

PART

2

Conceptual
Framework

BUILDING CONNECTIONS

Architecture and the Visual Arts Syllabus Stage 6

Building Connections is a multi layered resource aimed at supporting the teaching of architecture units as part of the Visual Arts Syllabus Stage 6. It is divided into 3 parts – the frames, conceptual framework and practice, and focuses on the architecture of six art galleries and museums. It explores the connections between architecture and other art forms, investigating ideas and themes through images, text, artmaking activities and links to other information. Two of the galleries are examined in more detail through essays and descriptions of practice, demonstrating how architecture can be considered within broader discussions of the Visual Arts.

Part 2 includes two essays that demonstrate how architecture can be discussed through the Conceptual Framework. The essays could be used as part of a wider case study.

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Why do contemporary artworks make particular demands on audiences?

The relationship between an artwork and an audience is informed by an artist's intentions. Frank Gehry was chosen to design a museum that would act as a key element in the renewal of the city of Bilbao, which was in decline since the 1960s. The city's port zone on the river Nervion had been neglected due to the contraction of the local steel industry. It was hoped that the partnership between the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, the city of Bilbao and the regional Basque Government would revive the city, with a focus on the riverside site.

Gehry's work is often considered iconoclastic, controversial and dramatic. His characteristic forms – complex, organic, fragmented and dynamic, are made possible through the use of sophisticated computer technology. It is these forms that can often

appear to be aggressive and overwhelming. The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao challenges the notion of the contemporary art museum as an ideal geometric form - a white cube to display art. Doug Hall, former director of the Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane contends that contemporary art is best shown in a simple setting. Some critics believe that Gehry's structure takes precedence over the art inside. Architectural theorist Nikos Salingaros views Gehry's architectural style as 'an aggressive assault to human senses' not to mention 'an attention seeking irreverent flamboyance that dominates the site rather than complementing it sympathetically'. For others, Gehry's work achieves an integration of function and sculptural form that has a transformative effect on the individual and the site.



View of museum from bridge
Photo David Baron

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Sitting on the edge of the river, the Guggenheim is a large and sculptural structure consisting of enormous shining metallic forms inspired by the shapes of the fish and boats often found in such a setting. The curves of the building were designed to appear random, yet with the purpose of catching the light. The various access points to the museum via the bridge and pathways offer new perspectives of the building at every turn. While the museum is a spectacular monument when viewed from the river, at street level it is quite modest and does not overwhelm its traditional surroundings.

THE ART



Above, Richard Serra's, *The Matter of Time*, 2005, inside The Arcelor Gallery
Photo La Tete Krancien

Far right, Exterior of museum with the Louise Bourgeois sculpture, *Maman*
Photo Phillip Marsh

The internal spaces of the museum vary in size and echo the sculptural form of the exterior. This move away from the traditional rectangular division of interior space was for many a demanding concept. It was only when the work of Richard Serra was installed in the Arcelor Gallery that the relationship between architecture and sculpture become apparent and the interior spaces better understood. Serra commented that he would 'like to see museum architecture supply a sense of volume and space.' The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao has solved a problem of housing large scale contemporary sculpture.

The Matter of Time by Richard Serra provides an experience of massive scale, created by the high dark walls enclosing the body of the visitor which can be claustrophobic and intimidating. Like Gehry's Guggenheim, these works demand a response – they dominate the viewer physically and psychologically; the building with its flamboyance and complexity, the sculptures with their essentially simple but confronting monumentality.



The Guggenheim Bilbao is a powerful and energetic building that engages the audience through the use of dramatic forms and a metallic skin. The use of technology to create these forms has allowed Gehry to challenge the audience's perception of a museum experience, and engage them both physically and emotionally. The Guggenheim Bilbao has now become a destination for tourists and locals, achieving its original intention of reinvigorating the once forgotten city precinct. This has been achieved by creating a building that demands that the visitor engages with it in new and interesting ways.

Outside the Guggenheim looms a large sculpture by Louise Bourgeois entitled *Maman*. The sculpture alludes to the strength of her mother, with metaphors of spinning, weaving, nurture and protection. This provocative work evokes emotions ranging from playfulness to terror. Like the Guggenheim Bilbao and Serra's, *The Matter of Time*, the sheer scale and materiality of the work encourages emotional and physical engagement with the audience.

Examine how documentary evidence enables the viewer to recreate the meaning and context of the artwork.

In your response you may consider documentary evidence such as photography, newspapers, film, video, manifestos, diaries and correspondence.

Maitland Regional Art Gallery is comprised of three buildings. The grand older building was the Maitland Technical College designed by NSW Government architect Walter Liberty Vernon in 1908. The more modest building was completed by Vernon a discrete distance away in 1911. Both buildings have been adapted to accommodate the new functions of a gallery and together with the new 'infill' building designed by Paul Berkemeier Architect in association with Barry McGregor & Associates, an impressive series of structures have been realised that serve both the local and broader communities.

The available documentary evidence about MRAG allows an audience to understand the narrative of the failed architectural ambitions, largely due to budgetary

constraints, of the early 20th century and the place of well designed architecture, in providing a community with a sense of identity and civic pride.

The two older buildings in MRAG are well documented by heritage architect, Eric Martin. In his findings he describes the engineering innovations and diverse stylistic qualities of the architecture such as the Gothic arches, cantilevered floor and the Art Nouveau window. Martin makes reference to other buildings by Vernon including the Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney's Central Railway Station, and the Newcastle Courthouse, thereby recognising Vernon's importance in the history of public buildings in NSW. Martin also acknowledges the intent of the community in Maitland to preserve these outstanding local examples of architecture.

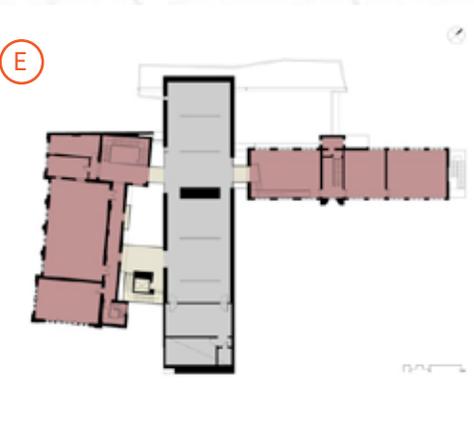
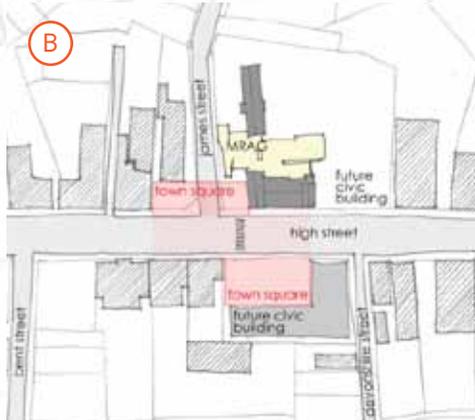
Paul Berkemeier wrote a case study titled Maitland Regional Art Gallery: building 'between', complements and unites a



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The new college building is made of brick with Ravensfield stone dressing and slate roof, the general design being perpendicular Gothic. The High Street façade forms an imposing but quiet and dignified aspect, being flanked at each end with gables and massive rectangular piers, while the balance of the design has been well maintained. Between the two gables the front is divided by three half octagonal piers, standing well in relief. **Maitland Mercury, 6 August 1910**

complex of two buildings on the site. He begins the description with 'a contemporary gallery that completes the adaptive reuse of a major regional educational building'. The case study describes the historical context of the older buildings and how 'they tell a remarkable story about the change in architectural expression that occurred in the early 20th century'. Berkemeier makes reference to the high standard of craftsmanship in the brick and stonework. He claims that the new building 'completes the process of adaptive re-use of the site'.



In his presentation of the project Berkemeier included aerial photos of Maitland highlighting the town as a regional centre situated among farmland. (A) A map of the town centre showed MRAG occupying a central position near the town square. A number of new civic buildings are planned adjacent to and across the road from the gallery, demonstrating its importance to the civic life of Maitland. (B) The presentation also represented Maitland as a town with buildings in diverse architectural styles including Federation, Queen Anne and Art Deco. Berkemeier commented that the variety of architectural styles allowed for the possibility of designing something quite bold for the new building. (C,D) Old photographs, ground plans and elevations showed the architectural features of the original TAFE building and the relationship between all three buildings. (E) Other slides show where the grand Federation building was to be extended to include a classroom wing. The exposed nibs and filled in archways are evident and can now be viewed from inside the new building. (F)

Documentary evidence provides insight into the context of the Maitland Regional Art Gallery. It allows viewers to understand the rationale behind the decisions in designing a significant community and cultural building that involves adaptive re use and a bold infill structure. The documentation demonstrates how the unfinished and disconnected original buildings, which were victims of budgetary constraints, left a place for a new building to continue the story.

In July 2011 Paul Berkemeier and Barry McGregor were awarded a commendation for the Maitland Regional Gallery from the Australian Institute of Architects (NSW Chapter).

[Read the jury citation](#) (go to 01/07/11 NSW Architecture Awards Jury Citations)

OTHER REFERENCES

www.mrag.org.au/pdfs/MRAGhist.pdf
www.paulberkemeier.com.au/projects/community-and-cultural

You can find excerpts from Paul Berkemeier's interview in the Practice section of the resource.

Images courtesy of Paul Berkemeier