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## *'An architecture to excite an interest': grand visions for Melbourne's public library*

THE IDEA OF A GREAT domed ceremonial space dominating the skyline of Melbourne was the centrepiece of Joseph Reed's 1859 master plan for the Public Library, Museums and National Gallery of Victoria, or the Institution as it was known locally. In February 1858 the land containing the Swanston Street building had been granted to the Library's trustees and in August their chair, Redmond Barry, wrote to the Chief Secretary asking that the remainder of the block of land to Russell Street be handed over for a Museum of Natural History, Geology, Science and Art. This land was appropriated for the trustees in 1860 although the actual deed of conveyance was not executed until 1864. So it was in this atmosphere of forward-looking optimism that they commissioned Reed's office to produce a new plan for a greatly expanded building.

On 12 May 1859 two weeks before the opening of the Library's south wing the *Argus* published a full, if somewhat unclear, description of the trustees' new scheme. According to the writer, most probably Barry himself, the intention was to complete the existing building facing Swanston Street by adding north and south wings along La Trobe and Little Lonsdale Streets and a two-storey arcaded wing forming the east elevation. The ground floor was to accommodate works of art, offices and a school of arts while the upper range was to hold the extension of the Library.

Another rectangular building facing Russell Street would occupy the rest of the site, connected with the first building by a stair hall on two levels, taking account of the fall of land from Russell to Swanston Streets. This building was arranged about a large internal courtyard framed by two halls running north-south. An entrance hall covered by a large dome faced Russell Street. The ground floor of the long north and south sides of the courtyard, divided into rows of rooms was to be for students, teachers' residences and offices while a third range on the east side of the courtyard was to house a museum. The upper floor was set aside for galleries, one large and one smaller on each side, the larger one facing the courtyard and the smaller one the street. Linked to a gallery on the east side they provided an enormous well-lit exhibition space 'on the same principle as the celebrated one in the Uffizi Palace at Florence'.<sup>1</sup> The reference here to Florentine painter, architect and writer Giorgio Vasari's cortile at the Uffizi suggests that the galleries were to be grand and urban in character. Not surprisingly Vasari's famous historical work *Lives of the most eminent painters, sculptors, and architects* (1550, 1568) was among the early books in the Library's collection. The *Argus* report concluded with an enthusiastic comparison of the future Melbourne institution with those of Europe:

Should this scheme be ever carried out, we may safely say that not only will there be nothing equal to it in the Southern Hemisphere, that even in the most celebrated

capitals of the Old World few palaces for the reception of works of art will be found to surpass it. The whole plan is worthy of a great nation, and will confer lasting honor upon the designer, Mr J. Reed, the architect, under whose direction the library is being built.<sup>2</sup>

Barry was right, for even the South Kensington Museum in London at this time comprised a group of unrelated buildings unencumbered by a master plan, and had this colonial project gone ahead it would have transformed Melbourne forever.

The scheme for the Russell Street block was soon modified, however, and Reed produced a new master plan that controlled development for the next decade. The grand courtyard was replaced by a domed ceremonial hall set within a square, at each corner of which was a quadrangle. This in turn was framed by symmetrical groupings of rooms and galleries. The idea of placing a domed space at the centre of the building may have been suggested by the British Museum where a new circular reading room was built in the Great Court of Sir Robert Smirke's Greek Revival building between 1854 and 1857; certainly the London institution provided a useful precedent for combining a library and museum. On the other hand, Reed's rigidly geometric plan had a closer precedent in K. F. Schinkel's unbuilt design of 1835 for the State Library in Berlin and his Altes Museum of 1823-30 which combined a strict Greek Revival exterior with a Roman domed interior.<sup>3</sup>

In 1860 Russian-born, Swiss painter Nicholas Chevalier prepared a large watercolour of the proposed new buildings. By 1859 Reed had already produced an updated design for the Library then under construction which lengthened the 1854 plan with end pavilions and enlivened the elevation by an octastyle Corinthian portico, sculptural ornament in the tympanum and acroteria on the attic above. In front, a formal parterre with fountains on either side of the entrance completed the re-design. Reproduced in a lithograph by De Gruchy and Leigh it provided a more impressive address to its urban setting than Reed's earlier winning design. Chevalier's watercolour reproduced the lithograph, adding the La Trobe Street elevation of the new block in a rather sketchy manner which nonetheless followed the classical character of the Swanston Street elevation. The whole ensemble was surmounted by a huge dome on a tall drum.

In addition to this were the implications for the urban morphology of Melbourne, an issue that Reed was forced to grapple with and one which had no local precedent at that time. No one had yet attempted to design an entire block of such significance to the city. The great set pieces of colonial legislature which were being constructed at this time – Knight and Kerr's Parliament House and J. J. Clark's Treasury on the Spring Street hill effectively blocked the extension of Bourke and Collins Streets; their role was to define the edge of Hoddle's grid. Reed's solution was to crown the building complex with a great dome, visible from afar and with allusions, albeit faint, to such European precedents as Michelangelo's St Peter's basilica in Rome and perhaps Wren's St Paul's Cathedral in London; it would have been an unambiguous display of the city's pride in its cultural ambitions.

The opportunity to complete the Library building came in 1866 when the decision



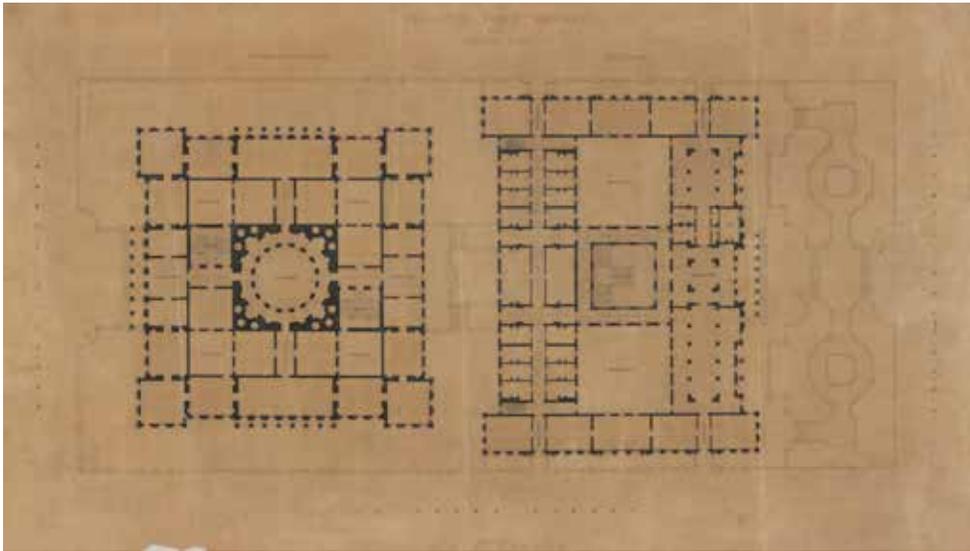
Reed Henderson & Smart, *architects*, Melbourne Public Library, National Gallery and Industrial Museum, view from Swanston Street, 1888. Ink watercolour wash and gouache on paper on linen. H30568/1.

was made to hold an Intercolonial Exhibition. The older 1854 exhibition building in William Street, a tiny replica of London's 1851 Crystal Palace, was considered too small and decrepit for such an ambitious new enterprise and the trustees lobbied successfully to house the exhibition in new buildings to be erected behind the library in Russell Street. These included a Great Hall, north and south wings connecting it to the library, a central stair hall and a large iron annexe. A plan produced at around this time shows how this scheme followed the master plan and how it was to function after the Exhibition

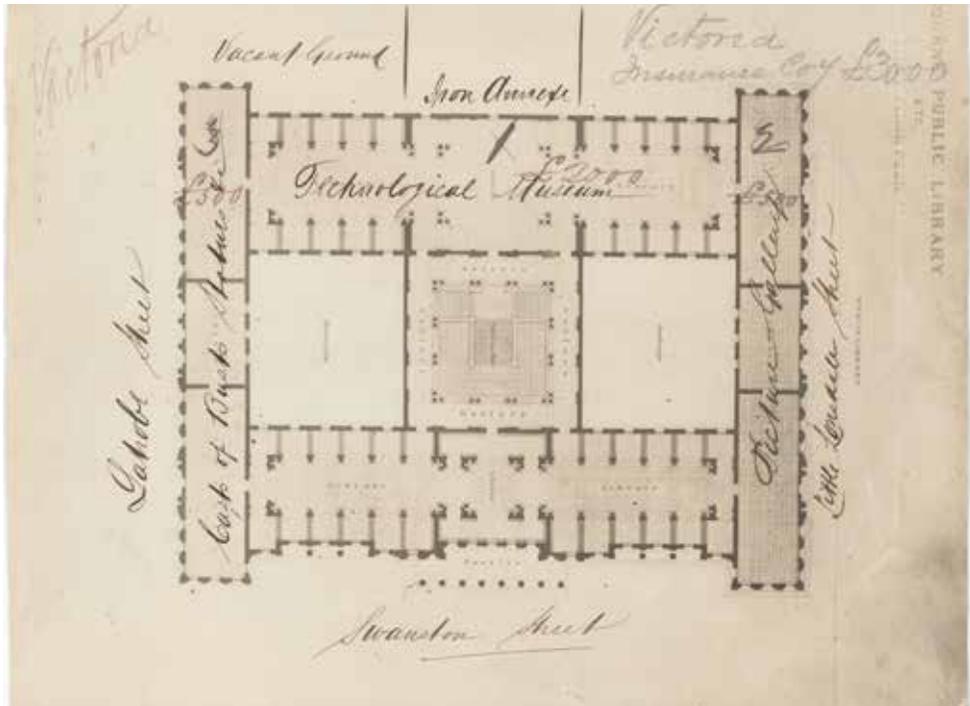


closed, with a technological museum, picture gallery and cast gallery occupying the new spaces. As Barry noted the buildings were intended ‘for the reception, on the close of the Exhibition, of the works of nature, science and art to which it is to be devoted’.<sup>4</sup>

At some stage however the square stair hall depicted on this plan was changed to a rotunda which became the first domed space erected on the library site and the only one for the following forty years. It may have been inspired by the festive character of the domed pavilions designed by Francis Fowke in 1862 for the Great Exhibition in London,



Joseph Reed, architect, Melbourne Public Library Etc. Ground Plan [Masterplan], 1859. Ink on paper. H2010.69/9.



Joseph Reed, architect, Melbourne Public Library, [masterplan reduced copy], 1866. Photograph, albumen silver [?] on printing out paper, 1866. H2010.69/10.

visited by Barry, Reed and architect George Knight, commissioner of the Intercolonial Exhibition. The rotunda was a substantial building, 22 metres in diameter, with an iron dome. For Barry, it inspired comparison with the best:

The rotunda of the grand staircase, which will be, when finished, probably as handsome as any yet built, not excepting the Scala Regia of the Vatican, measures in diameter 71 feet [21.6 metres]. It exceeds, therefore, by six feet the great dome of the Pantheon in Paris, one of the most striking objects in that delightful capital, and it is as large as the dome of the cathedral of St Isaac's in St Petersburg – that city of giants – where everything is on a scale of surpassing splendour.<sup>5</sup>

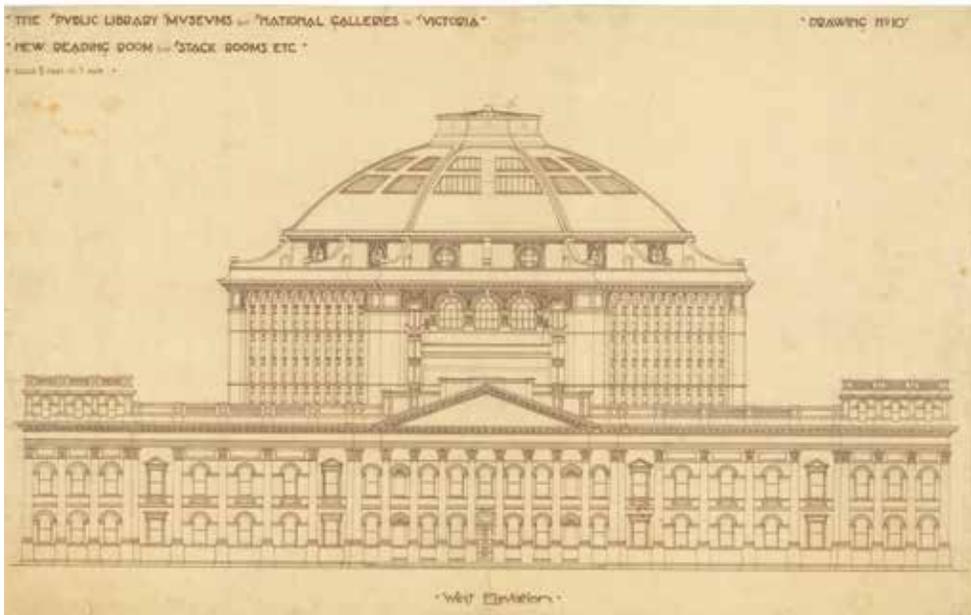
Even at this stage the rotunda was to house a staircase as in the master plan but at some point during construction this idea was abandoned.

Reed's halls were temporary and so their plain brick facades were fairly crude and everything depended on the effect of their interiors. These were decorated by Edward La Trobe Bateman,<sup>6</sup> a talented English designer who had worked in the office of the great design reformer Owen Jones in London and who counted as his friends, pre-Raphaelite artists John Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Thomas Woolner. He had arrived in Melbourne in 1852 and established himself as an artist, illustrator and garden designer. In 1860 he was commissioned to provide an interior decorative treatment for the Queen's Hall which was based on the latest archaeological evidence of polychromatic classical interiors. This partnership with Reed proved so successful that they collaborated again on the Exhibition, where Bateman produced such exciting and novel interiors that Barry considered them superior to those of the 1862 London Exhibition Hall. The local press wrote glowing reviews:

The decorations of the hall are also of a very superior description. The clere-story windows are frosted with imitation ground glass, and are ornamented with scroll pattern work, stencilled on the glass in light scarlet and blue. The walls are painted 'distempered buff'; and are divided into panels, with light blue and buff stiles, enriched with scarlet leafage with blue and red lines surrounding the panels; the main ribs are striped with red and blue. The whole has a most pleasing effect . . .<sup>7</sup>

The *Argus* thought that Bateman deserved credit for the success of the building:

Excepting in so far as the plan of this structure is concerned, Mr. Reed the architect, has enjoyed but little opportunity of displaying his taste. Only the foundations and lower walls of the great hall and octagon are permanent; the superstructure is of wood, which though capable of maintaining its position for many years admits of no elaborate architectural embellishment. The result is that the exterior of the pile is as ugly as the monster shed which Captain Fowkes [sic] constructed for the last London show, and the beauty of the interior is solely owing to its large size and the elegant decorative colouring which has been laid upon it. The name of the gentleman Mr. E. T. Bateman who has accomplished this portion of the work deserves to be remembered wherever any interest in the success of this Exhibition is felt. Even if filled with all the rich exhibits which the colonies could contribute, the large room and octagonal hall owe one-half their charm to the delicate and harmoniously-blended colours upon which the eye rests when lifted to the upper part of the walls and to the roof.<sup>8</sup>



Bates, Peebles & Smart, *architects*, The Public Library Museums and National Galleries of Victoria. New Reading Room and Stack Rooms Etc. West Elevation [of the Domed Reading Room], 1909. Brown dye-line print on paper H2010.69/61.

Bateman had assisted Owen Jones in the interior decoration of the Crystal Palace for the Great Exhibition in 1851 and seems to have harked back to that interior scheme. Jones had attracted initial opprobrium when he chose a decorative colour scheme based on his observations of the polychromatic architecture of ancient Egypt, Greece and at the Alhambra.

[He] opted for a vibrant colour scheme using only primary colours. His controversial plan caused much debate, prompting him to defend his views in a lecture before the Institute of British Architects on 16 December 1850. Jones proposed the use of stripes of red, yellow and blue, derived from his belief that during all great periods of art only the primary colours were used.<sup>9</sup>

While Bateman followed Jones to a certain extent he introduced his own ideas. For the Rotunda, he produced a very rich treatment of the interior of the cupola, a lower frieze divided into panels with central heraldic motifs, arched windows above, grouped in threes, and ornamented with stencilled stylised plants in imitation of etched glass and crowning it all the iron framed roof divided into timber panels decorated with stencilled motifs. The *Official Guide* called it 'surpassingly clear and beautiful'. While the colour scheme of the stencil work seems to have followed that of the Great Hall, the background colour was a surprising violet. Further, the overall effect of the patterning in

the different zones was unlike anything in Melbourne and looked forward to advanced ideas of interior decoration of the later 1860s and 1870s.

By 1870 the National Gallery of Victoria, the schools of painting and design, the Industrial and Technological Museum and the Art Museum were all in place under a new governance structure but new buildings for the burgeoning enterprise were hard to come by. In 1875 McArthur Gallery provided the first purpose-built exhibition space for the picture collection but, jutting out to the east of the Great Hall, it violated the master plan which did not augur well for the future development of that half of the site.

If Reed's grand plans for the Library were foiled for the time being, on another site not too far away he was given an opportunity to design on a large urban scale. Reed & Barnes won the competition for the Exhibition Buildings in Carlton Gardens in 1879, on a block bounded by Nicholson, Rathdowne, Victoria and Moor streets. Carlton Gardens had been reserved for public use in the early 1850s and was laid out in an ornamental curvilinear pattern by Bateman in the late 1850s. Reed's scheme destroyed Bateman's sweeping curves and complex symmetry and replaced it with 'an imposing arrangement of axial paths and parterre flower beds, at the heart of which the massive Exhibition Building stood like a Baroque palace'.<sup>10</sup>

The ceremonial approach from Victoria Street was, thought the *Argus*, 'perhaps Mr Reed's crowning achievement' with its recollections of the Tapis Vert at Versailles.<sup>11</sup> Dominating this site was the enormous domed expanse of the Exhibition building, framed by smaller domed pavilions. The Exhibition dome was, like that envisaged for the Library, tall rather than broad, raised up on a tall drum so it could not only provide a lookout over Melbourne, but be seen from a long distance. While by its very nature the building with its repetitive bay structure and pavilion form adhered closely to the nineteenth-century typology of exhibition buildings and was still quite close to Fowke's 1862 London building, its axial alignment to the streets and relationship to the adjacent formal gardens give an idea of what the architect was trying to achieve at the Library site. It is clear from Reed's 1859 design for the forecourt of the Library that formal parterres and architectonic arrangements were his preferred option for landscape adjacent to the major building, expressing their essentially urban and ceremonial nature.

In 1886 Barry Hall and Verdon Hall were built on the foundations of the south wing of the Exhibition building along Little Lonsdale Street, then Swinburne Hall to the south of MacArthur Gallery was constructed in 1887. In 1889 Reed, Henderson & Smart prepared plans for the completion of the buildings to the east; La Trobe Gallery, Stawell Gallery and McCoy Hall. By this time it was clear that the 1860 master plan was in jeopardy and there was a last-ditch attempt by the architects to present a vision of the Institution as a coherent urban form encasing the independently conceived galleries and halls. Now however, the great renaissance pile was shorn of its dome.

Reed died in 1890 having supervised the design of this new suite of buildings. Little work was done after 1892 as the city rode out the worst depression it had ever

suffered but as Federation rolled around things started to kick back into life. In 1900 the Chief Librarian, Edmund La Touche Armstrong, delivered a paper to the Library Association on 'The Model Library' where he stated his allegiance to the idea of a domed reading room:

. . . so far as I can ascertain, no radical improvement has been made on Panizzi's idea, as carried out to some extent at the British Museum. He planned a great circular reading room, and provided for surplus volumes and future additions in store rooms within easy access. No greater tribute has been paid to the excellence of this idea than the fact that the newly-erected Library of Congress at Washington has been built on very similar lines. I think, therefore, we may accept this system as a basis for our model library.<sup>12</sup>

This is interesting because in the 1859 master plan the domed hall was associated with the museum and galleries, not the library. However, the cachet of the British Museum library and particularly the example of the lavish and technologically advanced Library of Congress in Washington which opened in 1897, suggested that the idea of the dome could be transferred from the eastern to the western block of the site. A chance came to forward this plan in 1905 when the jubilee of the Library's opening hove into view. Armstrong suggested to the trustees that as a fitting way to celebrate this event, a new building be erected and the trustees agreed. Sketch plans were prepared by the architects 'for a great octagonal building, to contain over a million volumes, and to provide accommodation for 500 readers in the main hall'.<sup>13</sup>

In March 1907 Thomas Bent's government promised funding to commence the new library and the recently formed practice Bates, Peebles and Smart was confirmed as the library's architects for the next phase of its development.<sup>14</sup> In 1908 Armstrong travelled through Europe and America to observe the latest in libraries and library methods, taking with him the plans prepared by Norman Peebles so he could get comments on their suitability from leading librarians.

Edmund Morris Miller<sup>15</sup> who worked at the library from 1900 to 1913 was overseas at the same time visiting several of the leading libraries of the United Kingdom, Paris, Brussels, Berlin and making a special study of German libraries. The two men met in Edinburgh, as Miller recalled:

We spent a Saturday afternoon and a Sunday morning together, visiting places of interest, including the Royal Mile. We discussed the new Library buildings. Armstrong had just returned from America and had made up his mind to recommend a round structure, with a dome in some aspects similar to the Library of Congress. I advised him against this proposal, arguing that he was trying to do with thousands what the Americans had done with tens of thousands and even more. I pointed out that he had only made provision for a large public reading room with adjoining stacks, and that the staff accommodation would be inadequate. I suggested that he go over to Germany and see some modern representations of the rectangular designs, such as the Königliche Bibliothek, Berlin, and that he give consideration to the needs of researchers in science and literature. My views fell on deaf ears.<sup>16</sup>

Miller's account implies that Armstrong's trip was undertaken to discover the best type of library for Melbourne but the decision to build a domed octagonal library had been taken some time before and had been a firm fixture in Armstrong's mind for nearly a decade. What was it about a domed space that Armstrong admired? Certainly there were enviable recent precedents and keeping up with the latest trends was typical of Melbourne's cultural enterprises. While Miller no doubt thought that Armstrong's fixation on a domed library was irrational he had ignored its very powerful appeal as an architectural form, something that had been discussed at length in a radical book that had caused a stir when it was published in 1891 by leading English architect of the Arts and Crafts movement William Lethaby. In *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*, Lethaby attempted to provide an account of architecture not as a system of aesthetic rules but as symbolic form, reflecting and reinforcing ancient understandings of the world's origins, fabric and meaning. There were lessons here, he thought, for the present:

Old architecture lived because it had a purpose. Modern architecture, to be real, must not be a mere envelope without contents. As M. Cesar Daly says in his *Hautes Etudes*, if we would have an architecture excite an interest, real and general, we must have a symbolism, immediately comprehensible by the majority of spectators.<sup>17</sup>

The symbolic association of the dome with the heavens or cosmos is very ancient and, as Lethaby shows, appeared in both Eastern and Western architecture. Often, vaults and domes of ancient temples and churches were emblazoned with stars to illustrate the building's role as a microcosm of the world. In such a way the domed reading room could also be understood as a microcosm, a 'world' of books and learning. Rather than painted stars, its glazed roof panels allowing the passage of the sun to be recorded by those beneath, provided the link to the heavens. For Armstrong such symbolic freight would achieve 'that sense of reverence [that] should be just as powerful in a great Library as in a great Cathedral'.<sup>18</sup>

The domed reading room has been embedded in Melbourne's psyche for a century now, a space which continues to inspire the city's readers, artists, musicians and visitors. As Melbourne photographer John Gollings recently reflected:

I see it as a great piece of architecture and a place of continuity. The dome offers a sense of pride in a rich Victorian history. Its presence in the city inspires me; it gives Melbourne a gravitas that modern planning never rises to. The Library's Greco-Roman architectural origins invoke a deep-seated understanding of order and scholarship. The influence comes from its very fabric; both its form and function are sublime examples of human achievement.<sup>19</sup>

One wonders if Miller's rectangular library would have had such appeal or if the people who use this room intuitively understand its relationship to the ancient ideas and forms that Lethaby thought were so powerful a part of architecture.