

**DR RORY HYDE**

# Towards a counter-museum

## The design studio

In the second half of 2025, I ran a design studio as part of the Master of Architecture at the University of Melbourne, with the aim of reimagining what a museum can be. The studio was titled 'Counter-museum', to encourage the students to challenge the traditional model of the museum, and invite them to turn it inside out, by conceiving new relationships with collections, with publics, with conservation, with expertise and even with larger overarching themes of truth and democracy.

The title, 'Counter-museum' is adopted from the French-Réunionese political theorist and curator Françoise Vergès,<sup>1</sup> who proposes a new kind of institution founded on principles diametrically opposed to those of the Western 'universal' model. Her definition is deliberately ambiguous, refusing to be categorised or reduced to a checklist. Instead, Vergès describes it poetically, as '*an emancipatory utopia that would awaken the senses, letting imaginations and dreams unfold.*'<sup>2</sup>

The challenge set to the 12 participating students was to translate this contemporary curatorial thinking into an architectural proposition. The students were predominantly international, each with their own cultural background and experiences of museums and of architecture. They were directed towards Vergès's writing, as well as a stack of books from other key thinkers and makers in this space, including Alice Procter, András Szántó, Brook Garru Andrew and Jessica Neath, Zarina Muhammad and Gabrielle de la Puente, Dan Hicks and Mati Diop.<sup>3</sup> They were shown through the back-of-house collection stores at Melbourne Museum, where they encountered the wonders and realities of a major public museum, and through the Potter Museum of Art exhibition *65,000 Years: A short history of Australian art*, where they saw the power of curatorial decisions around selection, display, interpretation and conservation.

<sup>1</sup> Vergès, F. (2023). *A programme of absolute disorder: Decolonizing the museum* (M. Thackway, Trans.). Pluto Press, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Vergès, F. (2023), p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Procter, A. (2020). *The whole picture*. Cassell; Szántó, A. (2020). *The future of the museum*. Hatje Cantz; Garru Andrew, B., & Neath, J. (Eds.). (2024). *Marramara: Indigenous artists making history visible*. NewSouth; Muhammad, Z., & de la Puente, G. (2024). *Poor artists*. Particular Books; Hicks, D. (2020). *The brutish museums*. Pluto Press; Diop, M. (Director). (2025). *Dahomey* [Film]. Les Films du Bal & Fanta Sy.

A challenge for a studio such as this was to not let the theory overwhelm the freedom required to create, as it can be hard to know where to start. One way to address this is to prescribe aspects of the project brief in advance. I specified the site, the Biosciences 4 building on the Parkville campus — an unloved 1980s brick and concrete teaching building, ripe for reinvention. I also directed them towards the university's collections as the content for their museums. Each student was given an example object from a different collection — medical, geological, classical, agricultural, rare books and more — to focus their attention on a specific object type and mode of display.

We had many great discussions in class about how to challenge the authority of institutions, how to make them more relevant to the public, how to overcome gatekeepers, how to reduce barriers to entry, how to invite communities inside, how to recognise other forms of (non-Western) knowledge and, connecting it all, how to spatialise such abstract considerations. Holding these ideas and parameters in their minds, I set the students the main task titled 'The museum as ...'. They were to come up with a concept in a single word — to complete the sentence and to distil their research into one generative idea. This refers to Charles Saumarez Smith's broad summation of the evolution of the museum over the past three centuries, from the museum as palace, to the museum as classroom, to the present condition of the museum as playground.<sup>4</sup> The students were asked simply, 'What comes next?'

Together these projects form a catalogue of strategies to challenge the orthodoxy of museum architecture and institutions.

## Student projects

**The Museum as Liberty**, by James Winata, dissolves the physical boundaries of the building, allowing the collections to extend into the landscape around. Winata is critical of the elitism of arts institutions, who make grand claims for their publicness while catering to a narrow, educated, wealthy audience. When closed, the collection is stored on racks in a climate-controlled spine that runs down the centre of the building. When open, these racks can slide out, forming new spaces between them, allowing different activities and events to take place. This, Winata argues, 'liberates' the works from their institutional framing, and allows visitors and artists to generate new combinations and associations of their own.<sup>5</sup>

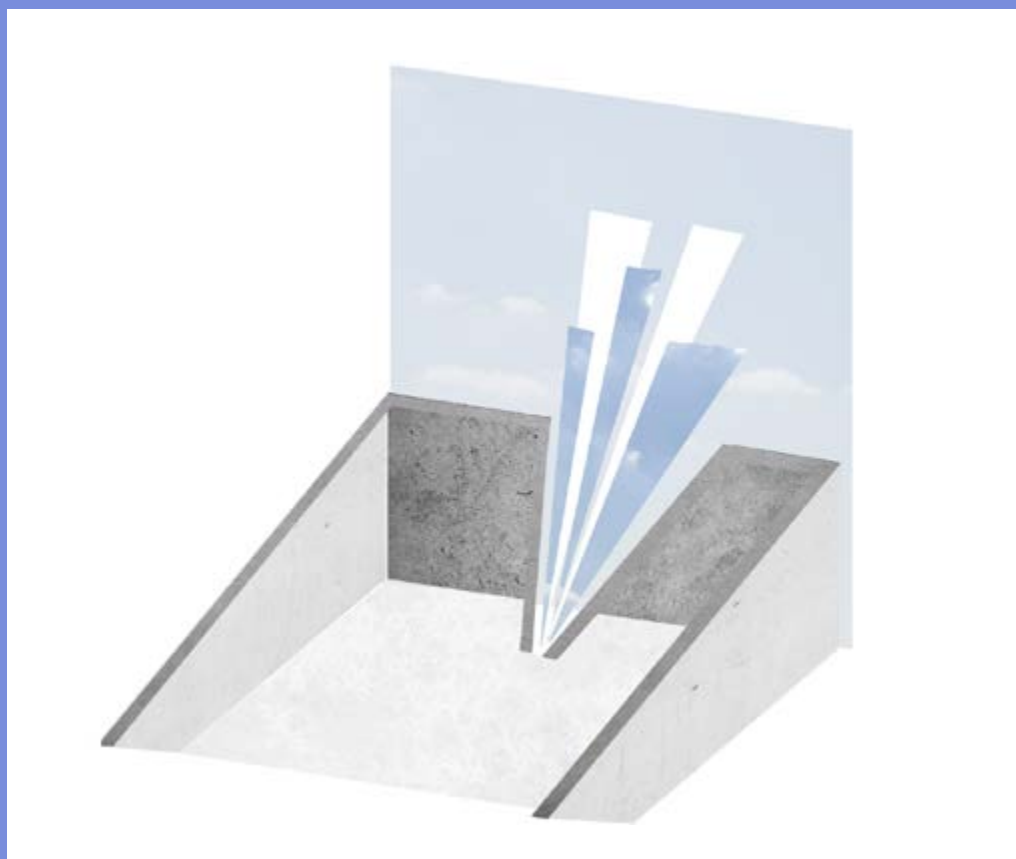
**The Museum of Zero**, by Jingxuan Yan, is comprised of the activities ordinarily prohibited in the museum. Visitors can yell, sleep on the floor, climb the walls, touch the objects, eat a meal, dance and make a mess. It challenges the role of the museum as a space that dictates forms of behaviour and etiquette, where food, children and loud voices are implicitly unwelcome. '*This thesis rejects the museum's role as a gatekeeper of culture*', writes Yan, and instead '*imagines it as a participatory commons where cultural value emerges from use, misinterpretation, and collective authorship*'.

<sup>4</sup> Saumarez Smith, C. (2021). *The art museum in modern times*. Thames & Hudson.

<sup>5</sup> All direct quotes here are from the students' submission booklets, 2025.



**Figure 1:** *The Museum as Liberty*, by James Winata. Copyright James Winata.



**Figure 2:** *The Museum of Zero*, by Jingxuan Yan. Copyright Jingxuan Yan.



**Figure 3:** *The Museum as Midden*, by Nan Wang. Copyright Nan Wang.

**The Museum as Midden**, by Nan Wang, excavates the earth beneath the existing foundations to reconnect the museum with a deeper concept of time and culture. This concept originated with the shell specimens in the FA Singleton Earth Sciences Collection, which have been used to understand the significance of middens as sites of First Peoples' gathering, celebration and culture over thousands of years. Using the shell and the midden as a metaphor, this project is conceived as a layered strata, illustrating deep time and First Peoples' ongoing connection to Country.

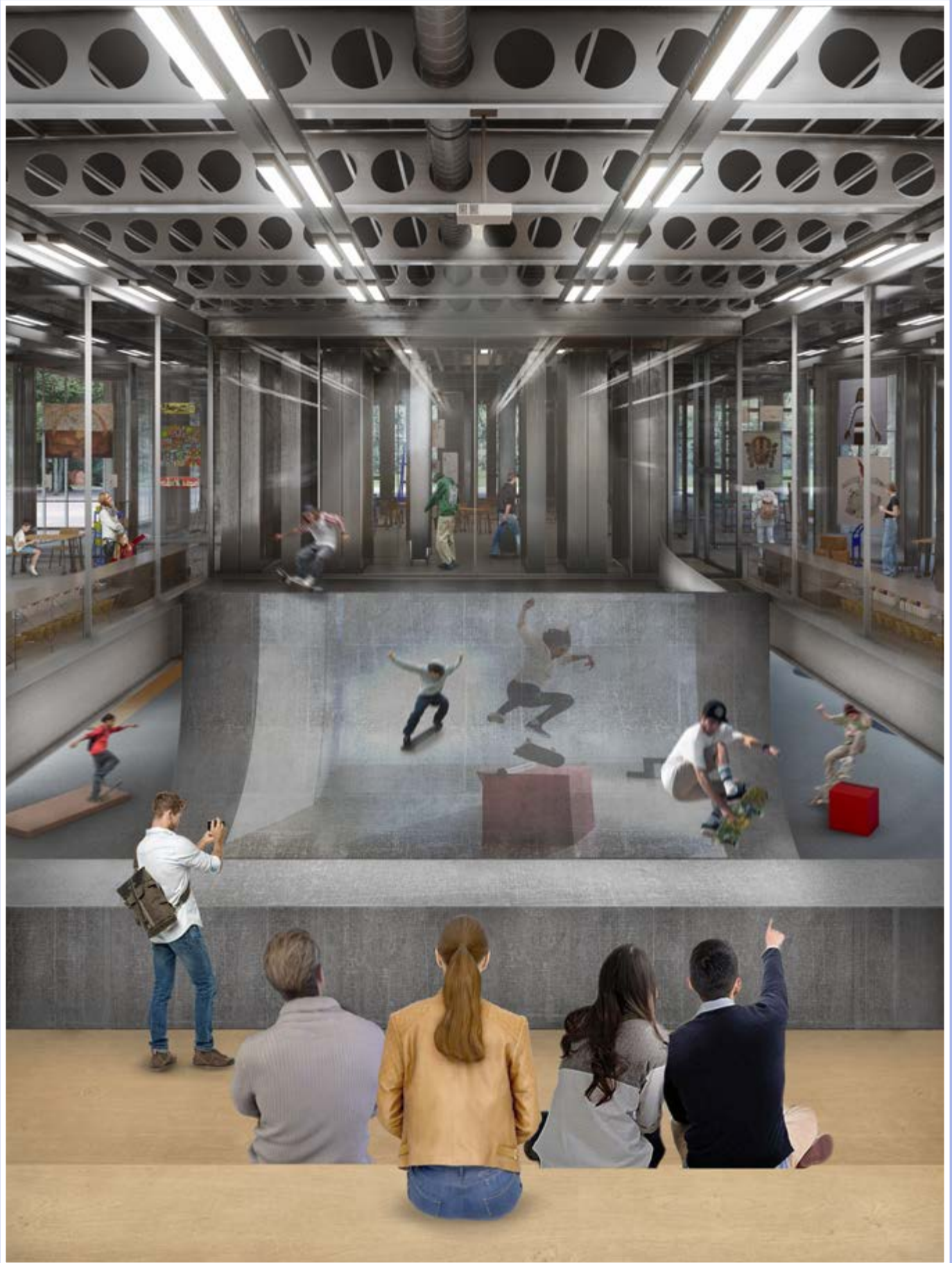
**The Museum of Yes and No**, by Henry Jorgensen, asks, 'How can a museum be trusted if only a singular "truth" is presented?' It responds to instances where museums were entangled with politics, such as the Trump White House targeting the Smithsonian Institution over apparent 'anti-American ideology', and Shell's sponsorship of the climate gallery in London's Science Museum. But rather than seeking to establish a definitive position, the museum is planned in two halves: one of fiction, fabrication, deception and concealment, and the other of neutrality, fact, authenticity and transparency. In the centre is the 'grey' zone, where these two sides meet. This space is absent of artwork and is instead centred on a circular space of discussion and debate.



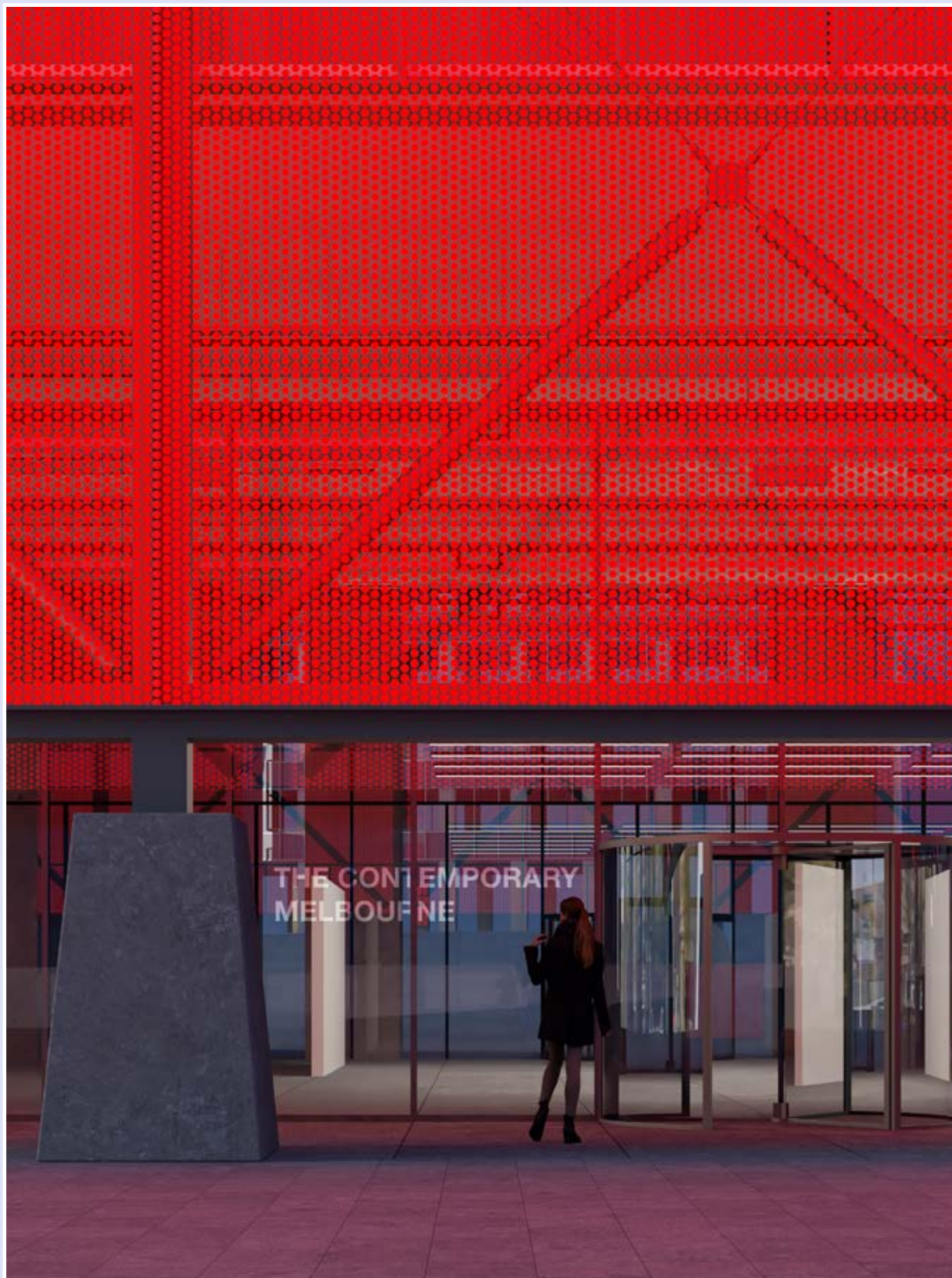
**Figure 4:** *The Museum of Yes and No*, by Henry Jorgensen. Copyright Henry Jorgensen.

**The Museum as Blur**, by Evelyn Gunawan, collides the typical museum program — galleries, cafe, shop — with a skate park and co-working space, thereby blurring the boundary between art and the everyday. At the centre of the museum, a skateboard half-pipe extends up to the level of the gallery, encouraging visitors to compare the balletic energy of the skaters with the artworks on display. And in turn, by inviting inside those who have been increasingly marginalised by the city, the institution takes on characteristics of the skaters' subculture, guided by respect and mutual support. *'Here, art and daily life collide without hierarchy',* writes Gunawan, *'and the museum shifts from a place of separation to a place of integration.'*

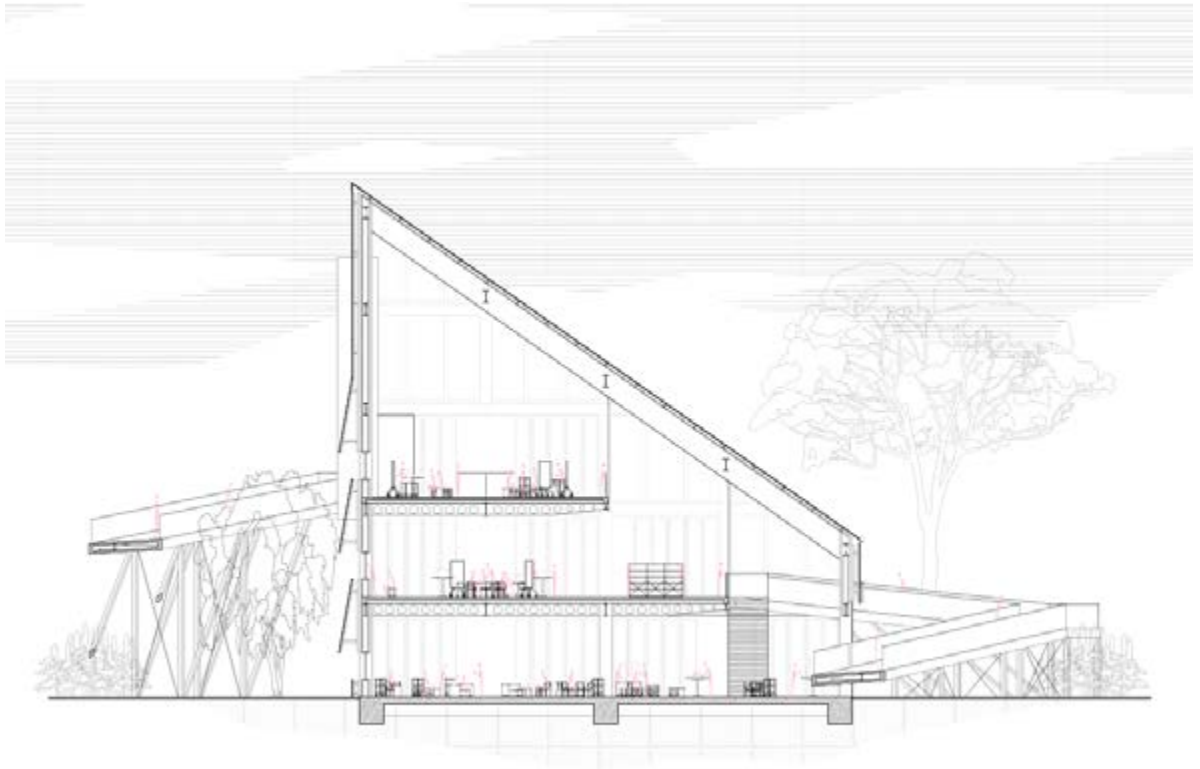
**The Museum as Catalyst**, by Forrest Lai, is defined by a giant digital billboard that can be programmed by the public. It takes a different site to the other projects in the studio, facing the Victorian Parliament, where it is visible through the window of the parliament's canteen. Lai is from Hong Kong, where he has been active in the pro-democracy protests. This experience led him to explore the role a museum could play in advocating for rights, acting as a *'catalyst for democratic encounter'*. Behind this billboard is a series of public spaces and galleries, displaying a collection of artworks that promote debate, dialogue and organisation. This is an institution that offers the tools for protest.



**Figure 5:** *The Museum as Blur*, by Evelyn Gunawan. Copyright Evelyn Gunawan.



**Figure 6:** *The Museum as Catalyst*, by Forrest Lai. Copyright Forrest Lai.



**Figure 7:** *The Museum of Becoming*, by Siuyan Liu. Copyright Siuyan Liu.

**The Museum of Becoming**, by Siuyan Liu, starts by noting the vast stores of museum objects hidden from public view. Many of these objects remain uncatalogued, unstudied and unknown, thereby revealing the claims made by institutions — that they are providing care and interpretation — as fatuous.

In response, Liu proposes a museum where the transformation of these objects from unknown to known is dramatised by the architecture. The ground floor is where unknown objects are received, displayed without hierarchy. Visitors can choose from these objects, taking them up to the first level for further study. Once these objects are 'known', they move to a temporary display gallery on the top floor. And the cycle repeats. By inviting visitors into this process to handle, analyse, document and interpret these objects, Liu also critiques the museum's claim to unique expertise, transforming the museum into a *'living system of learning'*.

## Reflection

It was thrilling to see the ease with which these students swept away long-held assumptions of what a museum should be. They were undaunted by the status quo, and simply asked, 'Why not?' Why not have a skate park in a museum? Why not let visitors catalogue the objects? Why not open the museum up into the park? Why not let visitors sleep, eat and yell?

I felt that by virtue of being architecture students rather than museum professionals, their thinking was liberated, allowing them to sidestep the tightly-held challenges and obligations of a working museum. They could casually dispense with institutional requirements for collection management, conservation, ticketing, sustainability, 'professionalism' and much else, with apparent ease.

This 'ease' could be a sign that museum architecture today isn't working hard enough. There is a gap between the advanced curatorial thinking taking place inside these museums and their architectural expressions. While museums lead the way in developing protocols for First Peoples engagement, restitution, cultural safety, audience participation, new media and innovative research, the architecture remains stuck in an 'expressive' mode, seeking to project ideas of spectacle and grandeur, in an apparent attempt to attract tourist dollars.

I believe the success of these student projects is in their bridging of this gap. Together, they give architectural form to radical curatorial thinking, reminding us — publics and museum workers alike — of the larger purpose of these institutions, not merely as places of entertainment, but as places where we collectively make sense of who we are.

This bridge, from 'spectacle' to 'criticality', is not a simple one, and there are many people who would prefer things to stay the way they are. From Woodside's greenwashing sponsorship of the Western Australian Museum<sup>6</sup> to the White House's attacks on the National Museum of African American History and Culture under the Orwellian title of 'Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History',<sup>7</sup> museums are on the front lines of the new culture wars. It seems that any efforts to democratise the institution, to present uncomfortable truths, to challenge the power of wealthy donors, to enable freedom and imagination, are inevitably quashed, as the conservative impulses for connoisseurship, hollow spectacle and nationalism are quickly reasserted.

To criticise the museum is to love the museum. To ask questions of it, to expect more from it, is not an attempt to diminish it, but a desire to reimagine it. This reimagination is of great importance, as unless these institutions are founded on truth, openness, inclusion and an honest reckoning with the past, their emancipatory potential will remain unrealised.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Rebecca Carland and Charlotte Day for their generous feedback on the student work in progress, and to Charlotte Day and Nurin Veis for hosting tours of their respective institutions.

<sup>6</sup> Cox, L. (2025, August 13). WA Museum partnership with Woodside criticised as record-breaking marine heatwave decimates coral reefs. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/aug/13/wa-museum-partnership-with-woodside-criticised-as-record-breaking-marine-heatwave-decimates-coral-reefs-ntwfb>

<sup>7</sup> White House. (2025, March 13). Executive order: Restoring truth and sanity to American history. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/restoring-truth-and-sanity-to-american-history/>, accessed March 2026.