

Grand designs

Towards a new SAM

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In an era of arts funding cuts, the prospect of a new purpose-built gallery in regional Australia is cause for celebration. In January 2017, Shepparton Art Museum (SAM) unveiled five concept designs for their new museum, with the winning design to be announced in April. Currently located in a remodelled council building, SAM has a permanent collection with strengths in ceramics, Indigenous art, work by Australian female modernists, as well as a provocative program of contemporary exhibitions. The new building – housing SAM, the Shepparton Visitor Centre and Kaiela Arts (the local Indigenous art gallery and studio, currently located in a storefront) – has the potential to be more than just a new exhibition space. Including a children's gallery and/or educational space, artist-in-residence studio and the obligatory cafe, shop and bar, the new SAM could become a significant generator of civic identity.

The design proposals for the new SAM resulted from a competition, endorsed by the Australian Institute of Architects, which received 88 expressions of interest, whittled down to the five finalists on recent public display. For the exhibition, the architects' brief required three small panels with minimal text, relying – perhaps ambitiously – on the ability of the general public to make sense of architectural drawings. The different scales, different types of plans and elevations and even different conventions to indicate details such as doors and windows, made comparison between the five entries difficult. However, the photorealistic digital renders certainly helped envisage the new SAM's spaces and atmosphere.

All of the proposals sought to connect the new building with its lakeside location and recognised its potential as a new public space for the town. The proposal from Denton Corker Marshall (DCM) – a cubic five-storey structure composed of four plates – was reminiscent of a Richard Serra sculpture. According to the architects, it was 'conceived like a land sculpture',¹ and the enclosed self-contained structure draws attention to its objectness, making it the least integrated with the site. However, the designers' consideration of the gallery's circulation patterns and flexibility of spaces was thoughtful, and it was the only proposal to include an outdoor studio space for Kaiela, important for some of the large-scale work in wood and ceramics they produce.

Kerstin Thompson Architects' proposal was the most difficult to read. Comprised of several circular glass spaces connected

by an overhanging roof, the flow into and through the structure created a sense of openness and, with only three storeys, it seemed less monumental than the DCM proposal. Less convincing were the interiors (there was only one interior image), with little indication of how the circular spaces might work. Unfortunately, the architects thought little about Kaiela (no studio, only a circular gallery space), but their proposal was the only one to indicate a commitment to sustainability with the inclusion of solar panels and rooftop planting.

A similar sense of openness and flow characterised John Wardle Architects' proposal, and their use of timber cladding made the structure seem even more modest. It also comprised three storeys, with an open and welcoming ground floor also in timber, and a curious red roof over the rooftop cafe/bar that seemed to be made of plastic or fabric. While the images made several references to SAM's ceramics collection, the displays and interiors seemed conventional. Lyons Architecture's proposal was similarly open on the ground floor with a complex four-storey building above. A series of small images gave a good idea of the interiors, while an 'Open Collection' space, adjacent to the educational space, suggested a potentially innovative tool for community engagement.

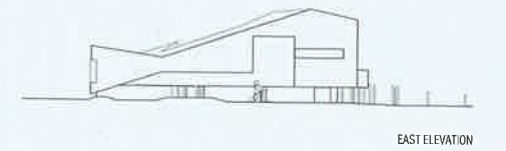
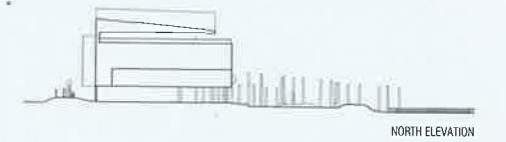
Finally, MvS Architects' proposal was the most colourful, both in its display panels and in the building's yellow and pink facade. Separating Kaiela and the Visitor Information Centre across a new pedestrian 'Kaiela Street' from SAM, MvS's exhibition spaces were conventional with little thought about the flow between them, but the rear of the complex, comprising a cafe/bar over two storeys, opened it up to the parkland behind. Inviting comment from the public, the passing conversations I heard about the design proposals both at SAM and Kaiela suggested not only a high level of community engagement, but also excitement about the prospect of a new SAM.

1. See http://greater-shepparton.com.au/assets/files/documents/consultations/new-sam/designs/Denton_Corker_Marshall_Pty_Ltd.pdf, accessed 2 February 2017.

The five shortlisted architectural designs for the new Shepparton Art Museum were exhibited from 16 January until 5 February 2017.



Image courtesy Denton Corker Marshall



Top:
Image courtesy Kerstin Thompson Architects

Bottom:
Image courtesy John Wardle Architects

Top:
Image courtesy Lyons Architecture

Bottom:
Image courtesy MvS Architects