

Bicultural condition at museum's heart

Stuart Niven offers a Wellingtonian's view of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa's programme and place in the city.

In May this year the revised design for the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa was revealed for general public scrutiny for the first time. In the weeks that followed the public (particularly in Wellington), and a raft of "experts", let it be known that they were less than enchanted by what they saw.

In the ensuing melee, at least at the public level, the desire for a simple, strong iconic image — the should it be a paua shell or a Big Ben pie debate — has largely overtaken and obscured any discussion of the bicultural intentions of the museum, and the evolving way Jasmx have chosen to express this architecturally.

At the heart of the museum's programme is a basic truth. As an institution it confronts a unique bicultural condition — Maori and Pakeha in one place. Through the museum brief this has taken a three-part form: *papatuanuku* — the land to which we all belong; *tangata whenua* — those who belong to the land by right of first discovery and *tangata tiriti* — those who belong to the land by right of treaty.

These are held together by a condition of cultural contact referred to by John Hunt in *Architecture NZ* Nov/Dec 1990. Referring to Thelma Rodgers' undergraduate work on biculturalism, he noted: "The importance of encounter (symbolic or real) between the two cultural traditions as a key element of a bicultural relationship . . ."

He went on to note that the presence of ". . . public spaces of meeting and encounter as key elements of [Architecti's & Jasmx's shortlisted and winning competition proposals suggested] the idea of biculturalism is not as resistant to architectural interpretation as some would suppose . . .".

From competition to later development, Jasmx have consistently employed two strong architectural ideas to interpret this view of the museum and its bicultural condition.



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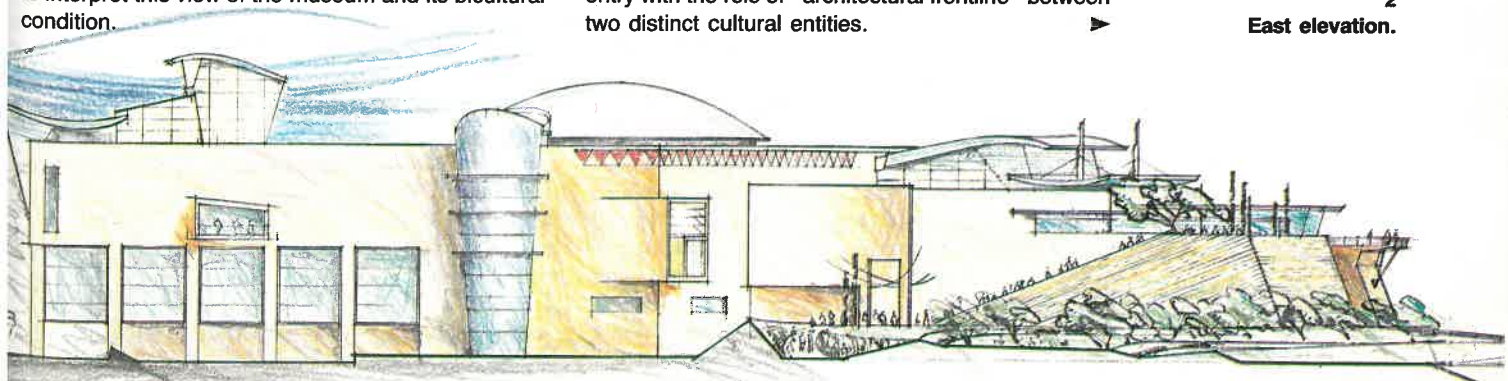
There has been both the desire for *papatuanuku*, *tangata whenua* and *tangata tiriti* to be given separate and explicit cultural form, and an equally strong desire to express this as a physical transition from city to harbour.

Within that transition the expression of "encounter" has been given a particular significance as the mediating ground — both visual and experiential — between these two cultural traditions. With the competition entry, the **expression of parts** was the stronger architectural motif; with the idea of **transition** expressed in more subdued and abstract terms. The particular power of this design was the prominence it gave to the "place of encounter" — a lofty, glazed and canopied axis combining the museum's approach and entry with the role of "architectural frontline" between two distinct cultural entities. ▶

1
Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa — view from north of curving temporary exhibition gallery (west wing) in foreground and wall on east-west axis.

2
East elevation.

SEPT/OCT 92 Architecture NZ



Museum of NZ Te Papa Tongarewa

◀ With the subsequent development of the museum brief, this "place of encounter" took on an altogether richer reading of cultural possibility, becoming the cove of the museological programme. This, however, introduced necessary conditions of light protection, climate control and interpretive setting which forced the internalising of "encounter" within the "black box" of the museum.

It was this, possibly more than anything else, that forced a reassessment of the competition design. The twin ideas of transition and expression of parts, and the interweaving between them, have, however, remained as the central architectural concerns of the museum design.

The differences between competition and revised designs follow a major shift in emphasis from the predominance of the expression of parts [with "encounter" as a mediating force between them], to the predominance of transition (with a less overt external expression of "encounter" and its possibilities). Unfortunately this shift in emphasis has introduced a difficulty, and has emphasised another, already inherent in the original competition design.

Taking the inherent difficulty first: the landform illusion of the museum's northern promontory, with its suggestion of independent occupation and settlement, has remained, and strengthened as a powerful expression of *tangatata whenua* [at least as far as this pakeha can tell].

When, however, we come to that part of the museum intended to press *tangata tiriti*, I cannot help feeling distinctly short-changed by this subdued and disengaged image of my own cultural traditions. While somewhat more dynamic in the competition design, the southern portion of the museum building, its sober, rectangular form marked by a pattern of grid geometries, has an unapproachable, back-of-house feel to it. This is further emphasised by its separation from the open public space of the museum's entry to the west. By this I do not mean I find ordered, precise rectangular forms inherently dull, or the classical origins of European architecture irrelevant. It was the combination of this form with the transitional idea of *tangata tiriti's* engagement with the city — the European cultural artifact par excellence — that had the power.

"Engaging the city" does not, however, occur by simple replication of a rectangular block form, or by reference to grid syncopation alone. To be "engaged with the city" is to form an active, and physically well-defined part of something that is far from static itself.

One clear strategy for this might have been to extend the museum's forecourt to include all the open ground between the southern wall of the museum and the building walls to Cable Street opposite. This would mean creating a particular space by wiping it clear of the conventions of property lines, pedestrian pavements, and the ubiquitous "kerb and channel", replacing them with a single encompassing surface, with an articulation of parking, shade, pedestrian facilities and vehicle movement appropriate to a major public space.

The result would be a single large arrival space for the museum, physically defined by the city's building fabric, with the museum as an inclusive part of that fabric. It would function as both a destination in its own

right and as a place through which the daily life of the city would flow. That would be "engaging the city!"

The second, and related difficulty comes with the introduction of a new element to the museum's original design — the large diagonal "wall" that runs the full length of the building from city to water.

As an architectural device it belongs to the idea of transition, and it is its undeniable power as a form, and the central part it will play in our visual experience of the museum, that creates the difficulty.

To successfully carry this idea the "wall" must span the full transitional spectrum from an engagement with the city at the "European" end of the museum, to an evocation of the Maori at its other extremity. Both are in need of some sharper definition. At the city end the "wall" is a dividing element. While it defines the entry forecourt, and determines our line of formal approach, it also consigns the rest of the building's southern frontage to the back-of-house role referred to above. This is the frontage most directly linked with a specific European reference. The primacy, however, of the entry forecourt and the wall's role in defining it, of necessity, diminishes the relative significance of anything divided off from that entry area.

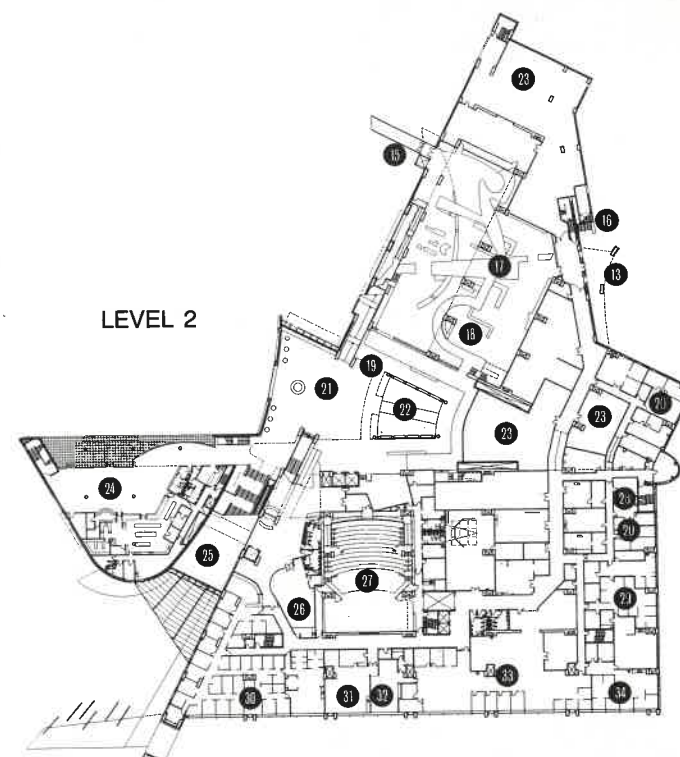
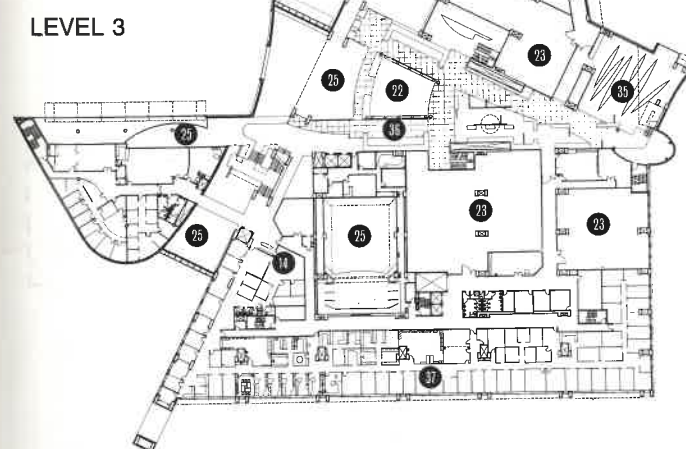
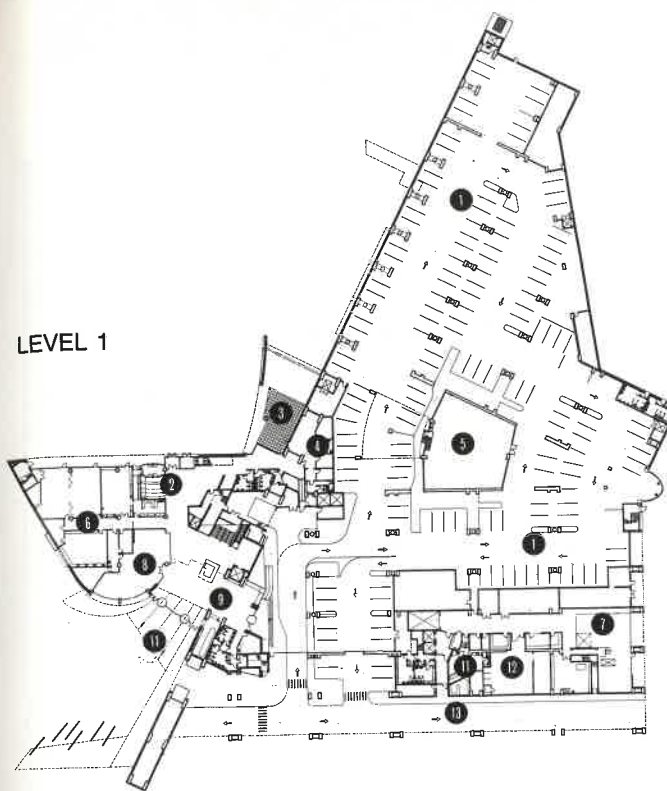
Most significant of all, however, is the degree that "encounter" has been allowed to emerge from the museum's interior. With the addition of a great cone canopy bisecting the museum from east to west at roof level — with attendant openings at either end — "encounter" is evident again as a mediating ingredient with clear architectural form.

What we come to then is a museum design, more chameleon than icon when it comes to national identity; more episodic than self-contained when it comes to an image for the eye. Where its form and ideas come together in a seamless way it is fine indeed. Where these connections are less successful, they are not always the result of site and programme constraints. In writing about the ethical and psychological roots of western urbanism, Richard Sennett has noted that: "... our culture is marked by hard struggle whenever people seek to make inner life concrete. This sets us off not just from our own origins but also from non-European cultures nearer in time whose masks, dances, ceremonials, shrines, sacred grounds, and cosmologies connect subjective life to physical things ..."

Perhaps this is where the real difficulty of expressing a shared cultural condition lies: Saying something cogent about ourselves, while simultaneously addressing a complex and demanding functional programme is undeniably a hard act. That the museum design addresses both with such tenacity is to be admired.

For my part I never wished to encounter the museum as some abstracted national cliché — whether embryonic gumbout, steak pie, paua shell, or any other discarded bit of kiwiana. The museum is about "condition" not "kitsch". It is about a strong architectural expression for our circumstances, sufficiently abstracted to allow for multiple shadings in the way those circumstances are experienced and understood, over time. Its real presence in this city cannot happen too soon for me.

1. *The Conscience of the Eye*, Richard Sennett, 1990, Alfred Knopf Inc.



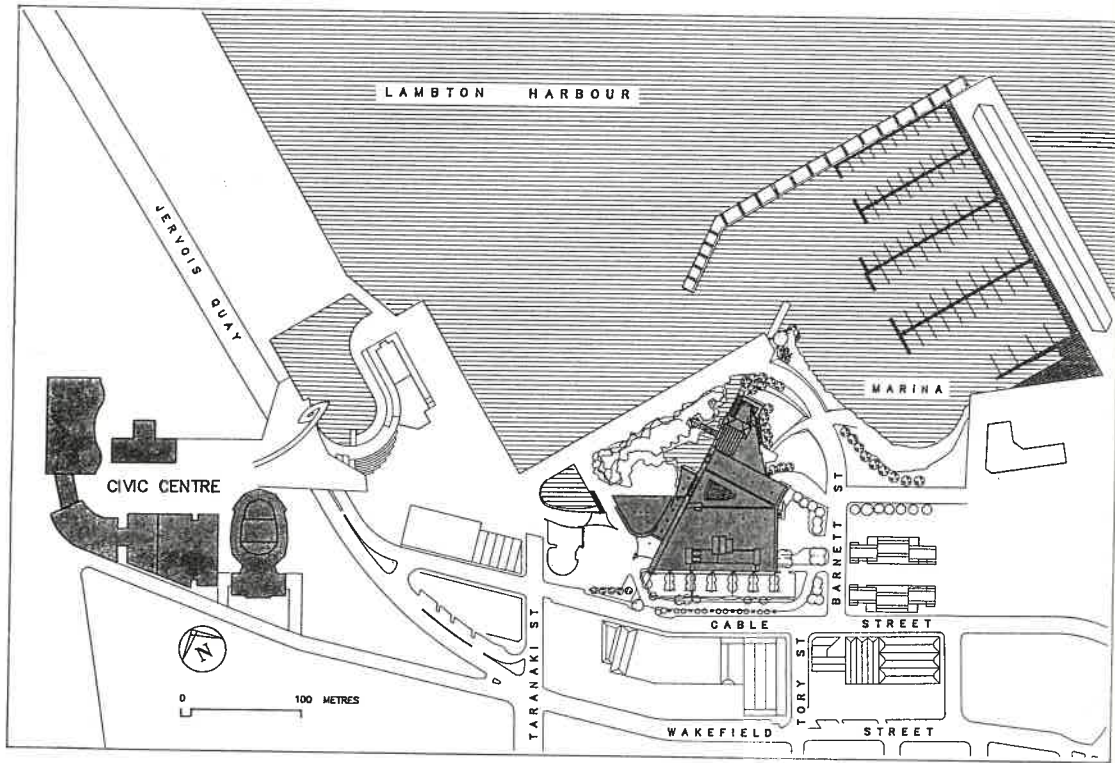
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|------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 Car park | 14 Management | 26 Childrens learning | 38 External marae |
| 2 Demonstration | 15 Bridge to park | 27 Auditorium | 39 Marae Atea |
| 3 Terrace | 16 Marae stairs | 28 AV | 40 Maori art and history exhibition |
| 4 Creche | 17 Natural environment exhibition | 29 Exhibition support | 41 Te hau ki turangi |
| 5 Plant | 18 Resource centre | 30 Education support | 42 Temp and touring exhibition |
| 6 Classrooms | 19 Marae ramp | 31 Photography | 43 Art exhibition |
| 7 Dock | 20 NE curatorial | 32 Conservation | 44 History/exhibition |
| 8 Shop | 21 Orientation lobby | 33 Registration | 45 Pacific focus |
| 9 Entrance lobby | 22 Core/Ihonui | 34 Graphics | 46 Works on paper |
| 10 Entrance | 23 Collections | 35 Canoe gallery | 47 Resource |
| 11 Building management | 24 Restaurant | 36 Promenade/Ihorangi | |
| 12 Carpentry | 25 Void | 37 Curatorial offices | |
| 13 Staff entry | | | |

SITE AREA:
1.9ha
TOTAL FLOOR AREA:
36,000m²
COST:
\$180.6m
CONSTRUCTION
PROGRAMME:
mid 1993-mid 1998
ARCHITECTS:
Jasmax (Pete Bossley,
Ivan Mercep)
ARCHITECTURAL
ADVISOR TO
MUSEUM BOARD:
Tom Dixon
ENGINEERS (CIVIL
AND STRUCTURAL)
Holmes Arup joint
venture
LANDSCAPE
ARCHITECTS:
Boffa Miskell Partners

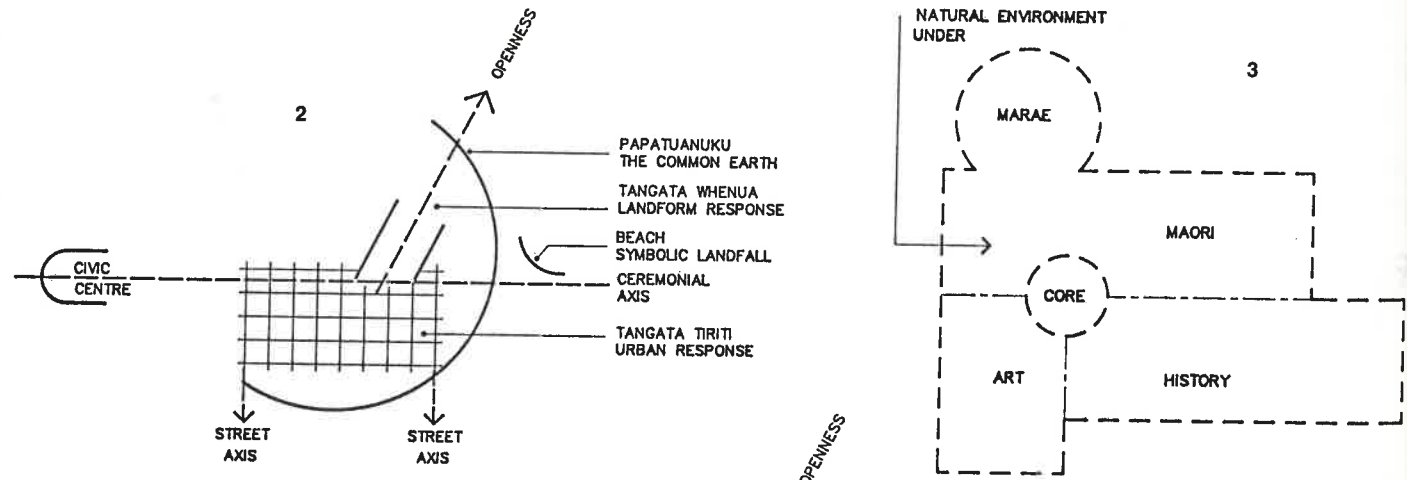
Museum of NZ Te Papa Tongarewa

1 Location plan showing Monz site in relation to city and harbour.

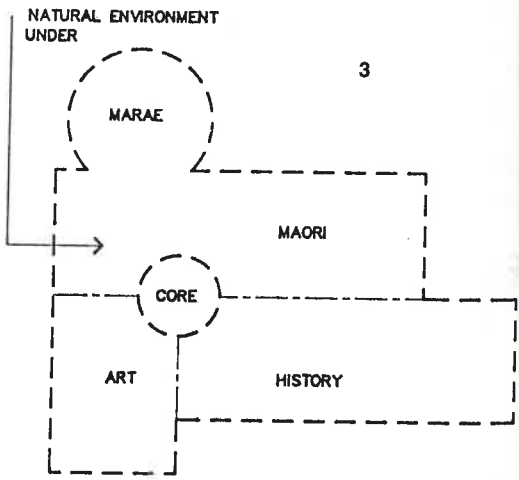
2, 3 & 4 Concept Diagrams: Competition proposal, exhibitions concept plan, developed design.



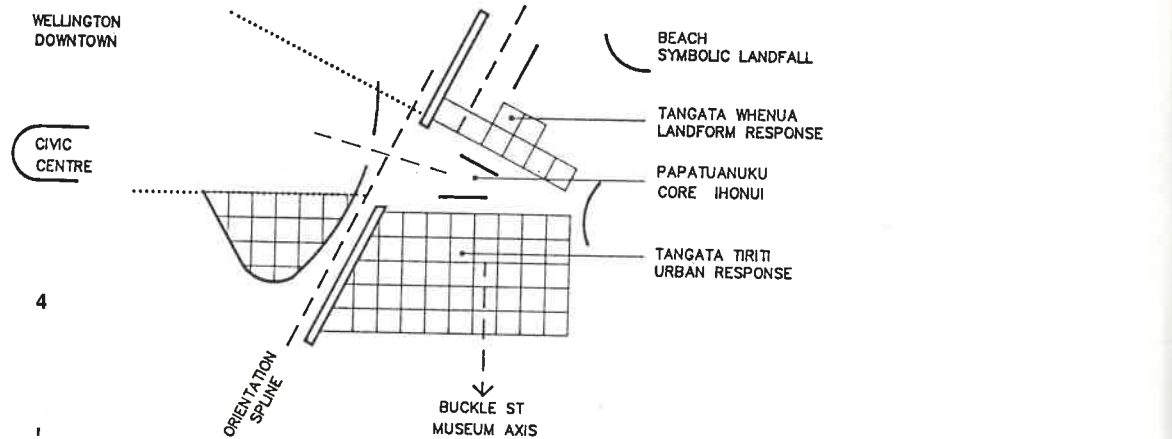
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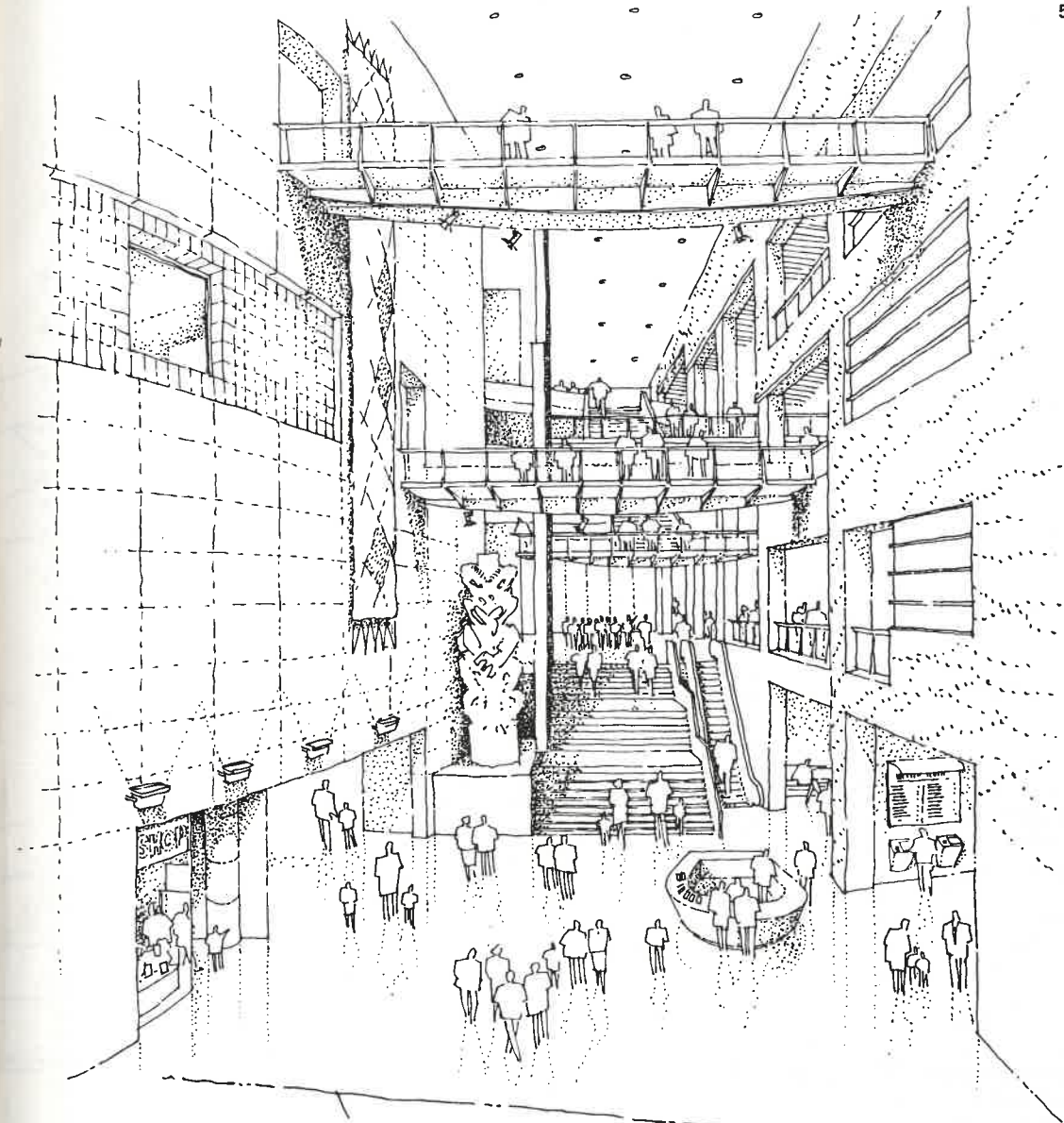
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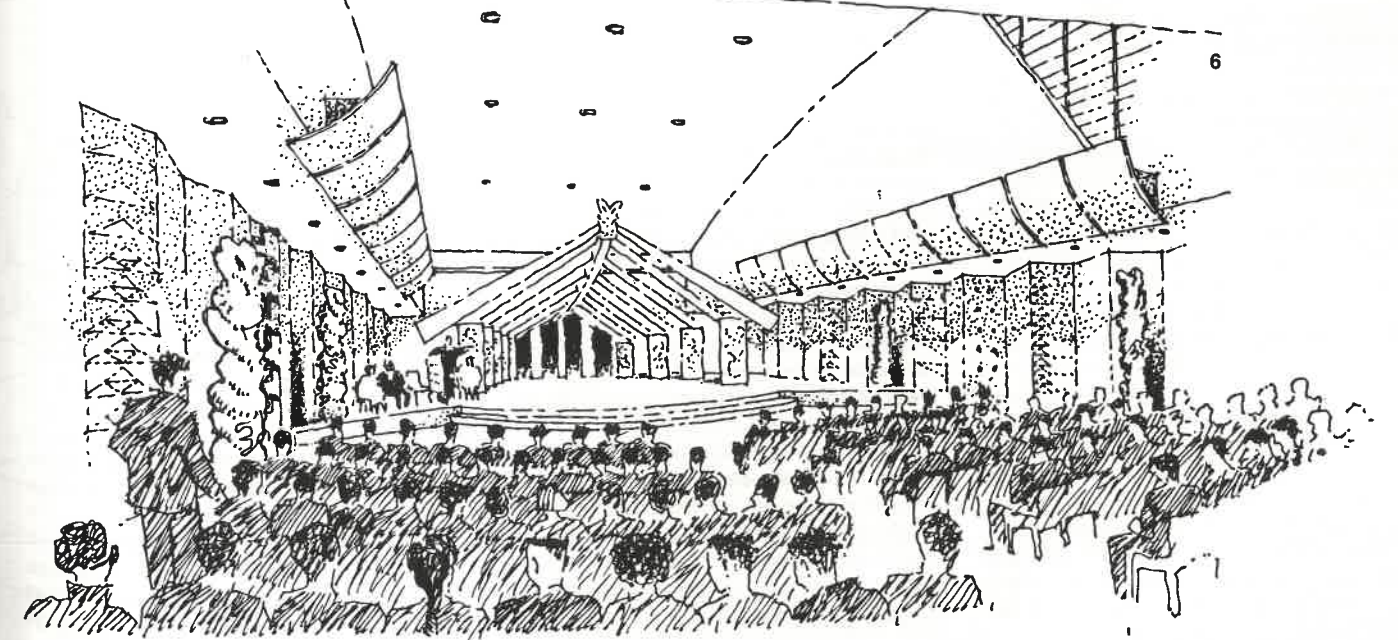
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5

5 Entrance lobby from Cable Street features full-height interior space.

6 Internal marae area with whareni on raised platform at rear.



6

ERRATUM

Pages 40-41 of this issue feature an interview with Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa designers Pete Bossley and Ivan Mercep of Jasmx. The introduction on page 40 was wrongly used and does not relate to the interview which follows.

ANZ: In an international architectural context museums have commanded enormous attention in the last 15 years or so. How do you view your building in that context?

IM: The first thing to define is that we are talking about both a museum and an art gallery and both have different responses and different requirements in terms of usage and function. It's very much a hybrid and we are not aware of any models that exist without a greater degree of separation. There is one multi-storey building in Denver with each department on separate floors, and it works very badly.

ANZ: This prescription is a new type then?

PB: Yes, and it's adventurous in those terms because it is trying to break down those boundaries. The other interesting thing about it in an international context is the bicultural overlays it has to deal with on top of "regular" issues of museums, urban design and so on.

IM: There is a parallel in the Waikato Art Museum which was seen as the first of its type. But whereas that has museum and gallery in the same building, the exhibition concept is separate.

ANZ: Can you describe something of the museum programme and the specific issues that have been developed.

IM: The exhibitions concept is the aspect of the museum that developed while the competition was in progress, and there are two significant parts to that: four departments and the inter-connections between those departments. Various categories of specialisation and integration have been developed, starting with integrated exhibits closer to the promenade (a defined viewing route) moving away to become more and more specialised.

PB: There are actually three types of space — the integrated which is shared by all four departments, shared space which might be shared by two or more departments, and designated which is solely for the use of one department.

ANZ: Is it inherently problematic to try and do all those things at once?

PB: To some extent it has been because it has meant changing the architectural typology but once one accepts the degree of flexibility required the exhibitions concept is left up to the exhibition designers. It took me a long time to understand that we were dealing with space that in 10 years time could be almost unrecognisable compared with how we perceived it.

IM: One is used to defining positive architectural spaces, but when Pete and I went on the trip to view museums prior to starting on the

design we saw buildings that were very much black-box, very much theatre. What was provided was a series of systems and services that enabled a variety of exhibits to be mounted. Ambient light levels were very low and you were concentrating on an object totally, and you were almost participating in theatre. So that really brought it home to us and we came back and changed our view somewhat on how we might attack this.

PB: We were also aware that the interpretive, hands-on, somewhat entertaining aspect which museums are taking on around the world may not be how they wish to display the artefacts in 100 years time.

ANZ: So where does the project fit in the flexible spaces versus rooms and corridors discussion — the paradigm of the Pompidou versus 'at of the Uffizi'?

IM: I think we perceive it as a series of flexible spaces. And with strongly defined orientation spaces. You move from those spaces into the less-defined spaces, but you come back to those four or five spaces that are defined as a constant piece of architecture.

ANZ: So you have a collection of reference spaces that enable you to locate yourself within the building — a city analogy.

PB: We have exactly that; we have nodes and intersections. Overlaying all that is the notion of openness, because it seems to us that openness is an inherent New Zealand perception, and there is a major conflict between a black-box museum and a feeling of openness. So we have explored ways of getting a feeling of openness into the museum. You move from something which is quite a dark display space through to something which is dramatically open and light, without an abrupt change.

IM: It's been a problem of having to ameliorate and grade the light that comes through to the point that achieves the objectives of the exhibits.

ANZ: The marae is an opportunity to make the connection with the light and the openness and some grading as you describe is able to be expressed in the diagram of the building where objects are able to be moved from storage to display and on occasion to be brought out into the light.

IM: We have 4-5 zones in the exhibition area that relate to public areas, in which there may be exhibits which can tolerate a certain amount of light, through to areas where the exhibits can tolerate absolutely minimal light, or no light at all, where even artificial light is a problem. The marae exhibits will be of this age and will be

works that are sculptured or worked on for that particular space.

ANZ: They will be objects made to cope with that environment.

PB: There is an issue about whether the objects or artefacts are living spirits and there is discussion about whether the taonga should be in a museum or whether they should be back on a marae. And this museum tries to fill some of those gaps by making the taonga much more accessible to Maori, by allowing them to come in and spend time with the taonga. The business of having recently made objects which will decay, maybe, is part of that and is accepted as a way of treating taonga.

ANZ: It presumably becomes rather like Japanese temples — a constant process of remaking.

IM: In fact, the building is designed in that context. We have a structure that will last 150 years but we have an envelope and components that are designed to be replaced or remade over a period of time.

IM: With regard to display of the artefacts and taonga, it is also important that they are made accessible to the public in a very friendly and easy way.

PB: The public's awareness of the back-of-house activities is heightened at every opportunity and they are encouraged to ask for assistance or information. Reception desks are located at each level and there are public advice rooms. The museum is a place of research and serious study, which happens on an international level but which few people are aware of. The museum is also a place of storage for non-display items — people will be able to see, say long rows of containers that will make them aware of the other world that exists there.

IM: The museum has a series of programmes in mind that relate to its education function. Demonstration areas, viewing rooms and classrooms are provided along with the theaterette and auditorium.

ANZ: You have a description of a place that is very active, very busy.

PB: One of the major ways that is reinforced in the building is that about 50% of the street front facade is people working, so there is always an awareness of the "back of house" rooms and offices.

ANZ: The notion of the "public edge" introduces the relationship of the museum and the city.

PB: We have strived to build up connections to the local environment and to use the building to somehow clarify the larger structure of the city and its context. In immediate terms it

is responding to the major streets around it and to the sea and the Civic Centre, with the museum and the Civic Centre as two ends of an axis. At the larger scale it is clarifying notions about the structure of the country — the big diagonal wall that parallels the major geological directions of the North Island, and the power of the geological growth and youth of the country.

IM: There are two areas where the relationship to the city is not how we would wish now but may be achieved in the future. The first is along Cable Street where an additional bay is allowed for, which will fill the gap between the present wall and street edge. The other area of the edge connection is with the water, where we have been hindered by the car race. That is still not a dead issue and there are techniques that we are exploring to at least in the interim make the connection much stronger so we can get back closer to where we were at the time of the competition. In the long term there is the need to maintain the suggested connection around the edge and one can still do that with tenuous links between the promontory and the harbour park so that the expression of its connection with the water is much stronger.

ANZ: The decision at the competition stage to excavate the ground behind the wharf was a great gamble and an enormous success, but on the other hand is it now giving you much difficulty?

IM: In a sense. The assessors encouraged us to persist in solving that and we have used that as a basis for continually promoting the water connection. There has been support for that and we are hopeful that we can develop that further. **ANZ:** You decided not to build up to the edge of the water, but to make a new edge and it seems vital that you are able to achieve that. Does the intention to use that space, effectively as a garden, obscure its real purpose which was a sea connection?

PB: To some extent it does, but from a museological point of view it is a richer gesture towards the nature of the country rather than a building sitting on the water's edge. I think every architect in the competition wanted to step out into the water with the building, but having the harbour park there gives visitors a much broader picture of what New Zealand is, rather than just being a seaside culture. We still intend to have the wharf there and the project has to be seen as existing in an urban landscape, in fact the great vision is to have ships moored there, in front of the museum.

IM: There are two parts to that. One is the promontory which touches the water, where we have been striving to achieve that close connection. The other is the harbour park which introduces the public to the museum and also helps to create a good external exhibition space for a whole variety of things to happen with security and protection from the wind.

PB: The competition concept had the building sitting against a lagoon. The harbour park has led us to emphasise the connection to the water through a dramatic axis where the water comes down the axis one way and the people come along the axis the other way, and are lifted up and thrust over the water. A more dramatic connection is made.

ANZ: Let's now look at some of the other metaphors, firstly the notion of the wall.

IM: It expresses the geological nature of the country and the very strong landform connection between the two cultures. In our initial scheme we had this expressed as a circular enclosing element. Now the wedge acts as the integrated dialogue area which separates the two cultures, the roof form over that together with the wall brings them back together again.

ANZ: Then the wall element is both linking and dividing. To the north you have the marae and to the south, the street side, the bulk of the display/exhibit areas. Architecturally, how are these issues described?

PB: We planned a distinction between the two cultures as we felt it important to recognise their different attitudes to land settlement, and it is the space between the two that becomes interesting. Whereas our competition entry stressed the veranda as the place of encounter, the exhibition concept plan stressed a coming together (rather than encounter) as a way of describing biculturalism. I think what we've got now allows both to happen over a period of 150 years as may be appropriate. Architecturally it doesn't define the scene as a scene of encounter, nor does it prescribe that it be a scene of happy togetherness.

IM: Another important issue is the notion of mana taonga which basically states that any culture that has objects stored within the museum gains mana by virtue of that and can stand on the marae as the tangata for a particular event. This means that European people can participate, although that has not been widely understood.

ANZ: The diagram could be interpreted as being about cultural separation, a kind of architectural apartheid where you have two different grids that are held apart. The core space, the ihonui, is not described in the traditional architectural language of gasket or prominence, and is sending a number of different signals.

PB: The intention is to read that space in three dimensions as separating or linking the elements on either side of it, such that they are used as part of something larger. The roof space is developed as woven beams possibly with skylights between.

IM: There's a feeling also that there is enrichment in having a series of cultures and that they should be able to develop. Inherent in the exhibitions concept are special spaces devoted to

a culture, and there are in-between spaces that allow a coming together. There is never a melding of the cultures, which would be a great loss.

ANZ: The kinds of criticisms that have been levelled at the building don't really deal with the way it relates to biculturalism or the land. People are saying is that it is weighty and expressionless, that it has a warehouse image. The initial brief certainly demanded a very expressive project, and while the diagram you present hasn't changed dramatically, some of the attitudes to the way in which the building is conceived have changed.

IM: The competition scheme had the same relationships of back of house and through to exhibitions and the expression of the marae is very similar. The change has really come about by the removal of the veranda as a connection; in a sense that has been replaced by the orientation spline and the expression of the more commercial aspects of the functional museum, areas that have to be accessible after hours have become much more defined. The elevation facing Cable Street and the east has changed in its refined detail, and we have been exploring whether that can be expressed more precisely the functions it encloses.

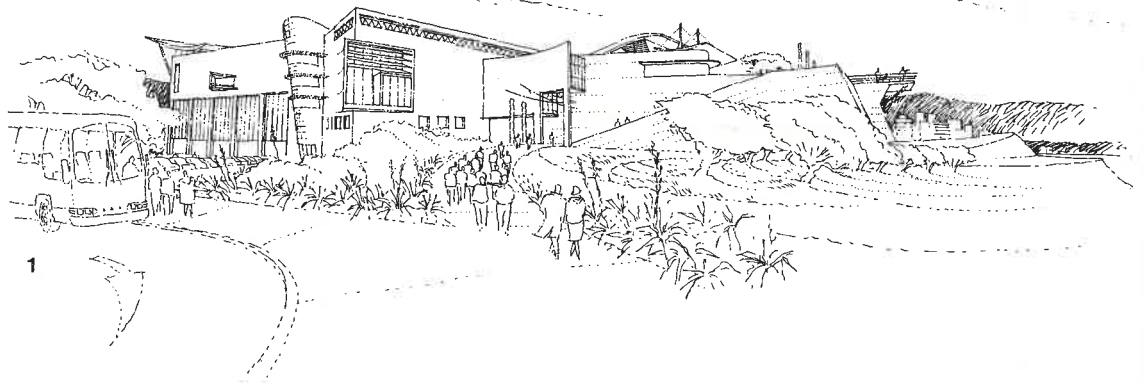
ANZ: You seem to be taking a much more modernist view, and I don't mean that in the perjorative sense, than the metaphorical position which drove the project in the earlier stages. The relationships between the elements are quite violent, the junctions aren't smoothed in any way, and I wonder if this has led to the building being very massive.

IM: The sense of scale is something you can't get away from — the sheer size of the building — and there are constraints on how you deal with that. The column system and large spaces that are common to both parts of the building work very well in terms of the discipline they apply to the plan and the resolution of design issues.

PB: There have been concerns about whether the grid is a suitable expression of pakeha culture, but for us it's more than a simple structure, or the representation of the streets of Wellington. It's about the fantastic mathematical and scientific power of the three-dimensional nature of the grid, which has helped European society explain the world. Within that three-dimensional structure is the wealth of variety mathematically and scientifically which relates to the museum world of ordering, cataloguing and explaining.

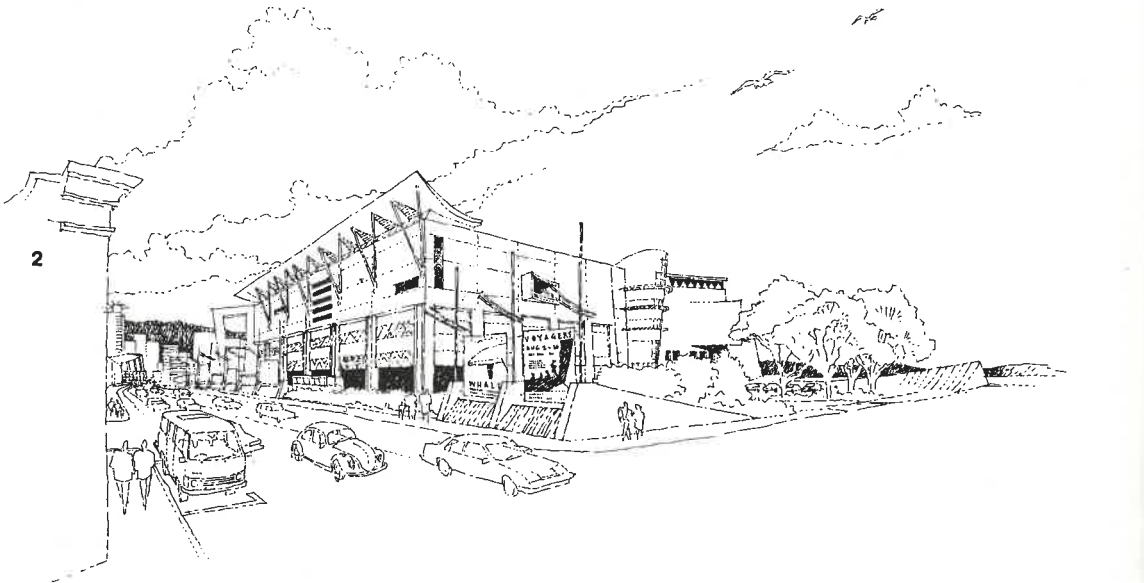
PB: The coherence and consistency of the grid is countered by the way the wall comes down and interrupts it... something outside the grid and more powerful than geometry has sliced through there. If we had adopted a less stringent attitude to the grid throughout, the power of the wall slicing through would have been reduced.

Museum of NZ Te Papa Tongarewa



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View from east.

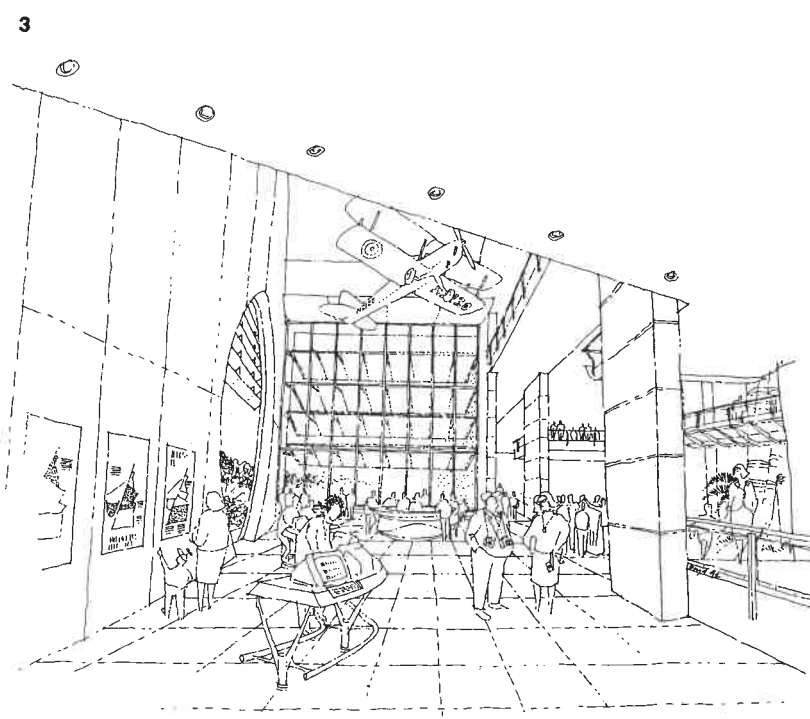


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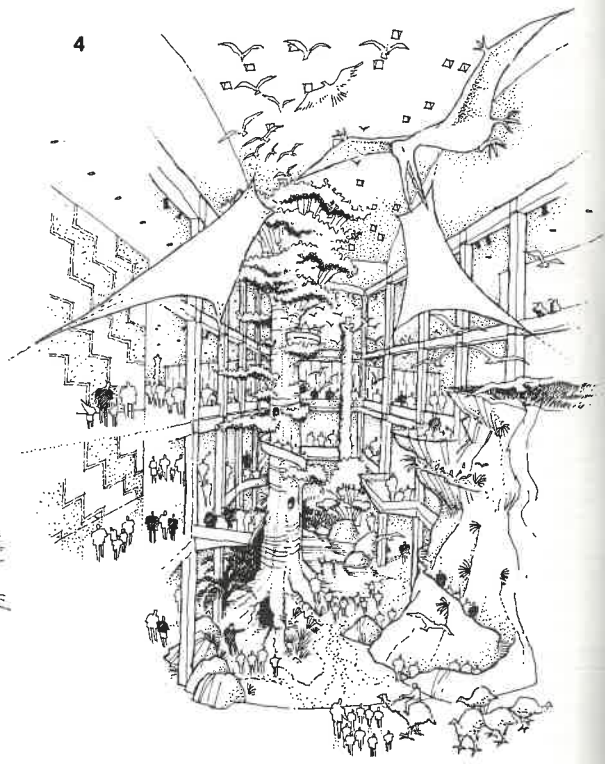
2
View from south
(Cable Street) showing
new gallery along roof
of south elevation.

3
Gallery to restaurant.

4
Central core/ihonui —
a 165m² wedge of
space opening towards
harbour park.



3



4