

Institute of Marine and Antarctic Sciences Building, Hobart

John Wardle Architects and Terroir (for *Architecture Australia*)

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In architecture, everything begins with the site – which cannot properly be separated from the place. This is especially so in the case of the University of Tasmania's Institute of Marine and Antarctic Science Building (IMAS) in Hobart designed by John Wardle Architects in partnership with Terroir. Situated on the very edge of the waterfront on Princes Wharf, just across from Salamanca Place, the IMAS building occupies the space on which previously stood the second of two large sheds built to service ships loading and unloading alongside. The first of those sheds, Princes Wharf No.1, still remains (refurbished, it is now in use for public events and exhibitions), and the IMAS building stands between it and another large shed-like structure belonging to the CSIRO further along the water's edge. This part of Hobart – the open space of Sullivan's Cove – is where the city and the surrounding landscape are drawn together in a place that has great historical as well as topographical significance. Here the hills meet the river – gesturing to the mountain behind and the sea beyond – at a flat surface, like the floor of an amphitheatre, that encompasses reclaimed land, concrete harbour apron, and the water plane of the cove itself. The significance of the site, and the need to attend, not only to its heritage values, but also to its topography and the sense of space so essential to it, as well as to its character as a *civic* space (and the engineering demands of its positioning on the sea wall), meant that the overall context within which the design process was situated was already well-defined even before any considerations pertaining to the building itself or the needs of the Institute. One might even say the design process was therefore heavily constrained, except that here the 'constraints' were no mere external impositions, but related directly to values and conditions inherent in the place itself – so that the need for the design to respond *to the place* was all the more salient. Yet although the design context may have been complex, the building that has resulted has a simplicity and clarity that belies any such underlying complexity. The form of the building, consistent with what was there before, is that of a shed – 'science in the shed' as the slogan has it. One of the features of the shed, as a built form, is the way in which it establishes and opens up a space through the enclosing of that space. One might say that all buildings operate in this way,

but the shed form does this in an especially simple and basic fashion, and the space it opens up is a space whose very openness is directly and immediately evident. In the case of IMAS, the shed form not only echoes the historical character of building on the site, along with the other buildings still present, but the open character of the form also means that the building remains open to what lies outside. Thus, although it is situated along the water's edge, the building does not operate to sever waterside from landside, but rather connects the two, as it also allows for connection between the high points that stand on either side of the Cove. On the ground floor, the retention of visual connection is enhanced by the elevation of the main body of the building and the extensive use of full-length glass to allow views through the building from the road to the water (pipe and pump work relating to the internal functioning the building are also visible). On the upper floors, visual connection is also maintained across the main axis of the building, and so from land to water, with the use of larger internal spaces (significant sections of the work space is open plan – a source of contention among some of the building's users, but inevitable given the design and site constraints). Viewed spatially, the main flow of the building is longitudinal, oriented along an east-west axis, with the western end 'sliced off', so that the structure of the building is exposed, opened towards Salamanca, the Parliament, and the Mountain, and the eastern end remaining more strongly enclosed and contained. The publicly accessible spaces of the building, in terms of both visual and physical access, are concentrated towards the western end (this is where the main entrance is located – a red-orange ribbon made up of stairway within connecting to low entrance walls without tying interior to exterior). A key element of the building is thus the dynamic established between containment and release as this operates through the focus of containment at one end of the structure and the opening up of that structure at the other in a way directed towards the space of the Cove floor and the landscape beyond. The basic form of the dynamic at work here can also be seen in Wardle's rightly celebrated Shearer's Quarters on Bruny island – where one sees a similarly elegant 'shed' form at work. In an article in the Hobart Mercury (November 23, 2013), Leo Schofield referred to the IMAS building as "another UTAS Disaster ... [a] grey beached whale of a building". Regardless of Schofield's exact intention, the marine description seems entirely appropriate. Not only does it fit with the building's focus on marine and Antarctic research, but it also captures something of the way the building rests at the water's edge, its blue grey bulk making an immediate visual link to the blue-grey waters of the harbour, its steel cladding having something of the iridescence that one sees on the slick body of whale or seal. As to the "disaster", however, the truth is quite the opposite. Meticulously finished and detailed, not only is the building a quiet triumph (it is not a building that shouts about itself, instead simply occupying its site as if it belonged there), it has the potential to do just what a hotel, or any other commercial development, could not: it reaffirms

the civic character of the space of the Cove, and in doing so also reaffirms the civic character of the university. The latter is an especially important achievement. One might argue that, in a time of reduced university budgets, IMAS is an extravagance, and yet it places the University in the heart of one of the city's iconic areas, in direct view of the very seat of government, and in a way that draws the public in and the university out. The challenge is to respond to what the building itself offers – and that is a challenge both for the University and for the Tasmanian community as a whole.