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Popularise or Perish: Reading the National Museum of Australia

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The recently completed National Museum of Australia (NMA) in Canberra has polarised the architectural community in Australia. While much of the comment directed at the building centres on its apparent contravention of standards of taste and propriety in civic architecture, this paper examines the connotations of the building's playful and obtuse character in light of the question of its supposed "populism". This question is particularly significant in a museum charged with the weighty task of representing "the nation", given that "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. This paper will thus examine the politics of the popular in museums, architecture, and museum architecture.¹

Introduction

It is perhaps mildly controversial that I should be discussing such a new building at a conference of architectural historians. It would be a stretch to say that the NMA building has even solidified yet into a stable position in the contemporary canon, let alone into architectural history. I justify this move by appealing to the museum's own strategy which, to paraphrase director Dawn Casey, is concerned not only with history, but with history as it unfolds in the present.² I am also aware of the dangers of writing about a building, which is so contentious. Given that it is a national institution, in the Australian national capital, it is particularly subject to opinion, and the mandate to comment upon it has been widely exercised, in often-vociferous tones. While I will draw briefly upon some of these reviews and critical opinions, then, I will also rely directly upon the topical currency of the project, and avoid both detailed description and a summary of its critical reception; there are excellent reviews and descriptions easily found elsewhere.³ The paper is not intended to be a critical appraisal of the building, but a speculative discussion of how it might propose or manifest broader issues in the history and theory of museums. Partly this is a result of the paper being drawn from a larger work, which deals with issues in contemporary museology as they intersect museum architecture. This, too, is the explanation for the title of this paper—the idea that museums are poised on the threshold of a major historical shift in their role and function in society, a shift which can be hinged around the idea of popularity.

Contemporary social history museums, under the influence of the "new museology",⁴ have broadened their focus, from an emphasis on the past, particularly as it is made present by authentic historical artefacts, to an

¹ My thanks to John Macarthur for his comments on a draft version of this paper.

² Dawn Casey quoted by Stephen Brook, "Azaria's black dress view of history", *The Australian*, (8 March 2001): 5.

³ In the architectural press, see for example John Macarthur, "Australian Baroque", *Architecture Australia*, volume 90, no 2, March/April 2001: 48-61; Peter Kohane, "Review", *Architectural Review*, volume 75, Autumn 2001: 53; James Weirick, "Landscape and politics: the museum and its site", *Architectural Review*, volume 75, Autumn 2001, p 63; Anna Johnson, "Knot Architecture", *Monument*, 42, June/July 2001: 54-60; Peter Droege, "Australia's hyper-museum in context", *Architectural Review*, volume 75, Autumn 2001, pp 60-61; and many others. In the popular press see for example Stephen Frith, "A monument to lost opportunity", *The Canberra Times*, March 20, 2001; Brook, S, "Azaria's black dress view of history" *The Australian*, 8 March 2001: 5; Brook, S, "Elite clash over museum for the ordinary", *The Australian* 13 March 2001: 3; Day, N, "Tangled map of the national psyche", *The Age*, 21 February 2001: 7; McCulloch-Uehlin, S, "Making an Exhibition of Ourselves", *The Australian* 13 March 2001: 13; Usher, R, "Australia, you're standing in it", *The Age*, February 21 2001: 7; Ward, P, "Enigmatic Theme Park", *The Australian*, 9 March 2001: 39; and many others.

⁴ See Peter Vergo (ed), *The New Museology*, London, Reaktion Books, 1989.

ever-increasing emphasis on reflecting the present and imagining the future. This comes in the wake of the postmodern critique of institutions, which painted the museum as itself a relic, dedicated to constructing and perpetuating outdated modernist metanarratives: in short, a "dead" institution. Theodor Adorno's famous assertion that the words "museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association",⁵ became a truism of museological criticism, and the "ruin" of the institution was widely proclaimed throughout the 70s and 80s.⁶ At this juncture in its history it really seemed that there were only two options left to the museum—it must popularise or perish. The remarkable flowering of the institution since those apocalyptic predictions of its imminent end can, I would argue, be attributed to a fundamental shift towards the former—the museum has never been as "popular" as it is today, neither with politicians nor cultural commentators, with architects or the general public itself. But this statement itself reveals the significance 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.

Theme Parks and Mausoleums

Given the title and subject of this paper, it is appropriate that I begin with an article from the "popular" press. Peter Ward, writing in the *Australian* of 9 March 2001, observes that former Prime Minister Paul Keating was dubious about the idea of building a national museum in Canberra, concerned that "it might be "another marble mausoleum" in the Parliamentary Triangle".⁷ Implying that Keating advocated a "populist aesthetic" because it was more closely aligned with left wing Labour party politics, Ward goes on to describe the 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 4000 square metres 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."⁸

Ward's description is general enough to apply to both the exhibits and the architecture of the new museum, and indeed there is a high level of cohesion between architectural and museological strategies at play in the NMA. Apart from the assertion that the building is an elaborate stage, then, the interesting thing in this passage is its positing of two possible models for the museum: on the one hand a "mausoleum" and on the other a "theme park". Contemporary museums, and museum architecture, can thus be seen to range across a scale which runs from the older "mausoleum" model on the one hand, to the ascendent 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 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 relative populism, or more specifically, their explicit *signification* of popularity. At stake here is a pervasive 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 is that they are presently undergoing a shift in definition, changing from the 19th century model, the purpose of which was edification in the full sense, towards the 21st century

⁵ "The German word 'museal' [*museumlike*], has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art. They testify to the neutralisation of culture". Theodor Adorno, "Valery Proust Museum", in *Prisms*, trans Samuel and Shierry Weber, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1981, p 175.

⁶ Perhaps most influentially by Douglas Crimp, in his collection of essays published throughout the 80s and first collected in 1993 as *On the Museum's Ruins*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, reprinted 1997.

⁷ Peter Ward, "Enigmatic Theme Park", *The Australian*, 9 March 2001, p 39.

⁸ Peter Ward, "Enigmatic Theme Park", *The Australian*, 9 March 2001, p 39.

immersive museum, where education and entertainment are subordinated to a generalised notion of "experience". Sober edification meets and clashes uncomfortably with sensation and spectacle.⁹ 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 lighthearted 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, which is solemn and educational, perhaps reflected in a conventionally monumental institutional architecture. The National Museum of Australia has, with a few exceptions,¹⁰ been unproblematically assumed to fit the former, theme park mould, with all that it entails. But I would argue that this assumption represents a misapprehension, or at least an oversimplification of the work, and indeed that the NMA presents and problematises the question of popularity in formal architectural terms. This leads me to my first proposition: that there is an "look" of populism that exists independently of any intended or actual popularity, or, incidentally, a connection with popular culture. I would argue that the NMA opens an elaborate play on this "look" of populism, and that it does so by manipulating certain key aesthetic devices: bright colour, 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 "popular" architecture, and between "elite" and "popular" culture more generally. The field of popular culture studies has already identified and discussed these dichotomies in depth. 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 term "popular", especially following a "shift in perspective" it underwent between the 18th and 19th centuries:

*"Popular was being seen from the point of view of the people rather than from those seeking power or favour over them. Yet the earlier sense had not died. Popular culture was not identified by the people but by others, and it 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."*¹¹

The ambivalent connotations of this complex term centre around a series of binary oppositions, foremost amongst which is that between "popular", vernacular or "low" culture, and "high" or "elite" culture. Not only is high culture privileged by institutions of which museums are among the most powerful, but the binary opposition is so strong that anything which is "popular" is often immediately assumed not only to be inferior, but quite likely gaudy and unsophisticated as well. But it is the final point in the passage, that of the popular being made by the people for themselves, that is the most hotly debated. This debate is made even more pointed by the fact that the intellectual or academic study of popular culture is *by definition* not

⁹ In fact there is nothing new in this—throughout their history 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 *Representing the Nation: A Reader: Histories, heritage and museums*, (ed) David Boswell and Jessica Evans, Routledge, London, 1999, p 267. My thanks to the anonymous referee who directed me to this and other valuable references in this area.

¹⁰ Notably Ian Perlman, "'Not a themepark' (National Museum)", *Architectural Review*, volume 75, Autumn 2001: 56-57.

¹¹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Fontana, 1976, p 199, quoted by Dominic Strinati, *An introduction to theories of popular culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995, pp 2-3.

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 18th 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".¹² Significantly, then, popular culture was linked from the very beginning with notions of nationalism and national identity; mythologised as the most "honest", "true" or "essential" expression of the people, it has a particular symbolic potency.¹³

In the high arts, including architecture, 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".¹⁴ This is based upon the assumption that high art is aesthetically demanding, whereas popular or vernacular art is facile and easily understood.

"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".¹⁵ The accusation of populism, he writes, "implies reckless and unscrupulous demagoguery".¹⁶ Here again the connection with national identity is clear—populist politicians are accused by their opponents of using nationalism as a cheap political 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...".¹⁷ Nevertheless, in cultural discourse it is not hard to see that many of the pejorative implications of the "popular", the "populist" and "populism" stem from a hidden or silent elitism, which continues to value high culture over low, in spite of the breakdown of these hierarchies attempted by postmodernism.¹⁸

Henceforth, then, I will make a distinction 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. I will use "popularity" in 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 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

¹² Jim McGuigan, *Cultural Populism*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, p 10.

¹³ See Kevin Moore, *Museums and Popular Culture*, London: Cassell, 1997, p 2: "[P]opular culture is defined not so much by what it is, but by what it is not. Popular culture is whatever is not defined as high culture. Where [accounts] differ is in how they perceive that culture to have been created. The multiplicity of approaches to the study of popular culture can be characterised, in simple terms, as adopting one of two fundamental positions. It is viewed either as a mass culture imposed by a culture industry to maintain the power of a ruling elite, or alternatively as a genuine, creative cultural expression from below, a form of consumer subversion in opposition to the dominant ideology".

¹⁴ McGuigan, *Cultural Populism*, p 2.

¹⁵ McGuigan, *Cultural Populism*, p 1.

¹⁶ McGuigan, *Cultural Populism*, p 1.

¹⁷ McGuigan, *Cultural Populism*, p 2.

¹⁸ Post-modern critique sought to collapse both the distinction *and* the value system implicit in binary oppositions between high and low culture—to still read low culture as inferior is to miss the point.

by "ambitious efforts to consecrate or position architecture once again as a higher, indeed the highest, form of Art",¹⁹ the question of aesthetic elitism is particularly pointed in museum buildings.

Public Museums and Popular Culture

The modern museum is public by definition—it is a commonplace of museum history that the origin of the modern institution was the forced opening of the Louvre during the popular democratic uprising of the French Revolution.²⁰ The early modern museum was an instrument for inculcating reverence for certain high cultural forms, reinforcing class and value systems, and perhaps most importantly for constituting "society" 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. 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.²¹ Much of the museum's power, as an instrument by which citizens can both identify *with* and be identified *by* nation and state, derive from its being both open to and symbolic property of the people. But just because the modern museum is *public*, at least nominally accessible to all, does not mean that it has historically been *popular*. For a "public" institution, the museum has a history of excluding, marginalizing and generally ignoring an inordinately large proportion of the populace, a state of affairs which has only begun to be redressed in recent years with the increasing "democratisation" of the institution.²²

Far from being truly "of the people", then, museums have traditionally been repositories not only for artefacts, but also for the norms and ideals of elite culture. But more than simply exhibiting high culture, in a very real sense the role of museums has traditionally been to *define* it, and they maintain a hegemony over the determination of cultural legitimacy to this day. Contemporary museums clearly have a vested interest in maintaining at least their authority, if not their hegemony, in questions of cultural legitimacy, but they have nevertheless been deeply affected by the idea of "popular" culture as the true expression of "the people". An emphasis on 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 best and most exemplary artefacts produced by a culture, whether authentic masterpieces or authentic historical artefacts. Popular culture was seen as spurious or inferior history, and as such was mutually exclusive from the museum's ideals.²³ The reversal of this system in contemporary museums has produced something of a revolution in the subjects and objects of museum display.²⁴

¹⁹ Michael Muller, "The Shopping Arcade as a Museum: On the strategy of post-modern aestheticisation", in *The Critical Landscape*, (ed) Michael Speaks, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam, 1996, p 114.

²⁰ See for example Carol Duncan, "Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship", in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, (ed) Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine, Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991: 88-103.

²¹ See Tony Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex", *New Formations*, 4, (1988): 73-102; and Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: history, theory, politics*, London: Routledge, 1995.

²² This democratisation is based on the assumption that, in simplest terms, people will feel more welcome in a museum in which they can recognise themselves, one that doesn't ignore their very existence. It centres partly around questions of representation, then, and a more truly representative picture of the diversity and heterogeneity of society. It also turns on questions of access—encompassing physical access and the general accommodation of the different needs of people with disabilities, but also sociological accessibility. This is informed by a relatively new branch of research, which analyses which sectors of society actually visit museums and why, and by extension why other sectors do not. This work has helped to reveal who the museum public actually is, and thus assisted in improving accessibility to a wider populace. Kevin Moore describes the process as "...a significant movement from within the profession over the past two decades to 'democratise' 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, *Museums and Popular Culture*, p 1.

²³ Moore, *Museums and Popular Culture*, p 4. 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".

²⁴ The trend towards the exhibition of popular culture in museums today takes two related forms. The distinction between them turns around the crucial issue of temporality. On the one hand popular culture in museums refers to the vernacular, to objects and narratives drawn from the lives of ordinary people. This trend is particularly associated with industrial or "folklife" museums and the notion of "history from the bottom up". It has political

But here again the ambivalences of popularity and populism are strongly evident, since the exhibition of popular culture has been associated with the "dumbing down" or "stupification" of the museum 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. But popular accessibility 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 of course the ever-increasing number of exhibitions dedicated to popular culture. There is more at stake here than a simple reversal of the value system, which positioned the museum as the collector and keeper of high culture, such that it is now a facilitator of a generalised, democratised and popular form of "cultural experience" and education, 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.

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 very 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 perhaps more than any of the other arts, and it is not easily abandoned, even with the best of post-modern intentions. Populism in architecture is also hedged about with proscriptions 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 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 is not truly of the people, avoid 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 the fact that in the NMA architects Ashton Raggatt McDougall have breached this unspoken rule 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 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. 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 naïve 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. In the last section of this paper, I will explore two of the ways this is manifest in the NMA building—through its avowed anti-monumentality, and its appropriation of elements of both high architecture and the vernacular.

implications in that it re-values the artefacts and histories of previously marginalised groups, and takes a broad definition of whom exactly "the people" that the museum represents might be. On the other hand, the idea of popular culture in museums has a temporal dimension, and refers to popular contemporary culture—things and events which are "popular" in the present—a primary example would be artefacts and narratives associated with popular entertainment. In exhibiting this, the museum takes on the socially acknowledged popularity of its subjects, it comes to participate in popular culture and is thus *recognised* as itself popular. Part of the attraction of such exhibits is surely their "drawcard" status; their ability to attract large numbers of visitors, but the perception of popularity also exists quite separately from actual popularity. While the exhibition of vernacular history follows a similar logic to the traditional history museum, albeit with a different subject in mind, I would argue that the exhibition of artefacts from contemporary popular culture represents a fundamental shift— from a vanguard position, following behind the tumult of historical events as birds follow the plough, to an explicitly *avant-garde* position, not simply recording, but actively participating in culture.

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

The Anti-monumental

The NMA has been described by one detractor as “a monument to lost opportunity”,²⁶ and by another as “a monument to horrendous political correctness”.²⁷ These seem particularly interesting descriptions for a building that was explicitly requested by the organising committee to be “anti-monumental”.²⁸ At one level, the demand for an anti-monumental building would seem a coded request for a building that is *present*, that is not (or at least not yet) lodged in history. If monumentality is conceived as an undesirable characteristic, it is not hard to imagine what its attributes might 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, entertaining, 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. 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 seems at one level to be a simple request for a “populist” building—not a solemn symbol of the establishment, but a deliberate counter to the general tone of the architecture of the national capital. 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.²⁹

Much of the energy of the NMA 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 metanarrative of “nationhood”. As a museum, 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 (or at least 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.³⁰ On the contrary, if a national museum is seen to “house” the stories of the nation, there was good reason for the NMA to make allusions to vernacular or at least domestic architecture, the “popular” architecture of the familiar and everyday. This strategy is particularly clear in the relationship of the NMA building with its own “backyard”, the Garden of Australian Dreams.

There is nothing grandiose in the architecture of the NMA: in its messy, pluralist vitality it works against false notions of completion, unity, and wholeness. I would argue that what the NMA committee was really requesting in its requirement for an anti-monumental building was one that *looked* popular. The NMA as a building and an organisation subscribes to the rhetoric, and significantly also to an *aesthetic*, of popularity. 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”,³¹ Frith complains that the building is a major

²⁶ Stephen Frith, “A monument to lost opportunity”, *The Canberra Times*, (20 March 2001).

²⁷ Piers Akerman, “Museum is an original imitation”, *Sunday Telegraph*, (8 April 2001): 97.

²⁸ “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): 57.

²⁹ My thanks to Trina Day for this anecdote.

³⁰ 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): 5.

³¹ “The word conceit is appropriate to a fragmented architecture of private meanings, in-jokes, hollow rituals. A conceit can be both highly conservative and intentionally pretentious. The museum is positioned as high art using low art, a latter-day adaptation of the theories of the

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..."³²

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 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?"³³

A different understanding of the NMA is evinced by John Macarthur, who, writing for *Architecture Australia*, conceives it as a work of architecture which forces the visitor into a "performance" of citizenship, through the very act of deciphering the encoded meaning of the building. Not an architecture that speaks only to a minority, then, but one that is open to interpretation by all, whilst at the same time demanding a certain effort in explication. In his conception, the building is not popularly accessible in the sense of being "dumbed down", but popular in that the populace is invited to make a guided reading of its formal architectural complexities. In Macarthur's words,

"There is a variety of opinion that sees this approach to design as mocking the client and lay visitor, because an architectural education is required to make the identifications and get the joke. However, in my experience, the public, when attending to a building as architecture, for example touring Parliament House, are perfectly happy for the building to require a guided reading. If anyone is being mocked by the architectural references it is architects who think that the meaning of buildings can be self-evident and exist without interpretation."³⁴

These two critical appraisals of the NMA building both raise the question of its apparent populism, but take opposing positions as to the relative value or utility of this. As with much of the building's reception, this critique has been most heated around the strategy of literally appropriating elements of certain canonical buildings from the modern period, as well as vernacular elements. To its critics the NMA is a collection of quotations, borrowed devices, and stolen motifs, itself a "museum of architecture".³⁵ 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 famously includes Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, amongst many others. Whether this is simply an opportunity for gangs of train spotting architectural

American architect Robert Venturi... These theories are now dated, tired and conservative in their application in the National Museum". Frith, "A monument to lost opportunity".

³² Frith, "A monument to lost opportunity".

³³ Frith, "A monument to lost opportunity".

³⁴ John Macarthur, "Australian Baroque", *Architecture Australia*, 90, 2, (March/April 2001): 56.

³⁵ Conrad Hamann makes the point that the NMA's appropriations themselves constitute a form of collecting, such that "...[t]he Museum's built fabric becomes itself a museum of Architecture—drawn partly from Australia and partly from the general experience of Modern architecture's world history". [Conrad Hamann, "Enigma variations: The National Museum of Australia and the AIATSIS Centre", *Art Monthly*, 138 (April 2001): 8.] This is a particularly interesting reading in light of the fact that architecture, of all the arts, is least easy to present in museums, and indeed constitutes a dilemma in this respect. Abstracted representations such as drawings and models can be exhibited easily enough, but are always inadequate to reproduce the spatial qualities and scale of the real thing. If ARM have produced a kind of "museum of architecture" at the NMA, then, the real dispute seems to be over the "authenticity" of its "artefacts".

historians to gather and play spot-the-reference,³⁶ or an elaborate game of post-modern cultural appropriation, I would argue that questions of popularity lie at the heart of the gesture. Of course, on the basis of these appropriations alone, the major complaint about the building is not that it *is* popular, but that in fact it is not popular enough.

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 long-standing 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, whilst simultaneously also employing genuinely "popular", vernacular elements from the broader socio-cultural 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. A disappointingly equivocal, postmodernist "either/or" 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 of the architecture, not the idea.

³⁶ Reviews of the building have engaged in this process to a certain extent, and Conrad Hamann wins the game with 14 references by my reckoning. See Hamann, "Enigma variations". Peter Droeger would have to get the award for analogical gymnastics, though, with his description of the NMA as a "Kahnian convention centre morphed into a Tschumiesque playhouse". Peter Droeger, "Australia's hyper-museum in context", *Architectural Review*, 75 (Autumn 2001): 60.