning of monumentality, see F Choay, 'Alberti: The invention of monumentality and memory', *Harvard Architecture Review*, no 4, Spring 1984, pp 99-105; W Curtis, 'Modern architecture, monumentality and the meaning of institutions: reflections on authenticity', *Harvard Architecture Review*, no 4, Spring 1984, pp 64-85; K W Forster, 'Monument/memory and the mortality of architecture.' *Oppositions*, no 25, Fall 1982, pp 2-19; W H Gass, 'Monumentality/mentality', *Oppositions*, no 25, Fall 1982, pp 127-144; and A Hamilton, 'Monuments and Memory', *Continuum*, vol 3, no 1, 1990, pp 101-114

³⁸ Peter Kohane finds that the museum 'has a monumentality rooted in, while critical of, traditional forms and compositional strategies.' Peter Kohane, 'Review', *Architectural Review*, vol 75, Autumn 2001, p 53

³⁹ In an article entitled 'Azaria's black dress view of Australian history', Stephen Brook makes an enumeration of some of the NMA's 'popular culture' contents, beginning with Azaria Chamberlain's infamous black dress. The article continues: 'The National Museum of Australia also celebrates the everyday and includes displays of Hills Hoists and Victa lawnmowers. The story of captain Arthur Phillip gets equal billing to entertainers The Wiggles.' The article continues a few lines later, without apparent irony, 'The museum features an ABC broadcast van from the Melbourne Olympics, a replica Federation Arch, as well as the largest collection of Aboriginal bark paintings in the world. Controversy has occurred over whether the museum takes a traditional enough view of Australian history...' Stephen Brook, 'Azaria's black dress view of Australian history', *The Australian*, 8 March, 2001, p 5

⁴⁰ Anderson and Reeves, op. cit., pp 79-124