“This is the most significant development to the National Gallery of Australia since it opened in 1982. This is the first increase in our permanent collection space since the gallery opened, and these are the first galleries specifically designed for the display of different kinds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art.”

Ron Radford AM
Former Director, National Gallery of Australia
Introduction

The National Gallery of Australia - New Entrance and Indigenous Australian Galleries is a major addition to the existing gallery in Australia’s capital city, Canberra.

The project provides a new identity for the institution without diminishing the character and integrity of the existing gallery building.

At ground level, the extensions incorporate a large foyer, new cloakroom, reception and bookshop areas, a fully serviced function room opening to landscaped gardens, escalator and lift connections to the original building and improved disabled access to all public levels. The upper level includes Australia’s first purpose-built galleries for the display of Indigenous art. These range in scale and character from large daylit spaces to small rooms for the display of more sensitive works.
In 1971, the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) proposed a new plan for the Parliamentary Zone, placing a 400m² called the ‘National Place’ within the central lakeshore area. This was to be flanked by the National Library to the west and the High Court and National Gallery of Australia (NGA) to the east, to create a strong axial link between the National Library and the NGA.

The designs for both the High Court and NGA were won by the firm of Edwards Madigan Torzillo and Briggs, and the entry levels of the buildings were determined by the proposed National Place.

In 1975, the NCDC abandoned the plan for the National Place. This left the entry levels for the buildings five metres above the natural ground level and without the connection to a National Place, Parliament, or the National Library. In 1978, the NCDC changed the access roads from a one-way to a two-way road system, together with the construction of a surface car park to the south of the NGA. This meant that most visitors approached the gallery from the rear side of the building.

The construction of the National Gallery of Australia commenced in 1973 and the building opened in 1982. The original building design was developed to display 1,000 works of art; however, the NGA art collection grew to in excess of 140,000 works. There had been no significant additional permanent display space since the building was completed.

The High Court and NGA National Place bridge link was not utilised by most visitors to the gallery. Generally, visitors arrived past the south facade of the building, not from the north as originally intended. From the car park visitors had to pass by service areas, dock roads and car park ramps to find a path to the building entrance. This was confusing and inappropriate for the entrance to a major national institution.
THE ENTRANCE
The entrance is marked by a lofty porch of concrete structural elements opening out to the path to the south and vehicular approach to the west. A new stair and lift provides access to this point from the existing underground car park, which is reserved for the public. Further parking for staff and visitors is provided by a temporary surface car park to the east of the building.

THE ABORIGINAL MEMORIAL
The first impression of the building is a view of a major Indigenous work of art, the Aboriginal Memorial, seen through a lofty glazed screen adjacent to the entry porch.

CAFÉ
An outdoor café is provided adjacent to the entrance, with outdoor seating, sun umbrellas and a water feature providing a welcoming ambiance to the new south entrance, where visitors to the gallery can enjoy the passing public.

THE ENTRANCE LOBBY
From the new south entrance door, a lobby leads to escalators which transports visitors to the principal level of the building. An information desk, shop, cloaking and toilets are located in an orderly sequence. Upon arrival, there is a view over the Aboriginal Memorial, setting a theme that this building is located in Australia’s national capital. The memorial is located under a conical light shaft sitting in a drum clad in timber. Partly into the lobby, a lofty “colonnade” of paired columns and light shafts leads to the function room to the right.

THE MULTI-PURPOSE FUNCTION ROOM
The multi-purpose function room is a subdivisible, multi-purpose space suitable for a wide range of activities including banquets for 320 people, large cocktail parties and meetings of a variety of sizes. This space is served by a kitchen and associated equipment storage facilities.
Indigenous Art Gallery (foreground artwork: Lin Onus Dingoes, 1989)

Foyer and bookshop in the new extension

The new gallery extension exterior

Torres Strait Islander art

North view (through the new foyer)
BACK OF HOUSE FACILITIES
New separate loading docks for art and general purpose deliveries with associated back of house facilities improve the day-to-day functioning of this busy institution.

THE PRINCIPAL LEVEL
On ascending the escalators to the principal level, visitors coming from the south arrive at the same point as those coming from the north - up the existing monumental stair, or from the West, along the footbridge from the High Court and National Portrait Gallery.

The removal of the shop from this location opens up vistas to the north, and east as well as to the south to the new Australian Aboriginal Galleries. Some of this space is used for key works such as the Sydney Nolan Ned Kelly series as well as photography and recent acquisitions.

THE NEW GALLERIES
The new galleries are generally daylit with supplementary artificial lighting designed with a variety of ceiling heights to suit displays of art objects of diverse scale. Smaller artificially lit spaces are located adjacent to the larger galleries for art works requiring lower lux levels.

Showcases for fragile objects are generally located within the depth of walls or between the paired columns of the “colonnade” element. The circulation of the new galleries is unified by an arcade of uniform openings and form a circuit from the principal east-west axis of the existing building.
The new extensions are surrounded by landscaped areas that help complete the garden circuit around the building.

'Skyspace', a major work by an American artist, James Turrell, is located within these gardens and is accessed from the function room and new building entry.

The extension draws on the materials palette and iconic forms of the original building; however are articulated from the original structure and clearly identifiable as new work. The building is of a monumental scale and designed to comfortably relate to the adjacent major institutional buildings of the area. It is an important structure in the landscape of the Parliamentary Triangle and the Griffin city plan.
PTW liaised with James Turrell and used three-dimensional modelling to document the complex geometric artwork comprising a red ochre pyramid base, partially submerged in the ground, surrounded by water. Construction techniques were developed with the contractor for the iconic artwork.

The landscaped gardens incorporate a major installation sculpture ‘Skyspace’ designed by American artist, James Turrell.
The Aboriginal Memorial, 1987-88
Looking across the Australian Garden to the new extension
Early Western Desert Paintings Gallery
James Turrell, ‘Within without’, 2010, installation (within the Skyspace)
Bookshop
Ground Floor Plan
(Level 2)

Section and Principal Gallery Floor Plan
(Level 4)

1. Entrance foyer
2. Aboriginal memorial
3. Cafe
4. Entrance lobby
5. Function room
6. Back of house facilities
7. Indigenous Galleries
8. Existing auditorium
9. Bookshop
10. James Turrell, Skyspace
PTW worked closely with the National Gallery of Australia to ensure that the design responded to the highly prescriptive requirements for the movement, treatment and display of highly sensitive works of art. Various tools were used to facilitate this process, initially sketches and simple block models, and as the design progressed, more sophisticated media such as 3D computer models of all structure and services and ultimately, a full scale prototype.
“What we’ve done in this permanent exhibition is really celebrate the diversity of Indigenous art in Australia.”

Franchesca Cubillo
Senior Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art, National Gallery of Australia

Project Recognition

AWARDS
2011 Property Council of Australia / Rider Levett Bucknall Innovation and Excellence Award