

Kayne Griffin Corcoran



After 17 years, James Turrell's Brisbane work is realized

A new permanent light work by James Turrell completes the vision of GOMA's architects, and is headed to become a global destination artwork for Brisbane.



James Turrell's architectural light installation at Brisbane's Gallery of Modern Art. Photograph: Natasha Harth, QAGOMA.

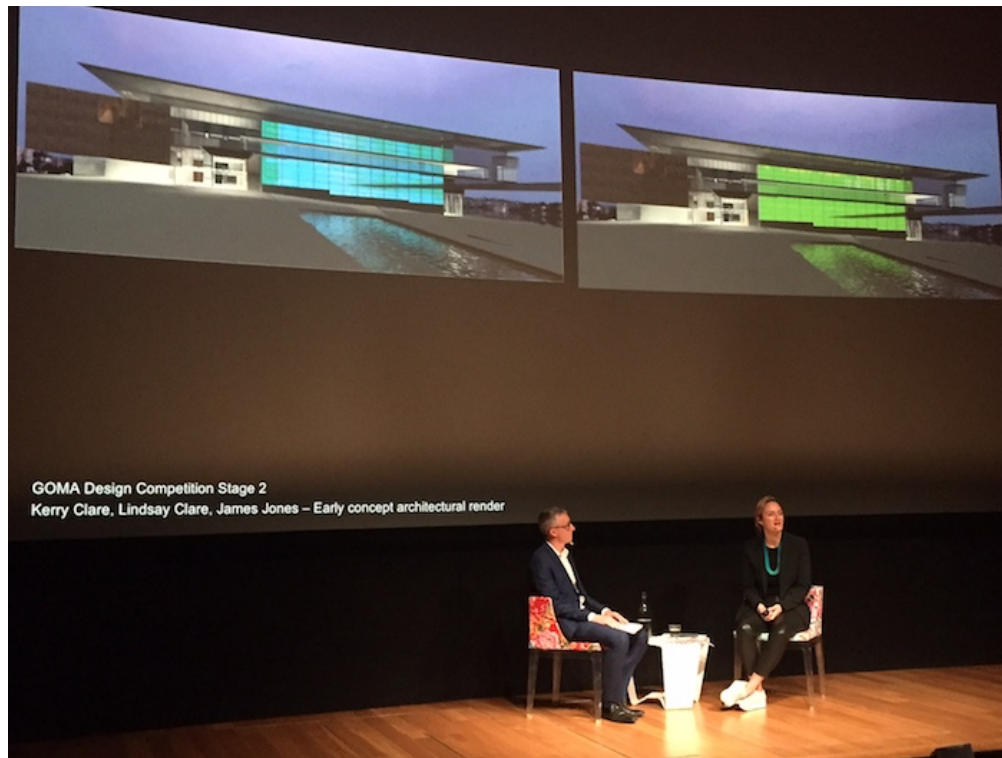
American artist James Turrell is no stranger to Australia.

His light works have been included in many museum shows, most significantly his 2014 retrospective at the National Gallery of Australia, as well as the permanent Skyspace, *Within Without* (2010) also in Canberra. Turrell's work also features in architectural installations at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart.

Now a new commission in Brisbane for the Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA) is garnering international attention.

QAGOMA Director Chris Saines said: 'During the development of GOMA, lead architects Kerry Clare, Lindsay Clare and James Jones envisaged an artist-illuminated "white box" on the Gallery's main pedestrian approaches.' More than a decade on that vision has been realised. '[It] completes a major aspect of the architects' original design intention,' Saines added.

Fairley, Gina. "After 17 years, James Turrell's Brisbane work is realised." Visual Arts Hub. 17 July 2018. Web.



Architect Brant Harris and QAGOMA curator Geraldine Barlow in conversation at GOMA, with original concept drawings by Kerry Clare, Lindsay Clare and James Jones (2001). Photo: ArtsHub.

While the idea of an illuminated façade was first pitched in 2001, it was not until 2017 that James Turrell was formally commissioned to realise a concept for the building, as part of GOMA's 10th anniversary celebrations.

Turrell's large-scale luminous work for GOMA is a first for the artist, and unique in terms of the many other light works he has created in and on buildings, and within landscapes, around the world.

'This one is more like a flat canvas of colour, while most of the others are built up by the architecture, or you are looking through plain glass at them,' said Saines.

Key to the work is the milky Starphire glass that covers GOMA's architectural field. Comprised of 200 glass panels and standing 15 metres tall, it wraps 85 meters around the building's two main facades. The building seemingly glows. Chair of QAGOMA, Ian O'Connor said: 'This is the most ambitious single artwork that the gallery has undertaken.'

ARCHITECT'S VISION REALISED

As early as 2001, architects Kerry Clare, Lindsay Clare and James Jones presented concept drawings for GOMA with their "white box" façade illuminated both green and blue.

Lindsay Clare told ArtsHub: 'When we did the competition, we said "Wouldn't it be great if we could commission an artwork that would respond to seasonal or daily events?" We had the idea but we didn't know how to make it work. The fact that it is here now – 17 years later – is extraordinary.'

'We chose Starphire glass so it could be either projected on or illuminated from behind, and we – along with the gallery – had to fight hard to keep that in the budget,' Clare added.



Turrell envisages his GOMA commission as being in conversation with Brisbane's skyline; Photo: ArtsHub.

However, these pricey glass panels lay dormant as other complexities of the project emerged. Geraldine Kirrihi Barlow, Curatorial Manager, International Art at GOMA, said: 'It was like an instrument waiting for the maestro to compose his piece with.'

Brant Harris, who was brought in as Design Consultant and Project Manager Exhibition Design on the Turrell commission added: 'Eleven years ago when the building was built, this technology wasn't available.'

Turrell – who was unable to travel to Brisbane for the unveiling this past weekend due to illness – was in connection in the weeks leading up to the "switch-on" moment with a live hook up, so he could test the light transitions with the aid of his on-sight team.

In a pre-recorded video cross for the opening, he spoke of his belief that buildings have having a consciousness and that they correspond with each other.

'After we are done with work we go out at night; we change, dress up and take off into the evening to have a good time. I was always interested in this quality that buildings have, a consciousness, and that they also can dress up and have this other life at night,' said Turrell.

WHAT'S GOING ON BEYOND THE FAÇADE

The original design concept allowed a gap between the exterior façade and internal gallery walls to carry power and data cabling for a possible artwork.

When the original concept didn't go ahead due to budget constraints, that purpose built cavity was used for various services for the building. Part of the realisation of this project has been to reverse that.

Harris explained: 'There is a lot of concrete structure inside, so our baseline to work back from was [a cavity] just 300mm deep ... It is a combo of high-tech and low-tech. Essentially the boxes are constructed from fibre-cement paneling and we painted the lower third of the walls grey to knock back the intensity of the lights at the base of each box, while the rest is white to get as much reflection as possible.'

He added: 'It plays like a large-scale video. There are 2,500 lights, and if you think of each image like a pixel in a television screen, the video was then composed and layered onto the façade.'

The project involved two years of prototyping, which was all done in house at GOMA. 'There were many nights standing around on phones to people inside the building saying turn that light up or down,' said Harris.

The result? Barlow described it as 'jube-like. There is that flush of colour as light moves from the right to the left of the façade. It feels quite fluid, bleeding together.'

Currently the cycle is 88 minutes. Barlow said the sweeps of colour are sometimes very slow so that you begin to question what you are looking at. She added that the pace of walking alongside the building, passing it on a Rivercat ferry or in a car from the freeway, were all considerations in how a person engages and interacts with the artwork.

The installation comes on at sunset each day and turns off at midnight. 'The software has an inbuilt time map for sunset for the entire year,' added Barlow. There has been discussion of a winter and a summer iteration of the piece. The LED fittings are expected to last 15 years. 'The set-up cost was considerable, but we have worked out that it is just \$32 dollars a day to run the work – that is pretty good bang for a buck,' said Barlow.

Queensland Premier, Anastacia Palaszczuk agreed that the investment in a significant destination artwork for Brisbane was worthwhile. 'In 10 years GOMA has been at the centre of our cultural transformation and this work adds the next layer of that transformation – this will continue to define Brisbane for many years to come.'

Saines added: '[Turrell's] work for Brisbane becomes both a civic beacon, and an instrument for the play of light. This work will truly transform the way local, interstate and international audiences experience the building at night.'

But it was Harris who perhaps best captured the magic so recently unveiled: 'Now when it turns off at night – it just doesn't feel right without it.'

The project was funded by Queensland Government, with a lead donation from Paul and Susan Taylor, along with generous contributions from The Neilson Foundation and donors to the 2017 QAGOMA Foundation Appeal.

—Gina Fairley