In the Vernacular: On the Architecture of the National Museum of Australia

Naomi Stead

The recently completed National Museum of Australia (NMA) in Canberra, designed by architects Ashton Raggatt McDougall, has polarised the architectural community in Australia. While much of the critical comment centres on its apparent contravention of standards of propriety in civic architecture, this article 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, this article finds instead that there is an aesthetic of populism which exists quite independently of actual popularity, or even a relationship with popular culture. 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, this article 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 as a specific work of museum architecture.[1]

The modern public museum has been described by one critic as a product of 'Renaissance humanism, enlightenment rationality and nineteenth century democracy'.[2] 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. 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.[3] 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 that conferred legitimacy by representing national identity through the transcendent ideals of art.[4] 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 over sovereignty, and of the museum as a founding pillar and instrument of democratic ideals.[5] 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.'[6] All of these characteristics have, in varying degrees, been transmitted to the museum as we know it today.

Margaret Anderson and Andrew Reeves suggest that Australian museums were 'born modern' in that 'no revolutions, either intellectual or political, were required

to break down their doors.' Such museums, however, '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.[7] The origins of Australia's museums may have missed some of the revolutionary fervour of their European counterparts, but in them a subtle lesson in civics has endured. 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. 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 aesthetic and historiographic standards of quality and value. Historically, museums exhibited only the most exemplary authentic historical artefacts and masterpieces produced by a culture.[8] 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.[9] 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.[10] 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.[11] Just because early modern museums were public, at least nominally open and accessible to all, however, does not mean they were also popular.

The revolution that 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 hope of producing a more truly public institution.[12] That process continues to this day. The fact that museums are often now framed as being both public and popular institutions marks the occurrence of a populist revolution that has been largely silent and unremarked though nonetheless significant. Museums have never been as popular as they are today, neither with politicians, nor cultural commentators, nor architects. 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. While 'popular' seems an innocent enough term, its derivatives 'populist' and 'populism' have decidedly more ambivalent implications as an examination of the example of the National Museum of Australia will demonstrate.

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, lest it become '"another marble mausoleum" in the Parliamentary Triangle'.[13] Ward implies that Keating favoured a 'populist aesthetic' because it was more closely aligned with left wing Labor Party policy and describes the now completed museum:

> 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.[14]

Ward's description ranges across both the exhibits and the architecture of the new museum and there is a high level of cohesion between architectural and museological strategies in the NMA.

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 to the ascendant but still not universal 'theme park' model. 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.[15] The 'theme park' and 'mausoleum' models correspond with a parallel scale of popular appeal: a theme park is self-evidently populist, while a mausoleum is not. The two models are primarily distinguished by their explicit signification of popularity and the 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 away from the earlier 'edificatory' model towards the twenty-first century immersive museum, with its generalised notions of 'experience' and 'edutainment'.[16]

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 which is solemn and educational, perhaps reflected in a conventionally monumental institutional architecture. The NMA has, with a few exceptions,[17] been unproblematically assumed to fit the theme park mould but this is a misapprehension, or at least an oversimplification, for the NMA presents and problematises the question of popularity in formal architectural terms. There is a 'look' of populism that exists independently of any intended or actual popularity, or even a connection with popular culture. The NMA opens an elaborate play on this 'look' of the popular by manipulating certain key aesthetic devices: bright colour, literal and figurative elements, visual jokes and non-orthogonal forms. These 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. This look of populism relies on a pre-existing set of dichotomies 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. Following Raymond Williams, Dominic Strinati has drawn attention to the changing meaning of the complex term 'popular culture', especially the '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 (c.f. 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.[18]

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 to be inferior, gaudy and unsophisticated. High culture is celebrated and enshrined by institutions, of which museums are among the most powerful, and traditionally represented by expensive, prestigious and enduring architecture. A direct reversal of this logic would suggest that populist architecture uses low-status or cheap materials and gives the impression of being flimsy: criticisms which have been directed at the NMA.

Populism has a similarly negative connotation when used in political discourse. McGuigan argues that it is commonly used to accuse rivals of 'the mobilisation of political majorities around a set of simple ... disingenuous slogans'.[19] The accusation of populism 'implies reckless and unscrupulous demagogy.'[20] 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'.[21] 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 to be 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'.[22] 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,[23] which have been associated with the 'dumbing down' or 'stupidification' of the institution to the 'lowest common denominator'.[24] The rhetoric is familiar: criticism of commercial television, film and the mass media employs similar expressions, which are countered in turn with accusations of elitism. 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 which 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. 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, it may be possible to identify a parallel trend in their architecture.

There is an important distinction to be made 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 Mûller 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,'[25] 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.

Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani suggests that '[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.'[26] This '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.[27] 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.[28]

The very definition of Architecture with a capital 'A' is based on its distinction from and elevation above 'mere' buildings, and the vernacular. The existence of architects as reflexive, educated design professionals — interlocutors between people and buildings — 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 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: if a work of high architecture happens to gain popular acclaim, then that is a happy accident. It is an ideal outcome for both architects and clients: a respectable work of architecture which is also well liked by the public. There are significant reasons, however, why such popularity must be seen to be incidental to other, more lofty concerns.

The fact that 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, enacts a complex game, weaving together both vanguard and *avant garde* positions. A work that 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 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.[29]

The NMA has been described as 'a monument to lost opportunity'[30] and 'a monument to horrendous political correctness.'[31] These are particularly interesting descriptions for a building that was explicitly requested by the organising committee to be 'anti-monumental'.[32] At one level, the demand for an anti-monumental building would seem an extension of Paul Keating's 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. '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. 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.[33]

Given that this particular civic building is a museum, the idea of anti-monumentality is more revolutionary than it might appear. There is a deep historical connection between museums and monumentality.[34] Museums have traditionally been monumental by definition, where 'monument' is used as an adjective for anything which 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 which are central to the communal nature of society.[35] Museum architecture has traditionally been conservative, historicist and generally funereal, and it has also manifested 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.[36] Museum buildings have been monumental in this older sense of having borne witness to the passing of 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 acts as counterpart and metonym for the objects within, artefacts which make past events present simply by their mute physical existence.

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' sets up a binary opposition between the traditional museum institution, represented as elitist, culturally irrelevant, and boring, and the brave new museum, which is 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 has 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.

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. This is especially the case in the idea of the monument as gravestone: principal designer Howard Raggatt's 'mordant sensibility' is evident everywhere.[37] The requirement for anti-monumentality remains instructive, though, 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 meta-narrative 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.[38] 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.

If the NMA seems at least ostensibly to be a 'theme park', there is another building in Canberra which 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.[39] 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. 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: 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 does not present that popularity as a spectacle. It would clearly be inappropriate if it also had the aesthetic trappings of popularity. The crucial 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.

A 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 all impact on the NMA. The NMA manifests both sides of many of these oppositions. The building 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.

The NMA is complex enough to be read on a number of levels. It is populist and elitist, literal and encoded, private and public, and it confounds traditional binary oppositions between these categories. A rather equivocal, postmodernist type of conclusion is 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 in the very idea of a national museum, a popular museum and a popular museum building. The architecture of the NMA does not paper over these cracks but rather expresses them in formal architectural terms. This is a tribute to the courage of the architects, given that a less sympathetic reading would see this as a weakness of the architecture rather than what it represents.

In the Vernacular: On the Architecture of the National Museum of Australia
Naomi Stead

1   See 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*, vol 42, June/July 2001, pp 54-60; Peter Droege, 'Australia's hyper-museum in context', *Architectural Review*, vol 75, Autumn 2001, pp 60-1; Conrad Hamann, 'Enigma variations: The National Museum of Australia and the AIATSIS Centre', *Art Monthly*, no 138, 2001, pp 5-9; Stephen Frith, 'A monument to lost opportunity', *Canberra Times*, March 20, 2001; Steven Brook, 'Azaria's black dress view of history', *Australian*, 8 March 2001, p 5; S Brook, 'Elite clash over museum for the ordinary', *Australian*, 13 March 2001, p 3; N Day, 'Tangled map of the national psyche', *Age*, 21 February 2001, p 7; S McCulloch-Uehlin, 'Making an exhibition of ourselves', *Australian*, 13 March 2001, p 13; and R Usher, 'Australia, you're standing in it', *Age*, 21 February 2001, p 7; P Ward, 'Enigmatic theme park', *Australian*, 9 March 2001, p 39.
2   J Mordaunt Crook, *The British Museum*, Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, London, 1972, p 32.
3   Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, 'The universal survey museum', *Art History*, vol 3, no 4, December 1980, p 453-4.
4   Duncan and Wallach state: '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 ... In the museum, the visitor is not called upon to identify with the state per se but with its highest values.' Duncan and Wallach, op. cit., p 457.
5   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 22-3.
6   Crook, op. cit., p 34.
7   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.
8   See Kevin Moore, *Museums and Popular Culture*, Cassell, London, 1997, p 4.
9   The idea of a national museum for Australia was first proposed as early as 1902. See Anderson and Reeves, op. cit., pp 92-3.
10 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. See also Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, 'Counting visitors or visitors who count?', in R Lumley (ed.), T*he Museum Time Machine: Putting Cultures on Display*, Routledge, London, 1988, pp 213-232; '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.

11 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*, pp 6-21; and Tony Bennett, 'Museums and "the people"', in R Lumley (ed.), *The Museum Time Machine*, pp 63-85.

12 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.

13 Peter Ward, 'Enigmatic theme park', *Australian*, 9 March 2001, p 39.

14 ibid.

15 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. 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.

16 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.

17 Notably Ian Perlman, '"Not a themepark" (National Museum)', *Architectural Review*, vol 75, Autumn 2001, pp 56-7.

18 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.

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

20 ibid.

21 McGuigan, op. cit., p 2.

22 ibid.

23 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. 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.

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

25 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.
Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani, 'The architecture of art: The museums of the 1990s', in Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani and Angeli Sachs (eds), *Museums for a New Millenium: Concepts, Projects, Buildings*, Prestel Verlag, Munich and London, 1999, p 13.

26 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.

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

28 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. 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.

29 Stephen Frith, 'A monument to lost opportunity', *Canberra Times*, 20 March, 2001.

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

31 '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,* vol 42, June / July 2001, p 57.

32 My thanks to Trina Day for this anecdote.

33 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.

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

35 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.

36 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.

37 See Stephen Brook, 'Azaria's black dress view of Australian history', *Australian*, 8 March 2001, p 5.

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