

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY



Design and materials

Site

The National Portrait Gallery is in the parliamentary precinct of the Australian Capital Territory. In November 2005, architectural firm Johnson Pilton Walker won the international competition to design the National Portrait Gallery building.

The building provides exhibition space for approximately 500 portraits in a simple configuration of day-lit galleries and responds to its site by connecting key vistas, levels and alignments around the precinct. Five fingers of space, arranged at right angles to the land axis, refer to Walter Burley Griffin's design for the National Capital.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Brett Boardman

Design

The design of the National Portrait Gallery is inspired by the notion that the proportion of a building should correspond to that of a person. This is particularly relevant to a building for portraiture. The building's siting in the landscape and relationship to its neighbours, its external form, the internal spaces and the individual components and details are all based on the *golden section*, a proportional relationship that describes a part's proportion to the whole, creating a harmonious relationship between the visitor, space, material, light and art.

The National Portrait Gallery's public spaces are on one level within 70-metre modules defined by the concrete walls. Various configurations of mobile walls create flexible exhibition spaces and all spaces enjoy natural light from translucent glazed clerestory windows controlled by a simple blind system, reducing the need for artificial lighting.

Six months after opening the National Portrait Gallery was awarded the Light in Architecture Prize, the Romaldo Giurgola Award for Public Architecture and the Canberra Medallion by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects. It is now a finalist for the national award to be announced in late October 2009.

Materials

The rich palette of materials and plants from around Australia is a counterpoint to the directness of the concrete structure and adds a fine grain, human scale to all spaces. Detailing highlights the method of construction, and the crafting of materials, both natural and manufactured, making the character of the building both bold and intimate.

The primary elements of the building were sourced and manufactured by companies based in and around Canberra. Concrete formwork and placement, the timber roof structure and the feature plywood panelling were all produced locally, where as the precast concrete portals on the east and west sides of the building are from Brisbane and the timber flooring in the historic Galleries is from Tasmania.

Hard-wearing terrazzo and concrete paving are used internally and externally, with inlay strips of stones from each State and Territory within the floor of Gordon Darling Hall to illustrate the geological diversity of Australia. The stone inlay comprises Black granite from Western Australia; Mintaro slate from South Australia; Bluestone from Victoria; Grey sandstone from Queensland; Light grey granite from Tasmania;

Dark grey granite from New South Wales; Red granite from the Northern Territory; and Mugga granite from the Australian Capital Territory.

Timbers from around the country highlight the diversity of Australia's natural resources. Externally, Hoop Pine veneered plywood forms the panels of the roofs. Internally, three timber species are used for flooring – Southern Blue Gum, a hardwearing, light coloured timber from Tasmania is used the permanent collection galleries; the Spotted Gum, a deeply figured brown timber from inland Queensland is used in the temporary galleries; and Jarrah from Western Australia is used in the theatre and administration areas. The circulation gallery ceilings are made from Spotted Gum half-round rods fixed to a simple suspended steel frame. This motif is used throughout the building to provide a consistent grain and proportion. The theatre is finished with Jarrah veneer panels and solid Jarrah stairs. Seating within the galleries is custom-designed for the project and made from Blackbutt *Eucalyptus pilularis*, a species of timber found along Australia's eastern seaboard coastal forests. The information desk is solid Jarrah from the south west of Western Australia and Mountain Ash and Tasmanian Oak are used for window frames and doors.

Garden

Canberra's climate presents a challenge when trying to illustrate Australia's biodiversity with plants. Feature plants used around the building include: the red Kangaroo Paw *Anigozanthus 'Dwarf Delight'* from Western Australia; *Callistemon 'Little John'*, a red flowering bottlebrush from Queensland; *Correa decumbens* a ground cover plant from South Australia; *Dianella revoluta 'Little Rev'* from New South Wales; *Kunzea 'Badja Carpet'* from the Australian Capital Territory; *Olearia erubescens* a spring flowering shrub from Victoria; Long Leaf Waxflower *Phyllothea myoporoides* from New South Wales; *Correa 'Dusky Bell'* a cultivar whose parent species ranges from southern Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, eastern South Australia and Tasmania; *Lomandra longifolia 'Cassica'* a hardy plant with widespread distribution through the eastern states; *Grevillea lanigera 'Woolly grevillea'* from Victoria; Climbing saltbush *Einadia nutans* from the Northern Territory; Native or Coastal Rosemary *Westringia fruticosa* from coastal New South Wales is representative of the Australian Capital Territory's coastal territory around Jervis Bay. Trees include Brittle Gum *Eucalyptus mannifera* and Red Ironbark *Eucalyptus sideroxylon* both local frost resistant and drought tolerant trees.

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