

SIR ZELMAN COWEN AWARD FOR PUBLIC ARCHITECTURE

National Portrait Gallery Johnson Pilton Walker

JURY CITATION

Canberra's Parliamentary Axis holds Australia's most important example of a monumental civic grouping, and it is vital that any new structure contribute to the whole, while also being an outstanding work of contemporary architecture. The imposing concrete edifices of the National Gallery and the High Court dominate this precinct. Smaller, more precious, the National Portrait Gallery seeks to resolve a public presence and public role with the intimate, often domestic, scale of portraiture.

A series of linear blocks recall Griffin's intention to build alongside the national capital's axis. They house the primary working spaces of the building and are separated by open-ended corridors, with glimpses of location and landscape. Externally the building recalls traditional Japanese pavilions and scaled-up Glenn Murcutt works. Giant cantilevered concrete blades define the forecourt.

The building combines off-form and precast concrete, terrazzo panels,

metal roofs, stone and timber flooring, rich timber accents, and relatively plain plaster backdrops for the display of art. A complex vocabulary is layered and understated. Considerable effort was made to resolve spaces and heights, and the acceptable admission of natural light. Kahn's top-lit Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth is a given reference.

The building, while a triumph in cultural terms and popular appreciation, is clearly too small for its public role, a reflection of contemporary governments' aspirations and budgets. Government probably never foresaw that this would be an attraction to rival the National Gallery and the War Memorial.

The portrait gallery is designed to be extended to the west in a series of pavilions, which may achieve a more substantial, permanent dimension and better integration with the park.

The building is an important addition to the capital, and reaffirms the necessary role of government in providing worthy public buildings.

