

# *Roots in the most unlikely of places: Reconsidering the Queensland Art Gallery*

Lloyd Jones

University of Queensland

*In 1973, Queensland architect Robin Gibson was awarded the commission for the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG), after winning a limited design competition. Shortly after, Gibson travelled overseas on a government funded tour of key international art galleries including, the North Jutland Art Museum, Aalborg (Alvar & Elissa Aalto with Jean-Jacques Barué, 1972) and the Oakland Museum, California (Roche-Dinkeloo, 1969). The purpose of the tour was to more accurately define the requirements of a modern art gallery. The resulting QAG, developed in response to Gibson's findings, is a highly considered gallery building, incorporating generous natural light and a suite of exhibition spaces of varying dimensions and architectural qualities. When opened in 1982, it received considerable national acclaim and was later awarded the RAIA Zelman Cowen Award for Public Architecture. However, despite this national recognition, the project received little exposure internationally.*

*In the only known critique of the QAG published internationally, critic Boris Kazanski, suggests that the "international" design language of the gallery failed to communicate with the surrounding context. This paper proposes that Kazanski's response was prejudiced by global discussions of post-modern concepts, such as Frampton's "Critical Regionalism" which were being enthusiastically discussed in local and international publications during the period the QAG opened. Kazanski, like other international critics, appeared to favour Australian projects that engaged with these debates often through architectural responses to climate and comfort. Consequently, the QAG's response to place through careful layering of light, surrounding environments and historical precedent has not yet been considered.*

*Keywords: modernism; regionalism; Queensland architecture; twentieth-century architecture; Robin Gibson*

The Queensland Art Gallery was established in 1895 but from 1931 the collection was stored and exhibited in the Queensland Exhibition Building (GHM Addison, 1891).<sup>1</sup> The gallery shared this building with the State Museum but it was considered improperly equipped to display or store art.<sup>2</sup> Plans for the construction of “fine, adequate, permanent premises befitting the State’s Art Gallery” were frequently discussed by parliament and in public media, but did not eventuate.<sup>3</sup> On December 23 1968, the trustees of the Queensland Art Gallery presented a submission to the State Government which outlined the inadequacies of their facilities.<sup>4</sup> In response, the State Government approved the establishment of a Queensland Art Gallery Site Committee in January 1969 to examine potential locations for a new gallery.<sup>5</sup> After examining three key sites in and around the city centre, they decided on a site in South Brisbane, overlooking the Brisbane river and city beyond.<sup>6</sup> This was then largely an industrial area populated by warehouses, disused wharfs, dusty vacant lots and railway infrastructure.

In 1972, a competition was announced for the design of the new Queensland Art Gallery (QAG). Ten local architectural practices with expertise in large projects were invited to submit a design proposal.<sup>7</sup> The ten were shortlisted to three and, in April 1973, the firm, Robin Gibson & Partners were announced as winners.<sup>8</sup> Principal of the practice was Brisbane-born architect, Robin Gibson (1930-2014) who had opened his office circa 1957.<sup>9</sup> In early practice, Gibson became known for small retail fit-outs, which were among the first in Brisbane to recognise the commercial benefits of a well-designed shop, combining architecture with purpose-built lighting, displays and graphics, to create a comprehensive package attractive to customers. By the early 1970s he was responsible for more substantial projects, notably at the University of Queensland where his firm designed Mayne Hall (1973), a graduation and performance space awarded the 1973 RAI (Qld) Bronze Medal (fig. 1). In the transition to the public scale, Gibson’s confidence grew in using materials such as pre-cast and in situ concrete, steel and extensive glazing. This combined with a reputation for “getting things done” made his firm a measured choice as architects of the new gallery.<sup>10</sup>

In 1975, the gallery brief substantially expanded to include not only the QAG (1982) but a restaurant (1981), the Queensland Performing Arts Complex (1985 & 1998), Queensland Museum (1986) and the Queensland State Library (1988). These buildings were all designed by Gibson’s office on adjacent sites, using the same materials, monolithic form and cubic geometries,

1 Janet Hogan, “Queensland Art Gallery: An Historical Perspective,” *ART and Australia* 20 no. 4 (Winter 1983): 477-79.

2 Guest, “Galvanised into action: The transformation of the Queensland Art Gallery,” *QAGOMA Blog*, February 3, 2017, <https://blog.qagoma.qld.gov.au>.

3 Hogan, “Queensland Art Gallery,” 482.

4 Hogan, “Queensland Art Gallery,” 482.

5 Cabinet decision No 12536, January 14, 1969, Cultural Centre Item ID541022, Queensland State Archives (QSA), Runcorn, Queensland, Australia.

6 Queensland Art Gallery Site Committee, “Proposed Art Centre Site Investigation,” March 1969, New Queensland Art Gallery Item ID 961664, QSA.

7 The firms (those in bold admitted to second stage) were: Bligh Jessup Brettnall & Partners, James Birrell & Partners, Robin Gibson & Partners, Prangley & Crofts, Conrad Gargett, Cullen Fagg Hargraves Mooney & Cullen, Fulton Collin Boys Gilmour Trotter & Partners, Consortium of Codd Hopgood & Associates and HJ Parkinson & Associates, Hall Phillips & Wilson, Lund Hutton Newell Paulsen, Blair M Wilson.

8 “How the new Art Gallery will look,” *Courier Mail*, April 19, 1973, 3.

9 Michael Keniger, “Gibson Robin,” in *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*, ed. Philip Goad and Julie Willis (Port Melbourne, Vic: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 271-72.

10 Allan Kirkwood, notes for “Robin Gibson: A Retrospective,” September 24, 2014. Held in private collection.



Figure 1. Mayne Hall, University of Queensland, Robin Gibson Architect, Brisbane, 1973. (Photograph by author, 2017.)

to form a unified complex known as the Queensland Cultural Centre (QCC). Gibson's office was responsible for the design of the complex in its entirety. As the QAG was the foundation building and the later projects used the forms and materials established in this initial design, this paper will focus on the gallery building alone.

Shortly after receiving the QAG commission, Gibson conducted a tour funded by the Queensland State Government of significant art galleries abroad. The purpose of the tour was to "more accurately define the needs and specific requirements together with the future demands which the gallery building will require during its lifetime."<sup>11</sup> This paper argues that this study of key galleries abroad gave Gibson an intimate sense of the functional requirements and experiential qualities of a modern art gallery. However, he was critical of how these buildings functioned as public buildings and exhibition spaces. Considered responses to these issues informed the design process of the QAG, resulting in a skilfully designed building with exhibition spaces that rival many better-known galleries abroad. Its architectural merit was recognised by a number of significant local awards shortly after opening including the RAIA Zelman Cowen Award for Public Architecture (1982).

While the QAG received acclaim nationally, it did not receive similar attention abroad. This was despite an increase in the

11 Robin Gibson & Partners, Queensland Art Gallery Report on Overseas Trip, 1973, Box 1, Robin Gibson Collection, Fryer Library, St. Lucia, University of Queensland.

number of Australian projects published in international journals during the period the gallery opened. These publications appeared to favour Australian projects responsive to prevailing architectural polemics of the late twentieth century, including critical regionalism and postmodernism. Projects such as the QAG, designed in a strong international language, are conspicuously absent from discussions of Queensland architecture by international journals from the early 1980s. Furthermore, the only known international criticism of the QAG, which appeared in German journal *Architektur + Wettewerbe*, is disparaging of the new building's response to its surrounding context. This paper will examine how Queensland architecture was represented nationally and internationally during the period the QAG opened, arguing the gallery is more sensitive to regional context than its exclusion in discussions of regionalism in Australia during the 1980s would suggest. Informing this discussion are the notes Gibson compiled during the 1973 tour abroad and various speeches Gibson gave during the subsequent decades which discuss the design intent for the QAG. The construction of the QAG was a significant event for Queensland culturally and remains a key example of a modern art gallery in Australia.

## The Tour

Fundamentally, the planning brief assembled by the Queensland Art Gallery Steering Committee in 1972 envisioned the new QAG building as a permanent home for the institution's growing art collection.<sup>12</sup> They desired "a building of its time, incorporating the best techniques and materials available" that should be neither "monumental or pretentious in character."<sup>13</sup> This reflected the ideologies of post-war gallery buildings nationally and abroad. In gallery buildings constructed during this period, architects and governments sought to dissolve the barriers between art and the general public by creating projects at the human scale which made an architectural statement without overshadowing the art within.<sup>14</sup> These galleries also incorporated modern developments in lighting, storage and gallery layout. As few gallery or museum buildings then constructed in Australia demonstrated these contemporary innovations, Gibson instead visited galleries and museum spaces abroad.

Although it is unknown how Gibson planned his itinerary, many of the projects he visited are located in the traditional cultural centres of the world. He visited galleries in London,

12 New Queensland Art Gallery Steering Committee, "Queensland Art Gallery Report," March 1972, New Queensland Art Gallery Item ID961664, QSA.

13 "Queensland Art Gallery Report," 1972, QSA.

14 Nikolaus Pevsner, *A History of Building Types* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976), 111-38.

Amsterdam, Berlin, Copenhagen, Aalborg, New York City, Chicago, Minneapolis, San Francisco and Mexico City.<sup>15</sup> Many were considered successful, modern gallery designs, for example, the Walker Art Centre (Edward Larrabee Barnes, 1971) in Minneapolis was touted as the “best museum space that we have in the United States” by art dealer Leo Castelli.<sup>16</sup> To assist with critiquing each building, Gibson developed a series of standardised criteria; planning, organisation/administration, environment, lighting, space planning and “miscellaneous”—principles that rated the building’s ability to display, store and administer a large collection of art.<sup>17</sup> Gibson also spent time with curators, directors and architects to further his understanding of developments in the administration and curatorial aspects of gallery design.<sup>18</sup>

From the notes Gibson compiled during the tour, it appears he found many of the galleries failed to address all his criteria adequately. Two recurring criticisms were a lack of acknowledgment of surrounding context impacting their success as a public building, and poorly planned and/or lit exhibitions spaces impacting their success as a functional art gallery. An example of this critique is expressed in Gibson’s notes for the Oakland Museum of California (Roche-Dinkeloo, 1968). The Oakland Museum sits as an oasis of cultural facilities and vegetation arranged on a series of landscaped terraces within a dense urban context. While aesthetic similarities between the Oakland Museum and the realised QAG have been made in publications elsewhere, Gibson’s comments are largely critical.<sup>19</sup> While he found the exterior terraces of Oakland “a delight” he was concerned that a lack of recognition of the surrounding urban and natural context made the building uninviting to pedestrians at street level who had no visual or physical connection to the landscapes within.<sup>20</sup> He was also concerned by the disconnect between the interior spaces and the terraces. He writes, “one feels completely divorced from the exterior because of the heaviness and severity of the structural system imposed by the design.”<sup>21</sup> A recent visit to the Oakland Museum by the author confirmed Gibson’s accounts. The exhibition spaces feel detached from the external landscapes and the internal finishes and lack of natural lighting make the galleries uninspiring environments for viewing art (fig. 2).

A response to issues of site were already one of the strengths of Gibson’s 1973 competition entry. In this design he had hinted at an opportunity for creating new public recreation spaces along the edge of the Brisbane River. In the report Gibson assembled post-travel he proposed to take this several steps further and

15 “Queensland Art Gallery Report on Overseas Trip,” Gibson Collection.

16 Leo Castelli quoted in Phillip Sargeant, “Art for Art’s Sake,” *Architecture Australia* 66 no. 1 (Feb/Mar 1977): 37; Ada Huxtable, “Architecture: A Museum Is Also Art, Exhibition Shows,” *New York Times*, September 25, 1968, 40.

17 “Queensland Art Gallery Report on Overseas Trip,” Gibson Collection.

18 “Queensland Art Gallery Report on Overseas Trip,” Gibson Collection.

19 See, Deborah van der Plaat, Andrew Wilson, Janina Gosseye and John Macarthur, ed., *Hot Modernism* (London: Artifice, 2015) and Conrad Gargett, *Queensland Cultural Centre Conservation Management Plan*, June 2017.

20 “Queensland Art Gallery Report on Overseas Trip,” Gibson Collection.

21 “Queensland Art Gallery Report on Overseas Trip,” Gibson Collection.





Figure 2. Interior of Oakland Museum of California, Roche-Dinkeloo, Oakland 1968. (Photograph by author, 2018.)

bury the existing road (Stanley Street) between the gallery and the river.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately this was what was constructed. In front of the gallery is a landscaped forecourt from which the river and city beyond could be observed. This slopes down to a pedestrian footpath along the water's edge intentionally leaving the river bank intact. Unlike the landscaped terraces at Oakland, this space allows pedestrians to experience the public landscape which includes large scale sculpture and panoramic views of the city without having to set foot into the gallery itself. In a further acknowledgment of local context, the buildings were kept low, as a predominantly horizontal silhouette, so when viewed from afar the geometric forms reinforce and draw the eye to the distant views of the mountain ranges beyond.<sup>23</sup>

22 "Site Access and Layout" in "Queensland Art Gallery Report on Overseas Trip," Gibson Collection.

Gibson observed that in many of the galleries he visited abroad there was a desire to deliver consistent light to the interior of the gallery. However, very few galleries were able to successfully introduce significant amounts of natural lighting into the exhibition spaces—instead relying almost exclusively on the stability of artificial lighting. However, Gibson found the eye demanded variations in light levels to combat visual fatigue.<sup>24</sup> In response, Gibson prioritized the introduction of natural light into the QAG writing in his notes prior to designing the building that, "the great thing is to realise the presence of light."<sup>25</sup> Key to the success of this in the gallery is a space known as the Watermall, a series of pools running from the exterior into a tall internal volume separating the galleries from the administration areas of the building (fig. 3). Conceptually, the pools run parallel with the Brisbane river giving a sense of this significant natural feature from inside the building while functionally the Watermall works as a device for

23 Robin Gibson, transcript for lecture at Queensland Art Gallery, July 18, 1974, private collection.

24 Queensland Art Gallery Report on Overseas Trip, Gibson Collection.

25 Peter Trundle, "Designing for the People," *Courier Mail*, June 4 1982, 5.

visitors to orient themselves as they move around the building. The Watermall is lit from above using baffled sky lights which introduce light into the space. These are present but not well resolved in the 1973 competition scheme and some credit may be owed to similar devices successfully used at the North Jutland Art Museum, Aalborg (Alvar & Elissa Aalto with Jean-Jacques Barué, 1972) a gallery Gibson visited. Light is reflected off the pools and the lightly coloured concrete walls and floor to introduce natural lighting into the galleries beyond which combined with concealed artificial lighting achieved the lighting conditions Gibson sought. When opened, the views of Australian critics were favourable to the project. In 1983 the national journal, *Architecture Australia* described the gallery as, “a masterly articulation of space, which generously serves the multifunctional activities of a major art gallery.”<sup>26</sup>

26 “Evoking Memorable Images,” *Architecture Australia* 71 no. 6 (December 1982): 122.

## Queensland Architecture Nationally

Although the QAG was reviewed favourably in *Architecture Australia* (AA) none of the subsequent Queensland Cultural Centre buildings were featured in the national institute’s journal. Nor were they featured in the journal *Transition*—founded in 1979 to counter the mostly pragmatic agenda of AA. However, even AA had begun regular “discourse” issues dedicated to

Figure 3. Queensland Art Gallery Watermall, Robin Gibson & Partners, Brisbane, 1982. (Photograph by author, 2018.)



contemporary architectural theories and debates. Central to this discussion were contemporary architectural polemics such as postmodernism and critical regionalism which were applied to the search for an Australian architectural identity. Paul Walker and Karen Burns observe that although postmodernism struggled to gain a foothold in Australia, Kenneth Frampton's concept of "critical regionalism" appeared to align with the views of a generation of young architects in Australia.<sup>27</sup> This is discussed at length in the essays in the catalogue for the travelling exhibition of Australian architecture which toured Europe and North America in the early 1980s, *Old Continent New Building*. Here, architect Phillip Cox writes in his essay, "An Architecture in an Australian Landscape," that Australian architects from the 1960s were working towards "an architecture more Australian than the pastiche of the international school."<sup>28</sup> Although the QAG was included in the exhibition alongside several other large modernist works, the "hero project" chosen for the cover image of the catalogue was the John Andrews designed homestead, Eugowra (1981), a building which borrowed heavily from the colonial building traditions of rural Australia.<sup>29</sup>

Conversations about region and identity were also occurring in Queensland but represented more by built works than active critical discussion. Central to this was the ubiquitous Queensland house described by J.M. Freeland in his 1968 book *Architecture in Australia* as the "closest that Australia has ever come to producing an indigenous style."<sup>30</sup> During the post-war period, Queensland architects critiqued this building type by blending modernist forms and materials with climatic elements derived from the local context, such as verandahs and courtyards. The Mocatta Residence designed by Gibson and built on the bank of the Brisbane River circa 1966 was a representative example of this critique. Although the Mocatta Residence bears little resemblance to a pre-war "Queenslander" issues of light, ventilation and a semi-outdoors lifestyle are no less considered in its design. However, from the 1970s, young Queensland architects such as Rex Addison and Lindsay Clare began returning to the forms and materials more closely associated with the pre-war housing traditions such as exposed timber structure, corrugated iron and pitched roofs. During the 1980s these houses were often depicted as the representative examples of Queensland architecture in national publications and were described as being constructed in the "Queensland Idiom" associating these projects with the climate and building traditions of the region.<sup>31</sup>

27 Paul Walker and Karen Burns, "Constructing Australian Architecture for International Audiences: Regionalism, Postmodernism, and the Design Arts Board 1980–1988," *Fabrications* 28, no. 1 (2018): 27.

28 Phillip Cox, "An Architecture in an Australian Landscape" in *Old Continent, New Building*, ed. Leon Paroissien and Michael Griggs (Darlinghurst: David Ell Press in association with the Design Arts Committee of the Australia Council, 1983), 16.

29 Walker and Burns, "Constructing Australian Architecture for International Audiences," 27.

30 J.M. Freeland, *Architecture in Australia* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire Publishing Pty. Ltd, 1968), 209.

31 "In the Queensland Idiom," *Architecture Australia* 71 no. 6 (December 1982): 118



## Queensland Architecture Abroad

During the 1980s, English journal *Architectural Review* (AR) by their own admission became a “strongly regionalist magazine” and the Queensland projects featured during this time supported this agenda.<sup>32</sup> These were almost all houses and the articles on them were often penned by recent Australian immigrant Rory Spence. The subjects included a Noel Robinson house in Spring Hill; a house in Chapel Hill by Brit Andresen & Michael Keniger within a larger feature on Australian Houses; and a major piece written on Queensland architect Rex Addison that included several of his residential projects alongside domestic scale public buildings.<sup>33</sup> These projects were realised in an idiom of lightweight materials, thresholds, shading and screens identified in the texts as fundamental in mitigating the effects of the Queensland climate. As with the national publications, parallels were also made in the AR articles between these climatic devices and similar elements on traditional Queensland houses, which was reinforced by images of traditional Queensland houses and wide-angle shots of Brisbane suburbs.

Curiously, in several texts the relationship between Queensland building traditions and climatically responsive design was also identified in projects at the public scale. The solar shading on the Harry Seidler designed Riverside Centre is described by AR in 1988 as “a version of traditional Queensland awning overhangs.”<sup>34</sup> This was also observed by British critic, Kenneth Frampton who in the introductory text for a photographic book on this building argues that the solar shading on Riverside Centre “points to the regional inflection of what is otherwise an international hermetically sealed airconditioned work.”<sup>35</sup> He upholds that the building despite being a massive commercial tower serves as an act of defiance against the “juggernaut of consumerism and the admass of kitsch.”<sup>36</sup> It is worth observing that the tenuousness of this connection is demonstrated by the use of similar awnings on Seidler buildings in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Paris.

As did the building reviews in AR, the Italian journal *Domus* assumes a link between Queensland architecture, climate, tradition and the house in its 1985 issue on Australian Design, titled “Ciao Australia.”<sup>37</sup> Queensland architecture was represented in this issue only by a series of residences designed by local architect, Noel Robinson. *Domus* also aligns Robinson’s work with Frampton’s understanding of regionalism as an “architecture of resistance” by describing these small structures as a “challenge to local prejudice” and depicts his use

32 “Death of High Modernism,” *The Architectural Review* 217 no. 1297 (March 1, 2005): 47.

33 Peter Davey, “Queensland Screens,” *Architectural Review* 179, no. 1068 (February 1, 1986): 76-78; Rory Spence, “Three Australian Houses,” *Architectural Review* 176, no. 1052 (October 1, 1984): 26-33; Rory Spence, “Rex Addison in Queensland,” *Architectural Review* 180 no 1077 (November 1, 1986): 66-77.

34 Francis Anderton, “Queensland Shield,” *Architectural Review* 183, no. 1095 (May 1, 1988): 90.

35 Kenneth Frampton, *Riverside Centre* (Cammeray, N.S.W: Horwitz Grahame, 1988), 10.

36 Frampton, *Riverside Centre*, 10.

37 Alessandro Mendini, “Old Trends New Directions,” *Domus*, 663 (July/August 1985): 3.

of traditional forms and materials as a means of protecting the “local cultural heritage.”<sup>38</sup> Houses appear to remain the definitive expression of this regionalism in the *Domus* issue. This becomes problematic when presented as the only valid means of expressing regional identity. More so when coupled with an assumption that architects working outside of these traditions, on projects at a scale beyond the domestic, are not able to create alternative yet equally valid expressions of place.

It is this representation of Queensland and Queensland architectural practice which is framed in the only known review of the Queensland Art Gallery by an international journal. The author Boris Kazanski (who was actually based in South Australia) begins his piece for a 1983 issue of German journal *Architektur + Wettewerbe* by writing:

*Walter Gropius would be delighted on his centenary birthday. The spirit and architectural values rejected steadfastly in his native German by the advent of Post Modern principles in design, have found roots and expression in the most unlikely of places; Brisbane [sic].*<sup>39</sup>

Although Kazanski praises the simplicity of the Queensland Art Gallery’s design and the attention to detail, overshadowing his critique is a discussion of the relevance of the international style within a sub-tropical context. He appears surprised that Brisbane with its “indigenous residential architecture full of ornamentation, originality and playfulness,” could foster a building in such a cool, international, idiom.<sup>40</sup> Throughout the piece, Kazanski argues that the QAG was representative of an “established architectural community” who shunned the historicism and eclecticism of the region embraced by younger members of the profession.<sup>41</sup> To Kazanski, the gallery sits on the bank of the Brisbane River as an “island of dignified architecture,” but ultimately declares it an “introspective building” that lacks recognition of its neighbouring suburban context.<sup>42</sup>

38 “Brisbane: Tra Tradizione e Innovazione,” *Domus*, 663 (July/August 1985): 32

39 Boris Kazanski, “Queensland Art Gallery and Cultural Centre, Brisbane, Australia,” *Architektur + Wettewerbe* 116 (1983): 110.

40 Kazanski, “Queensland Art Gallery,” 110.

41 Kazanski, “Queensland Art Gallery,” 110.

42 Kazanski, “Queensland Art Gallery,” 111.

## The QAG as a Response to Place

Although climatic sensibilities played their role in the design of the QAG through the use of deeply recessed windows, covered walkways and thermal mass, Gibson’s sensitivity to place is not defined by their expression. Instead it is a carefully considered response to the architectural history of the city, the natural characteristics of a riverside site in inner city Brisbane and the

lifestyles of the people who inhabit it. Gibson declares in his speech “Life Styles & the Built Environment” that “Brisbane, even though it is only just over one hundred and fifty years old has already demonstrated interesting and varied patterns of life styles and has created appropriate buildings to house those styles.”<sup>43</sup> He argues that buildings such as the Treasury Building (1886-1928) designed by Colonial Architect JJ Clarke and the Parliament Building designed by Charles Tiffin (1867) used a style and detailing more typical of an international idiom to express “the aesthetic ideals of the people but also their confidence in the future.”<sup>44</sup> It was this sense of permanency in the buildings, catering to specific needs of the society who built them, which Gibson aimed to capture in the design of the gallery.

The gallery was a means of representing the needs of present-day Brisbane for high-quality cultural facilities and an aspiration for art to play a greater role in the lifestyle of Brisbane society then and into the future. The functional success of the gallery facilities made the region attractive to international exhibitions, creating a cultural link with Queensland and the rest of the world at an unprecedented scale. Over 400,000 people visited the gallery in the first 6 months it was opened, demonstrating how quickly it was embraced by the people it was intended to serve.<sup>45</sup> Later Gibson described this success, “I get a great deal

43 Robin Gibson, *Life Style and the Built Environment* (Brisbane Queensland: Aquinas Library, 1981), 7.

44 Gibson, “Life Style and the Built Environment,” 43.

45 Raoul Mellish, “Queensland Art Gallery: A Personal View,” *ART and Australia* 20 no. 4 (Winter 1983): 482.

Figure 4. Queensland Art Gallery. (Unknown Photographer. Courtesy of Robin Gibson Collection, Fryer Library, University of Queensland.)



of joy of coming here on a Sunday and seeing not the type of official person that you normally expect to see in art galleries, but families of people, the ‘thong brigade’ coming and enjoying themselves on a Sunday.”<sup>46</sup>

46 Robin Gibson, interview by J. Harper-Nelson, Christensen Fund, ARTLOOK Video Production, 1984.

To Gibson, the gallery was also an opportunity to celebrate and preserve the natural assets of the city, particularly the Brisbane River (fig. 4). The relationship between the city and the river is a recurring theme in many of the speeches Gibson gave during the 1980s. In the speech titled, *Brisbane Banal or Beautiful* he declares the river is the “major physical and visual element of Brisbane” with historical significance as the reason for Brisbane’s establishment.<sup>47</sup> Despite this significance the “birth right of all people of this city” was rarely acknowledged by historic or contemporary public buildings constructed in the city.<sup>48</sup> He lamented the river’s diminished role in present Brisbane society, the result of developments such as the Riverside Expressway which divorced the river from the fabric of the city and the people. The placement of very large commercial buildings blocking vistas from the city to the river was another concern Gibson had with the contemporary development of the city. In contrast the placement of the gallery on the river but stepped back from the water’s edge while providing generous external public landscapes that acknowledge context, presents as a compelling act of resistance.

47 Robin Gibson, “Brisbane: Banal or Beautiful an Architectural Perspective,” transcript, private collection.

48 Gibson, “Brisbane: Banal or Beautiful an Architectural Perspective,” 5.

## Conclusion

Had the QAG opened during the mid-1970s as had originally been intended, in a critical landscape more sympathetic to modernist “international” architecture, or, if it had been built in Sydney or Melbourne where the international perception of the relationship between the environmental context and the architectural traditions of the region were less rigidly tied to a regionalist narrative it is possible it would have met with a more enthusiastic reception from critics abroad. Instead, its significance as the nucleus of a cohesive collection of cultural buildings designed by a single architect on a key urban site has rarely been acknowledged internationally. Its role as a catalyst for a process of urban renewal along the south bank of the Brisbane river which, via a World Expo held in 1988, has become one of the defining public spaces in Brisbane is also often overlooked.

While Gibson consciously avoided the use of a domestic language for his public buildings this has not been the case in recent public buildings constructed in Brisbane. In fact, the

Gallery of Modern Art (2006) designed by Architectus, which forms a bookend to Gibson's existing Cultural Centre along the Brisbane River, aspires to the opposite. In the architects' statement published in English journal *UME*, they claim, "broadly, our model for the Gallery of Modern Art has been the traditional Queensland house."<sup>49</sup> The adaptable timber screening on the western elevation thus becomes a gesture shaped by "local circumstances."<sup>50</sup> As noted by Naomi Stead, this building was framed as "a genuinely regionalist building which responds to local architectural traditions and the local climate."<sup>51</sup> Other developments such as the expansion of Gibson's Queensland State Library by Donovan Hill and Peddle Thorp in 2006, which almost completely obscures Gibson's original building under an introduced vocabulary of green concrete and lightweight, timber steel and glass, could be considered an erasure of Queensland's modernist heritage in favour of a more traditional expression of a Queensland building. A more extensive redevelopment schedule proposed by the State Government in 2014 was curtailed by a successful campaign to add the Queensland Cultural Centre to the State Heritage Register, confirming the cultural significance of the project. This has led to a wider appreciation of Gibson's work and its relationship to region.

49 Architectus, "Brisbane, Queensland, Australia: Gallery of Modern Art," *UME* 21 (2007): 2.

50 Architectus, "Brisbane, Queensland, Australia: Gallery of Modern Art," 2.

51 Naomi Stead, "The Brisbane Effect: GOMA and the Architectural Competition for a New Institutional Building," in *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand* 32, *Architecture, Institutions and Change*, ed. Paul Hogben and Judith O'Callaghan (Sydney: SAHANZ, 2015), 637.