

project 6548 Sarjeant Gallery
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subject Sarjeant Gallery Design Statement
prepared on behalf of Warren and Mahoney Architects Ltd

ARCHITECTS STATEMENT

URBAN RESPONSE

The mountains, the river, the undulating hills and the ocean are the significant architectural features of the Wanganui landscape. From its birthplace on the slopes of Mt Ruapehu the Wanganui River meanders through the rugged hill country towards the ocean. As the lifeblood of this vast landscape the river has throughout history been of immense value as a river road, a pathway for travellers.

Wanganui's site is the last crossing point on the river before it meets the ocean. The modern city has taken possession of the land, structuring the environment by axes, paths and places. The city grid is aligned northeast/southwest with the centre of the community located between two hills adjacent to the river. Victoria Avenue, the city's east/west axis, links the river crossing to the east with Mt Taranaki to the west. The city's north/south axis connects the volcanic peaks in the north with the river mouth and ocean to the south. The Sarjeant Gallery straddles and reinforces this north/south axis. Mountains and ocean are thus linked by this imaginary line which reflects the course of the river flowing down to the sea.

With its uncompromising, symmetrical, cruciform plan and its classical language and its hill top site, the existing Sarjeant Gallery represents colonial power in an untamed landscape. Its centralised plan and north/south axis dominates the form. However; the axis is blocked to the north by a blank window and solid mass of Oak trees beyond. The east/west axis of its plan is closed at both ends. By extending the gallery to the north with a building form which continues and strengthens the north/south alignment, this important city and landscape axis is reinforced and extended towards the distant Mt Ruapehu.

The principal north/south axis orders the internal circulation through the galleries, whereas the secondary east/west axis defines the points of entry and links the old and new part of the over-all building.

BUILDING FORM

The new building comprises a new, three level structure sited to the north of the existing gallery. Accommodation of the required floor area over three levels provides a logical functional split, maintaining a relatively small building footprint and a modest mass alongside the existing gallery.

The new building form consists of a solid box containing new exhibition space elevated on columns over a fully-glazed ground floor which contains public facilities, shop, cafe and staff offices. Below the ground floor is a solid base, partly buried below ground, containing storage and exhibition preparation areas. In its massing, the proposed extension maintains the height and bulk of the original building.

The intent of this design is to create a modern extension, for and clearly of today, which is compatible with the old building by maintaining proportion, scale, height, materials and colour, resulting in a neutral addition that sits comfortably alongside and does not compete with its neighbour. Old and new components are linked by a foyer that has full-height glazed walls to the east and west, together with a partly glazed roof, this creates an open, transparent entry space between two solids. This dematerializing of the connecting space is deliberate and important, providing the opportunity for two clearly defined related forms, to be read independently. This connection only lightly touches the historic building while making a new city connection on the east/west axis of Campbell Street. This new entry is at ground level at the rear of the existing building.

HERITAGE RESPONSE BETWEEN BUILDINGS

This design concept extends a significant, historic civic building which is an iconic landmark. Though the building was originally designed with the provision for future expansion to the north, the classical cruciform nature of its plan is “complete” in itself. A primary intent of this proposal is to design a neutral extension (in terms of external form) which only lightly touches the historic building, thus expanding and enhancing the Sarjeant Gallery in a respectful and complementary manner.

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ACCESS

The new main entrance to the Sarjeant Gallery faces west on the east/west axis of Campbell street. This location provides the most direct connection to the city street system, while preserving the formal pedestrian approach up the Veteran Steps. Pedestrians may approach the gallery from any direction via the existing pathways into Queen's Park. Similarly, vehicles may approach the site each of the existing routes, the principal one being from the Campbell Street/Cameron Terrace intersection. From this approach, the new gallery entrance is immediately visible on entering the park, at the end of Campbell Street. The main entrances to the Wanganui Public Library and Museum are immediately visible and accessed.

A new paved forecourt is created at the east end of Campbell Street close to the Davis Library and existing carpark. The entrance leads directly from this forecourt into the new foyer. The transparency of this foyer allows the visitor to see right through to the park beyond towards the east as well as towards the distant landscape through the café to the north. Through its transparency the foyer allows the visitor to clearly read the old and new parts of the building and to easily orientate themselves on entering the art gallery.

INTERIOR PLANNING

The success of the extended gallery will depend on the legibility of the arrival and circulation space process. The transparency on the new double height foyers allows visitors instantly to read the old and new parts of the gallery, and easily orient themselves on entering this dramatic space. Immediately to the left on entering is the reception area, the shop, cafe and toilets. The gallery reception is immediately inside the entrance and adjacent to the stairway and lift leading to the exhibition areas on the floor above. The shop is clearly visible from the forecourt. A display area adjacent to the shop allows the shop to expand into the foyer during its hours of operation. The café is situated along the north side opening onto a sunny terrace, with access to the public library, views towards the hills, river a sculpture lawn that is flanked by hedges. Both the café and the shop are able to be entered directly from outside for use after gallery hours. A long opening in the lobby ceiling allows natural light to filter down from the skylit origination gallery above, making a dramatic connection between the ground

floor lobby and the exhibition overhead. The foyer can be used as public receptions, functions and exhibition openings. Staff offices occupy the eastern end of this floor and look out into the park towards the Cenotaph and band rotunda.

The forecourt paving continues into the foyer and rises as two grand stairs, landing onto a wide landing, for display, presentations and speeches, at the eastern end. A single flight returns up to the bridge suspended in the space above, providing access to the galleries and linking the existing and new parts of the building at this level. The process of circulating up through the foyer strengthens the sense of arrival and gives appropriate importance to the galleries above, with clear legibility of orientation. The bridge is a crossing point between two worlds but it is also like a boat, representing a point of departure on a journey into the world of art.

New exhibition spaces are located on the upper floor at existing gallery level. All exhibition spaces in the building are entered via the main foyer stair and suspended bridge, or alternatively by lift from the foyer. The auditorium functions are located to the east with classrooms beyond. Movable walls allow the classrooms to be opened up into the gallery spaces which then also allow auditorium functions to occur.

From the bridge, visitors enter the existing Sarjeant Gallery to the south through a new opening in the north wall. The new walls are entered through an opening in the south wall of the new extension. The exhibition areas are grouped along a long skylit orientation gallery on the buildings principal axis. This space has glazed doors at its north end opening onto a cantilevered balcony that project's ones views towards the distant mountains, birthplace of the river.

The specialist large scale gallery is located the western side and is accessible from two points, allowing this room to be easily subdivided into smaller spaces. The other gallery/auditorium spaces and classrooms also contain the necessary services. The classroom has movable walls to open up to give flexibility to the variety of spaces and encourage circulation sequentially through all the galleries.

Each of the new exhibition areas is designed to allow total artificial lighting control. Adjustable blinds in the orientation gallery skylight diffuse the natural skylight.

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The new galleries are designed as a series of simple well-portioned rooms allowing artworks to be hung on a neutral backdrop.

The existing Sarjeant gallery spaces remain as they presentably are and the domed central space retains its magnificent proportions. The original entry remains for formal and ceremonial occasions while the adjacent offices are converted to reading rooms for the gallery members.

The basement floor of the new structure contains, staff operational areas, workshops, storage facilities, the loading dock with all the necessary faculties for the building.

STRUCTURE

The both buildings will be seismically strengthened to meet the latest Structural Building Codes and the information becoming available from the Christchurch Earthquake investigations. The new building will be able to meet the requirements for occupation by the Gallery and the Wanganui Council Staff, shortly after a seismic event should it be required. Separate Structural Reports are available from Holmes Consulting Group. Wellington.

THE HISTORIC SARJENT GALLERY

The historic building from appearances, upon completion of the seismic strengthening work would be almost undetectable from its current appearance and the timber floor shall remain, with squeaks. The external stone walls and roof will be repaired and replace where necessary. A new opening will be created in the north elevation giving access to the bridge and gallery extension at the upper level. The original main entrance can be used for ceremonial occasions and will become an emergency egress door. The basement space will be reconfigured as necessary, to accommodate the altered functional requirements, now required. The servery kitchen will remain as a back-up to the cafe, for very large functions and events which may use the buildings.

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CULTURAL RESPONSE

Old and new, present and past cohabit this hill top site connected by a bridge. This meeting point is also a point of departure or a crossing, representative of a meeting of cultures.

As the creative spirit of New Zealand and Maori art traditions look both backwards to the past and forwards to the future, the new Sarjeant Gallery makes reference to its history and its context, the land, the river and the sea as a continuum, linking our origins and our destinies.