

Arts development embraces ACCA

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The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) is a vital element in Melbourne's cultural landscape; it is the only public institution wholly dedicated to contemporary art, particularly that of a large scale, but yet it is sidelined by its situation on Sturt Street at the perimeter of the arts precinct, a veritable 'back of house' for the State's premier arts venues. The situation is about to change, however, with ACCA set to become an integral part of an estimated \$700 million dollar Government initiative to revitalise the Sturt Street arts district. Project One will see Sturt Street transformed into a "vibrant mixed use activity strip" forming the spine of a newly redefined cultural precinct wherein all major arts and cultural institutions relate as a campus of interdependent complexes.

Set a considerable distance from the central hub of Federation Square, orientation to ACCA has been impeded through lack of a direct pedestrian thoroughfare and suitable signage. The new cultural spine, however, will provide a link between Sturt Street and St Kilda Road, the eight metre variance in levels cleverly overcome by the installation of a broad pedestrian ramp. The ramp shall descend from a new urban plaza located between Hamer Hall and the Art Centre theatres. Intended as a "major activity hub comparable to Federation Square", it is hoped the plaza will encourage arts audiences to traverse the length of the Sturt Street spine to culminate their journeys at ACCA.

News of this redevelopment arrives at a crucial moment, with the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney recently revealing refurbishment plans "that will see the institution transformed into a global hub for Contemporary Art and ideas by 2011." What does this mean for ACCA who maintain a national scope in being *the Australian Centre* for contemporary art and who are additionally active in bringing International contemporary art to Melbourne? ArtsHub contacted ACCA attempting to determine how Project One would assist them in re-situating the focus for contemporary arts within Melbourne. Whilst ACCA has failed to respond, if their visitor survey on the matter is to be judged, they certainly anticipate great outcomes for the project; both in terms of improved facilities and surrounds but more importantly in further enabling emotional and intellectual access to contemporary art which is the larger issue at hand in broadening audiences.

ACCA is an anomaly amongst public institutions, in that it commissions rather than collects works of art. In an era, where museum branding has become paramount, and public identities are often derived from the character of their collection, the architectural bravura of ACCA's signature building is a clear attempt to correlate the 'building as brand' within the public mindset. The architects Wood Marsh, intended its design "to make reference to its function... a sculpture in which to show art". For myself, however, the façade is

problematic in facilitating access. It presents as a fortress, a solid barrier of corten steel, whose access point is subsumed by the grandeur of architectural elements. There are no windows, no external glimpses of the treasures contained within. As visitors, we are not enticed nor are we invited. The angular faces of the façade prevent ACCA from utilising banners as other institutions do, in laying out the welcome mat and more importantly outlining and illustrating the experiences to be found within. Nothing about ACCA is revealed externally and this prevents a level of emotional access that could assist first time visitors or those unfamiliar with contemporary art in overstepping their comfort zones. After all there is no exclusion like self exclusion and ACCA can be a forbidding institution for the uninitiated.

Granted a degree of visitor orientation is to be found in the placement of café style flip boards adjacent to the entry but further measures could be instigated to make ACCA more user-friendly. It's surrounds are barren with only the thinly disguised tunnel exhaust tower and the yellow peril for accompaniment. A paucity of other leisure attractions makes ACCA an isolated venture. Project One seeks to introduce shopping outlets, bookstores, restaurants and cafés to the vicinity; incorporating ACCA into a scheme of leisure outlets; a prospect which not only encourages repeat visitation to ACCA from Art minded audiences but encourages first time visitation from leisure audiences too. The familiarity of leisure venues lends a level of emotional access which can provide an entry point to the more difficult issue of intellectual access to contemporary art.

For the most part, exhibitions at ACCA are unaccompanied by explanatory text. Whilst providing a pure slate devoid of extraneous material for the display of installations, the intellectual content of the work is not realised by the majority of visitors. Explanatory iPods are available from the front desk but as the survey suggests, this is a service that most visitors are either unaware of or disinclined to take advantage of. Artistic Director Juliana Engberg has said in conversation with journalist Jill Singer, that ACCA doesn't want to dumb down contemporary art. "People want to think again" she says "we find people who are very high placed legal people, surgeons, policy makers...great corporate captains who have reached a stage in their own lives where most of what they do they know. They love the fact that we are reigniting all the synoptic connections for them." But what about the average visitor, those who are not highly placed doctors, lawyers or politicians? How does ACCA increase accessibility for those who are unfamiliar, uninformed, and less educated?

Education forms the basis of most public institutions *raison d'être* and ACCA is no different. They offer a varied program of public talks conducted by artists, curators and guest speakers. The complexity of contemporary art, however, with its origins in cultural theory can be prohibitive. The term 'contemporary' is a value judgement in itself. It confers authority and style. Contemporary art is not merely contemporaneous but rather 'serious', 'intellectual' and 'challenging'. Indeed Naomi Milgrom, Chair of the Board of Director's notes that "to be involved with ACCA is to engage with art that rewrites the rules." Whilst ACCA's mission is to be at the forefront of change, it does make accessibility for broad audiences difficult. Entry level access is vital for those whose lack of familiarity and knowledge make attending public lectures uncomfortable. Moreover, whilst the provision of ipods is a great way to modernise access, their placement behind reception, requires the visitor to concede their lack of knowledge. Text based gallery essays presented prior to each exhibition entry enables self learning with discretion.

Whilst maintaining a balance between intellectual integrity, aesthetic purity and equal access for all levels of visitor comprehension can be a difficult task; it is not unrealistic. The provision of information to further an audience's comprehension of the works displayed does not necessarily equate to 'dumbing down'. Although Engberg remains steadfast that "it's about not wavering on what we do" she concedes that "perhaps it is about also explaining what we do better, making ourselves available at certain levels of interpretation so that people have ways of accessing what we do, and I think we have improved a lot in that." This improvement continues with Project One. The survey makes it clear that ACCA is increasingly looking towards its audience for

directional clues. We are asked what type of contemporary art exhibitions we would like to see exhibited at ACCA in the future. The options provided are thematic based group exhibitions, solo exhibitions by Australian artists, solos exhibitions by International artists and major new commissions. We are not however, asked what forms of contemporary art we would like to see represented in the exhibition programme. For example: more Installation, videography, new media or perhaps more the traditional mediums of sculpture and painting.

In an interesting twist though, we are asked “what colour reflects your perception of contemporary art?” With each colour assigned a psychological meaning, ACCA attempts to gauge our emotive response with colours like orange inferring feelings of excitement, enthusiasm, and warmth whereas white infers blandness, sterility and cold. This question confounded me and I chose quickly without consideration, belatedly worrying what information I had unwillingly provided. Whilst I question the validity and successful outcome of this approach, what it does convey, however is that ACCA is set to change.

Project One presents an exciting opportunity for ACCA, one which I hope they will use to full advantage to slough their air of cool exclusivity to become a more inclusive and engaging institution for a broader cross section of audiences.



