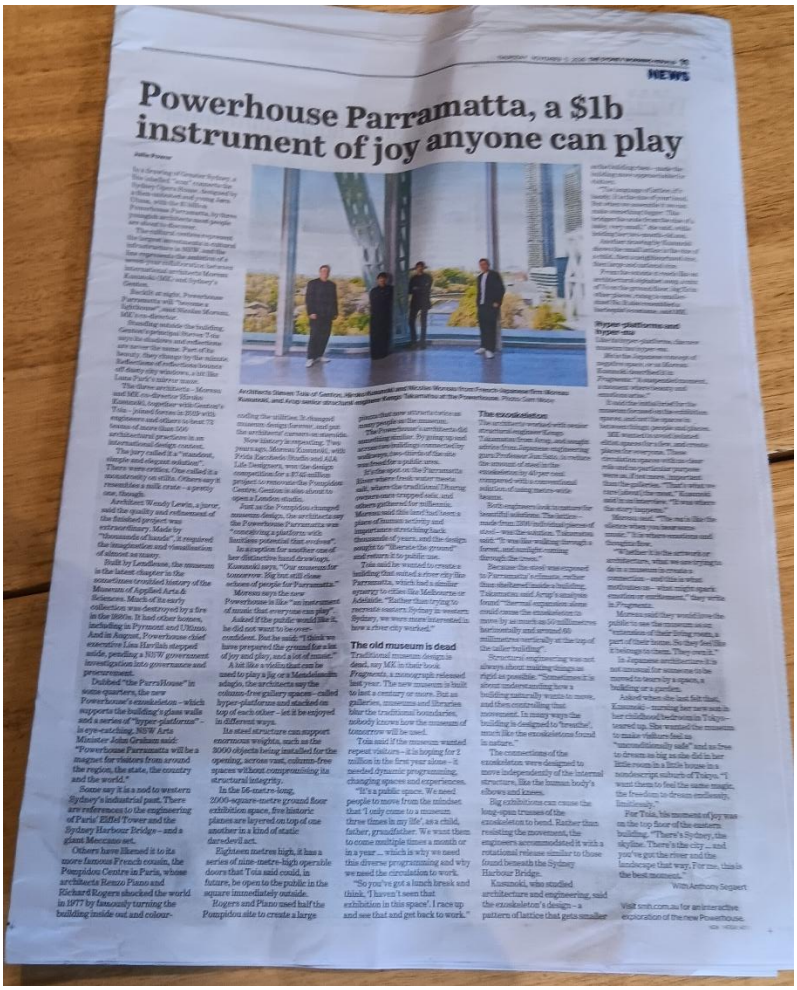
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NEWS

Powerhouse Parramatta, a $1b instrument of joy anyone can play

Julie Power

Architects Steven Tsia of Genton, Hiroko Kusunoki and Nicolas Moreau from French-Japanese firm Moreau Kusunoki, and Arup senior structural engineer Kengo Takamatsu at the Powerhouse. Photo: Sam Hodge

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INSIDE SYDNEY'S NEWEST HOUSE

In print as: POWERHOUSE PARRAMATTA, A $1Bb INSTRUMENT OF JOY ANYONE CAN -PLAY

The billion-dollar Powerhouse Parramatta has long been touted as western Sydney's answer to the city's postcard-worthy architectural marvels. This is how a decade-long dream came together.

by Julie Power, Anthony Segaert and The Visual Stories Team
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In a drawing of Greater Sydney, a line labelled “icon” connects the Sydney Opera House, designed by a then-untested and young Jørn Utzon, with the $1 billion Powerhouse Parramatta, by three youngish architects most people are about to discover. The two cultural centres represent the largest investments in cultural infrastructure in NSW, and the line represents the ambition of a seven-year collaboration between international architects Moreau Kusunoki (MK) and Sydney’s Genton.

Backlit at night, Powerhouse Parramatta will “become a lighthouse”, said Nicolas Moreau, MK’s co-director.
Standing outside the building, Genton’s principal Steven Toia says its shadows and reflections are never the same. Part of its beauty, they change by the minute. Reflections of reflections bounce off dusty city windows, a bit like Luna Park’s mirror maze.

The three architects – Moreau and MK co-director Hiroko Kusunoki, together with Genton’s Toia – joined forces in 2019 with engineers and others to beat 73 teams of more than 500 architectural practices in an international design contest.
The jury called it a “standout, simple and elegant solution”. There were critics. One called it a monstrosity on stilts. Others say it resembles a milk crate – a pretty one, though.

Architect Wendy Lewin, a juror, said the quality and refinement of the finished project was extraordinary. Made by “thousands of hands”, it required the imagination and visualisation of almost as many.
Built by Lendlease, the museum is the latest chapter in the sometimes-troubled history of the Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences. Much of its early collection was destroyed by a fire in the 1880s. It had other homes, including in Pyrmont and Ultimo. And in August the Powerhouse chief executive Lisa Havilah stepped aside, pending a NSW government investigation into governance and procurement.

Dubbed “the ParraHouse” in some quarters, the new Powerhouse’s exoskeleton – which supports the building’s glass walls and a series of “hyper-platforms” – is eye-catching.

Some say it is a nod to western Sydney’s industrial past. There are references to the engineering of Paris’ Eiffel Tower and the Sydney Harbour Bridge – and a giant Meccano set.

Others have likened it to its more famous French cousin, the Pompidou Centre in Paris, whose architects Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers shocked the world in 1977 by famously turning the building inside out and colour-coding the utilities.
It changed museum design forever, and put the architects’ careers on steroids.

Now history is repeating. Two years ago, Moreau Kusunoki, with Frida Escobedo Studio and AIA Life Designers, won the design competition for a $745 million project to renovate the Pompidou Centre. Genton is also about to open a London studio.
Just as the Pompidou changed museum design, the architects say the Powerhouse Parramatta was “conceiving a platform with limitless potential that evolves”.
In a caption for another one of her distinctive hand drawings, Kusunoki says, “Our museum for tomorrow. Big but still close echoes of people for Parramatta.”

Moreau says the new Powerhouse is like "an instrument of music that everyone can play". Asked if the public would like it, he did not want to be overconfident. But he said: "I think we have prepared the ground for a lot of joy and play, and a lot of music."
A bit like a violin that can be used to play a jig or a Mendelssohn adagio, the architects say the column-free gallery spaces – called hyper-platforms and stacked on top of each other – allow it to be enjoyed in different ways.

Its steel structure can support enormous weights, such as the 3000 objects being installed for the opening, across vast, column-free spaces without compromising its structural integrity.

In the 56-metre-long, 2000-square-metre ground floor exhibition space, five historic planes are layered on top of one another in a kind of static daredevil act.
Eighteen metres high, it has a series of nine-metre-high operable doors that Toia said could, in future, be open to the public in the square immediately outside.
Rogers and Piano used half the Pompidou site to create a large piazza that now attracts twice as many people as the museum.

The Powerhouse's architects did something similar. By going up and across two buildings connected by walkways, two-thirds of the site was freed to create a large riverside public area.

It's the spot on the Parramatta River where fresh water meets salt, where the traditional Dharug owners once trapped eels, and others gathered for millennia. Moreau said this land had been a place of human activity and importance stretching back thousands of years, and the design sought to "liberate the ground" and return it to public use.

The old museum is dead

Traditional museum design is dead, say MK in their book *Fragments*, a monograph released last year.

The new museum is built to last a century or more. But as galleries, museums and libraries blur the traditional boundaries, nobody knows how the museum of tomorrow will be used.
Toia said if the museum wanted repeat visitors – it is hoping for 2 million in the first year alone – it needed dynamic programming, changing spaces and experiences.
"It's a public space – we need people to move from the mindset that 'I only come to a museum three times in my life', as a child, father, grandfather. We want them to come multiple times a month or in a year … which is why we need this diverse programming and why we need the circulation to work.
"So you've got a lunch break and think, 'I haven't seen that exhibition in this space'. I race up and see that and get back to work."

The exoskeleton

The architects worked with senior structural engineer Kengo Takamatsu from Arup, and sought advice from Japanese engineering guru Professor Jun Sato, to reduce the amount of steel in the exoskeleton by 40 per cent compared with a conventional solution of using metre-wide beams.

Both engineers look to nature for beautiful solutions.
The lattice – made from 1300 individual pieces of steel – was the solution. Takamatsu said: “It was like walking through a forest, and sunlight coming through the trees.”

Because the steel was exposed to Parramatta’s climate, rather than sheltered inside a building, Takamatsu said Arup’s analysis found “thermal expansion alone could cause the exoskeleton to move by as much as 50 millimetres horizontally and around 60 millimetres vertically at the top of the taller building”.
Structural engineering was not always about making things as rigid as possible. “Sometimes it is about understanding how a building naturally wants to move, and then controlling that movement. In many ways the building is designed to ‘breathe’, much like the exoskeletons found in nature.”

The connections of the exoskeleton were designed to move independently of the internal structure, like the human body’s elbows and knees.
Big exhibitions can cause the long-span trusses of the exoskeleton to bend. Rather than resisting the movement, the engineers accommodated it with a rotational release similar to those found beneath the Sydney Harbour Bridge.
Kusunoki, though, said the exoskeleton’s design – a pattern of lattice that gets smaller as the building rises – made the building more approachable for visitors.

“The language of lattice, it’s handy. It is the size of your hand. But when we assemble it we can make something bigger. This bridges the scale from the size of a baby, very small,” she said, while holding her two-month-old son.
Another drawing by Kusunoki shows the small lattice the size of a child, then a neighbourhood size, then large, national size.
From the outside it reads like an architectural alphabet soup, a mix of Vs on the ground floor, big Xs in other places, rising to smaller-sized Ns. It also resembled a harlequin’s costume, said MK.

Like its hyper-platforms, the new museum has hyper-*ma*.
Ma is the Japanese concept of negative space, or as Moreau Kusunoki described it in *Fragments*: “A suspended moment, a moment where beauty and emotions arise.”
It said the initial brief for the museum focused on the exhibition spaces, and not the spaces in between things, people and places.

MK wanted to avoid isolated elitist spaces for a few, and create places for everyone. These circulation spaces with no clear role and no particular purpose were as, if not more, important than the galleries. “That’s what we care [about] the most,” Kusunoki said in an interview. “It was where the story happens.”
Moreau said, “The *ma* is like the silence when you hear some music.” It is where emotions and thoughts flow.

“Whether it is the artwork or architecture, what we are trying to do in a museum is create a connection, and this is what motivates us – what might spark emotion or excitement,” they write in *Fragments*.
Moreau said they would love the public to see the museum as an “extension of their living room, a part of their home. So they feel like it belongs to them. They own it.”

In Japanese architecture it is not unusual for someone to be moved to tears by a space, a building or a garden. Asked when she last felt that, Kusunoki – nursing her new son in her childhood bedroom in Tokyo – teared up.
She wanted the museum to make visitors feel as "unconditionally safe" and as free to dream as big as she did in her little room in a little house in a nondescript suburb of Tokyo. "I want them to feel the same magic, the freedom to dream endlessly, limitlessly."

For Toia, his moment of joy was on the top floor of the eastern building. "There's Sydney, the skyline. There's the city … and you've got the river and the landscape that way. For me, this is the best moment."

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