Designing a public building which uses representation of stories and meaning requires careful use of the building language to effectively portray its meaning. How the representation is contextualized through the uses of signs and semiotics is key; being used as a skin treatment or developing into the overall form of the building. In the case of Ashton Raggatt McDougall’s Australian National Museum (2001) it uses a hybrid of both skin condition and architectural form to portray the many interconnected stories which are the ‘Australia story.’ The building utilizes and amalgamates a series of forms and facades in its portrayal; text, brail, and symbols are used as well as the representation of other significant buildings to draw upon a contextual link to another dimension of meaning. This paper will explore how the implementation of signs and semiotics represent the story and how effectively this meaning is portrayed. Utilizing Saussure’s concept of Semiotic Theory as a basis; and Robert Venturi’s and Denise Scott Brown analogy from Learning from Las Vegas (1972) of the ‘Decorated Shed and the Long Island Duckling’ as a precedent of the two different methods of application. The paper will also explore the implications of the method of diagraming the form of the building; in relation to theorist of Robin Evens, Peter Eisenman and Anthony Vidler. In light of semiotics and diagrams it will identify the relationship to a poststructuralist building or a deconstructivist building, through using Mary MeLeod, Jacques Derrida and John Macarthur to highlight these two movements. Resulting a question; what is the experiences of a visitor?

Introduction

Ashton Raggot McDougall's (ARM) National Museum of Australia (NMA) attempts to tell the Australian story through it uses of language. ARM exploits Semiotic Theory extensively as the language in which to build this multi-layer story; the apparent story of Australia. The building uses a variety of both surface treatments and the architectural form in order to portray meaning. The use of signs throughout the NMA provides the building a plethora of different meanings, though the eligibility of these is questioned. As the incorporation of meaning is only effective if the signs are understood and signify the
desired meaning. While Semiotics’ remain the overarching theory and concept for the design moves, the use of the diagram and its subsequent relationship to the final building demonstrate the changing nature of the diagram. This changing nature of the diagram demonstrates the shifts from the historic uses and the corresponding implications to the form and spatial experiences. Thus resulting in the question while there is an abundant meaning encoded within the NMA, does it effectively portray the intended meaning or are visitor’s only seeing the building as fluid, blob like form of merging planes, with an intriguing spatial experience? And therefore what architecture movement does it correspond to postmodern or deconstructive.

Semiotic approach to architectural language

The uses of semiotics is a key communication device in the NMA, as Charles Jencks recognises people subconsciously compare buildings to similar buildings or objects which they familiar with¹. Saussure’s concept of Semiotic theory is the relationship between the sign, the signifier and the signified, the object; which occur together and are separable only abstractly². This comparison of experiences is semiotics; signified meaning allow for manipulation of comparisons between buildings and elements. While semiotics is a linguistic framework; it does lend itself to architecture in the way in which buildings are read; in relation to meaning, histories and culture. The meaning which we associate with an architectural language can be subjective; resulting in individuals having a different experience of the building. Therefore it is difficult to curate the experience, as the potential aspired message is variable. While sign(s) are critical for architecture, the composition and construction of this language is critical in order to

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convey the desired meaning. Bonta states that “by changing the system in which the form is seen, the position of the form within the system – and therefore its meaning – may change.” Bonta further highlights that the meaning is dependent on comparisons made to other structures; demonstrating that the signified is dependent on the individual and may not portray the desired meaning in which the architect is attempting to evoke. How this language is therefore curated is key in utilizing the building as a storytelling device.

The NMA employs signs and semiotics as the foundation of the overall design of this public building, in the vision that not only will the artefacts within tell stories and portray meaning but the building itself will. While in a traditional museum the artefacts are the signifier and the associated meaning is signified; the NMA attempts to exploit the many meanings and emotions which are attached to a museum in the overall form and surface treatment. ARM utilizes the building form and surface treatment in multiple ways throughout as the signifier for the visitors to project the signified. This results in the visitors seamlessly projecting their individual understanding. ARM uses various different signs within the NMA to tell the diverse stories and experiences which make up the Australian story.

ARM use of Semiotic surface treatment and building form from the signs can be compared to the ‘Long Island Duck and the Decorated Shed’ in Denise Scott Browns and Robert Venturi’s learning from Las Vegas. In this case these surface treatments relate

to that of the ‘Decorated Shed’ and the building form signs to that of the ‘Long Island Duckling.’ Although like NMA, many building can portray the characteristics seen in both the ‘Long Island Duckling and the ‘Decorated Shed;’ there are implications on the form and the surfaces treatments⁶.

![Surface treatment of the x as a sign.](image)

**Figure 1:** Surface treatment of the x as a sign.

NMA employs several different signs as surfaces treatments, which are applied to facades of the building, these are the equivalent to the ‘Decorated Shed’ in learning from Las Vegas. Firstly is the repetition of the letter x, which is a painted element on various facades of the building, as demonstrated in Figure 1. The letter x is the sign to signify the embedded meaning of the x which Indigenous Australians would sign their name. Whist the intended signified is this meaning; it can be seen as somewhat ambiguous as “over time, words change meanings, and so do building and building parts.” The intended meaning may not be obvious to the general public, who potentially lack the knowledge of either the building or that Indigenous Australian signing. Visitors that are unaware of this are likely to adopt a different meaning differing to that of the architects. This

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highlights the ambiguous nature of signs, as how people read them over time change, and thus a building's meaning may differ to the intentions of the architect.

Another surface treatment is braille on the walls depicting the phrases of; Sorry, God knows, she'll be right, good as gold and love is blind. These phrases are Australian colloquialism and 'Sorry' is political statement, in commentary of the Government at the time refusing to apologies to the Stolen Generation. In addition to the braille the word 'eternity' is fragmented over the permeate gallery; which references Arthur Stace who would chalk this on Sydney footpaths. These signs differentiate to the x sign, as these phrases allow for more interpretation. The signified is more subjective and in this case, as the architects ideal intention of the prescribed meaning isn’t as clear; they are referencing words and history. Although these sign allow for changes in meaning over generations, the way in which they are implemented as decorations may be too subtle. This subtle is in contrasts to the 'Decorated Shed,' whose primary focus is to attract attention⁸, the subtlety requires the users to engage more with the building (and for braille be able to read it) if they wish to uncover greater levels of meaning. This divergence for the sign in the 'Decorated Shed' demonstrates the need clear coherent meaning.

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In addition to the surface treatments there are also form making signs within the NMA. These are what are seen as the ‘Long Island Duckling9,’ the sign isn’t merely plastered on the facade; it is the overall form of the building, with the building articulating the sign. Firstly, the replication of the plan of Daniel Libeskin’s Jewish Museum; the gallery of the first settlers. Signifies the comparison between the holocaust and how Indigenous Australians were treated. Whether the visitors agree with the architects statement of the preforming genocide of Indigenous Australians, isn’t necessarily the intent; it is to encourage the comparison; engaging the visitor in conversation and argument. Whilst this is a powerful sign, it does require knowledge of the architectural precedent of the Jewish Museum and the emotive spatial experiences it creates. The NMA only replicates this in plan, creates a vastly different experience, consequently when inside of the building you don’t witness this sign, as it is only evident in an aerial view and the diagrams of the NMA. While this is an effective way of drawing comparisons between the two subjects, the different experience hinders the sign

legibility. The Jewish Museum is a deconstructivist building which has inherent qualities; a defiance of structural and material conventions; a play with binaries and absences, and in Libsakin’s work extreme fragmentation of the diagonal. This is employed in the Jewish Museum in order to make an emotive building; having emotional effect on the visitors. By segmenting the plan from the special experience you alter the building, in turn the sign loses clarity and the visitor doesn’t identify the ideal signified meaning. As human’s we experience the building in section its spatial experience, not its plan.

Another form making sign is that of the reproduction of the villa Savoye in black at 1:1, the intent is a connotation of an abstract form of Ned Kelly’s helmet. While Ned Kelly’s helmet is widely recognizable, this abstract cross between modernist architecture clouds and confuses the symbol; those who see the meaning to be Ned Kelly will link the story which Australians have grown up with, understanding its context to the NMA. In contrast those who see it as a piece of modernist architecture may be confused by the lack of relation to the rest of this postmodern building, as the movement fundamentally rejects modernism. This highlights that “buildings provide different reading to different succeeding generations [as well as people within a generation] because its form signifies not simple, one-to-one signified, but many signifieds.” This highlights the potential multiple meanings of a sign and the ever changing language; exploring the impossibility for every visitor of the NMA to see the meaning which the architect intended.


The overarching sign represents the knot tying all the strands of stories and meaning together. The knot is the form of the great hall and the Ularoo line (the canopy). This is a grand symbolic meaning of Australia and of the museum itself. It is a series of signs demonstrating different stories and statements; though the signified meaning isn’t as clear due to the competing reference of the Opera House through the articulations of the windows in the grand hall. This allows for greater interpretation and layers meaning within the one sign, losing its strength of a single meaning. The most prominent sign is form of the building imitating a knot, a wider understanding is not necessary in order to connect the signifier and signified.

The signs demonstrate a recurring problem with the coded meaning embedded within this building, that being the legibility of the sign and signified. “In order to know a meaning, what a signifier signifies, the receiver must know the code.” Hattenhauer uses the analogy of Morse code to elaborate; if one does not know which arrangement of dots and dashes signifies which letters and words; one does not understand. In addition, if one receivers signifier is different to that of the receivers code the message is miscommunicated. The majority of visitors will not understand or identify the correct meanings within the NMA, unless told the deep meaning and storytelling which the building strives to tell. This means the building presents itself as completely different, one with somewhat of an identity crisis, as without the knowledge appears as a conglomeration of different architectural movements. In many ways the building has several identities dependent on how the visitor views the building.

The implications of the diagram

Whilst signs are a key move in this Post-Modern building, the result form of the building is based around diagraming; the diagram of the knot. The way in which ARM have employed the meaning of interwoven stories as the sign of the knot; it takes the form of a boolean of the knot; thus a cast of the knot. In demonstrating this importance firstly one must understand the historical use. The diagram “historically [is] understood in two ways; as an explanatory or analytical device and as a generative device14.” is a representation tool in an exploration of ideas; there is a relationship between the final building and the diagram yet they are distinctly separate. Robin Evans discusses how the diagram historically doesn’t depict a total picture of the building rather it highlights elements and leaves others out; only certain subject matter is made available15.

Figure 3: The uses of the diagram of the Knot to create the finished building form.

The NMA demonstrates this change in diagraming that the architecture is now the diagram and the diagram is now the architecture; they are on in the same. This

demonstrates the change that comes about due to the medium used for architectural drawing. Robin Evans references that the effect of the medium is a “non neutral vehicle transporting conceptions into objects,…. It doesn’t necessarily dominate but always interacts with what it represents.” The NMA demonstrates the effect the utilization of 3D software to the diagram; it is seen to dominate the representation. Anthony Vidler discusses the effect of this software.

“The technique of its design are drawn not from architecture but from animation software that generates it complex forms with the help of digital avatars that work, independent of the architect, to produce multiple iterations of possible combinations.”

Vidler here is suggesting that the architect is no longer designing the diagram and subsequently the building, the software is designing it independent of the architect. The change of the ability to diagram at 1:1 scale in a virtual realm allows for a greater relationship to the human in regards to the spatial experience. This effect can be seen within the knot of the building; in terms of its fluid form of merging planes. This is a dramatic spatial condition drawing the visitors into the knotted form which is the sign of Australia’s interwoven story.

The use of this technology has allowed for a unique spatial experience which has reference to signs and subsequent meanings. While the experience to a visitor is unique and different to those of it creates, due to the form; it raises the issue that it has no relationship to its context, representing stories of Australia, with no connection.

Australian buildings. As Rem Koolhas recognizes this dilemma “it exists; at most, it coexists. It subtext is fuck context.” The focus on the buildings relationship to its embedded meaning and spatial experience jeopardizes its relationship to its context.

**Postmodern or Deconstructive**

The NMA can be seen to fit with both of these postmodern and deconstructive, partly due to similarities they share. The implementation of meaning is critical to both these architectural movements; and the uses of semiotics in the NMA is the sources of the design moves.

The NMA can be seen as a postmodern building as it seeks “ideological justification, not in program, function or structure, but it meaning.” This is seen through the coded signs employed throughout the building. Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi’s ‘Learning from Las Vegas’ demonstrates the effects of consumerism and its every growing presence; highlighting the engagement of buildings or more so the sign with general public; a key language tool which is being tackled within postmodern movements and the NMA. ‘Learning from Las Vegas’ highlights the need of architecture to identify and communicate with the general populist, similar to the postmodern movement; demonstrated through the incorporation of language, signs and metaphors. It rejects the modernist movement which alienated the general public. ARM exploits meaning throughout the NMA through semiotics in an effort to engage with visitors. Although the NMA utilizes of the postmodern movement it’s abstract form is more

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reminiscent of a deconstructive building. Deconstructivism derives from Derrida’s literary theory of deconstruction; all of Western literature and philosophy implicitly relies on a metaphysics of presence, denying the possibility of a pure presence and thus of essential or intrinsic meaning.\textsuperscript{20} In regards to architecture, the experience of the deconstructivist building is a sort of critical paradox which is supposed to undo the paradoxical account of human presences in architectural theory as we have inherited it.\textsuperscript{21} Though there is evidence of deconstruction within the building in relation to difference, trace and erasure, and subjective meaning; it also has elements of postmodern building. While the building does demonstrate characteristics of both movements, it primary focus is associated with semiotic theory and its form.

**Conclusion**

ARM uses signs extensively throughout the NMA in an attempt to portray meaning and make statements about the Australian story; some politically motivated at the government of the day (when built in 2001, in reference to indigenous Australians rights). With prior knowing of the intended meanings, the signs are very effective at portraying this story; however the issue lying with the legibility of the signs. Many of the signs fail to clearly communicate the intended message; to the extent that visitors may confuse the sign as a mere element of the multifaceted computer generated knot. The NMA highlight the need for a legible code in order to fully understand the building, without the visitors understanding of the deep meaning behind the building, all they


understand it as is an interesting faceted building yet only find meaning in the objects and not the building itself. This results in a building that doesn't live to its intentions and highlights that unless it can be read by the general public not just the informed (in regard to architectural knowledge) it will not be able to effectively communicate it's message.
LIST OF CITATIONS IN ESSAY (BIBLIOGRAPHY)


