



Select Project Competition

Southern Highlands Botanic Gardens

Bowral NSW

Visitor Centre Jury Report





The Visitor Centre for the Southern Highlands Botanic Gardens Bowral NSW

Select Project Competition

JURY REPORT

The Design Brief

The Southern Highlands Botanic Gardens has been established to display and celebrate the landscape character, diverse horticultural species, plant inquiry culture and garden design heritage of the region. The theme of the Gardens is that of four distinct seasons in a mainly cool climate environment. The Gardens occupy a prominent site in Bowral in a setting which reflects the landscape character of the Southern Highlands of New South Wales and the rural township lifestyle of the area.

The Visitor Centre is the first major public building at the Gardens and will be the hub for public engagement and community activity. The Client - Southern Highlands Botanic Gardens Limited - invited five architects to design a building which would inspire and delight, establish an enduring brand for the Gardens and which would:

- be a memorable gateway to a unique highlands landscape experience in all seasons – an admired and welcoming building and a key regional destination
- identify as the home of education and research in local and regional flora and horticulture
- enthuse visitors to learn about the landscape of the Southern Highlands and its native and exotic flora and woodlands
- be a fascinating, safe and interactive environment for children and for their carers
- appeal to a new demographic of younger people and encourage them in their interest in plants and gardens
- stimulate public participation in the development and activities of the Gardens
- provide an attractive venue for public or private events in an outstanding internal and landscape setting
- attract revenue for the Gardens from a range of sponsors and generate commercial opportunities.

The entrants were also required to respect the concept plan and sketch designs for the Gardens prepared by landscape architects Taylor Cullity Lethlean (TLC) and in particular the landscape planning principles for the development of the Entrance Garden, the Town Garden and the Parterre.

Selected Entrants

The five architects invited to prepare design concepts for the consideration of the Jury are:

- CHROFI
- Fender Katsalidis Architects
- Hassell
- John Wardle Architects
- Tonkin Zulaikha Greer.

The brief for the competition was issued in March 2017 with designs submitted in June. The architects made presentations to the Jury on 23 June and had the opportunity to respond to questions particular to their proposals.

The Client acknowledges and appreciates the quality of the design proposals submitted and the commitment of the entrants to this significant competition.

Jury Observations

The Jury thanks all the architects for their excellent submissions, thought-provoking presentations and interesting and rewarding discussions.

The aspirations for the 'Visitor Centre' were translated in a range of imaginative ways. The selection of the winning design was not an easy decision for the Jury. Each scheme represented a unique approach, was compelling and offered a valuable interpretation of the brief and of the TCL Concept Plan and landscape principles.

The approach to architectural language was stimulating, particularly in regard to interpretations of the Southern Highlands 'sense of place' and the interrogation and resolution of visitor experience to spatial sequence and program. Every scheme embedded sustainable and innovative energy principles within the siting, structures, passive energy systems and material selections. The Jury was impressed by the sensitivity and dexterity of the architects in addressing what is a complex set of requirements and artful landscape composition.

The Jury notes that the competition elicited concept design responses which would all benefit - as was to be expected - from design development in close collaboration with the Client and Taylor Cullity Lethlean. The talent of the participating architects was evident in the way in which they recognised the value of the Visitor Centre to the long term development of the Gardens and the community and tourist appeal of the Highlands.

The Jury commends and congratulates all of the architects for their attentiveness to the project and their outstanding execution of design response.

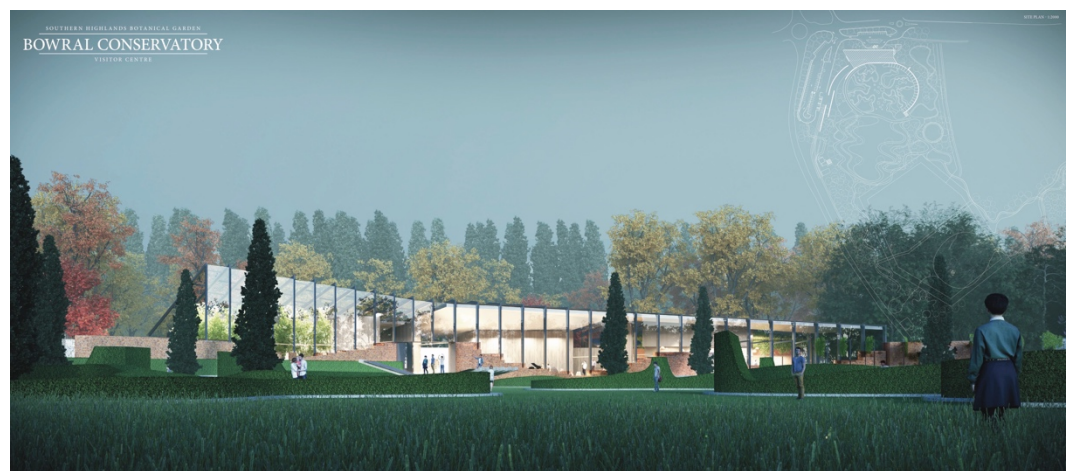
Jury Deliberations And Decision

WINNING DESIGN

John Wardle Architects

Inspired in part by the idea of botanical gardens as '*places of learning and observation*' and of a '*conservatory nestled within the garden wall*', this sophisticated proposal marries earth, sky and garden. The deceptively simple building form is deferential to the landscape and references local traditions of agricultural buildings, dipping its lid to the old 'Skin Shed' on the site, which was used to dry hides from a nearby abattoir.

An elegant skeletal steel portal frame echoing botanical forms rises from the Bowral brick base which anchors the building to the ground. This brick formation creates an 'occupied' edge which provides wonderful spatial moments framing the landscape views. The balanced arrangement of lightweight structure above a solid base is both visually attractive and an appropriate contemporary expression of the built history of the Southern Highlands. Varying levels of transparency and choreography of light enliven the building within and without, suggesting orangeries and conservatories and creating beautiful moments and meeting places.



The sensitive architectural statement with its concomitant enclosure and transparency responds to the stipulated principles for the landscape sequence of the Gardens. Views across the gently falling landscape will range from '*carefully choreographed glimpses*' to '*panoramic vistas*'.

The Jury was impressed by the skilful synthesis of the internal and external spaces and the architectural envelope. The building is arranged practically in a series of appealing spaces including a long glazed internal conservatory. The planning and detailing recognises the sometimes severe climate of the Southern Highlands paying due attention to thermal efficiency and human comfort. The visitor journey into and around the building is gentle and legible yet enticing and joyful.

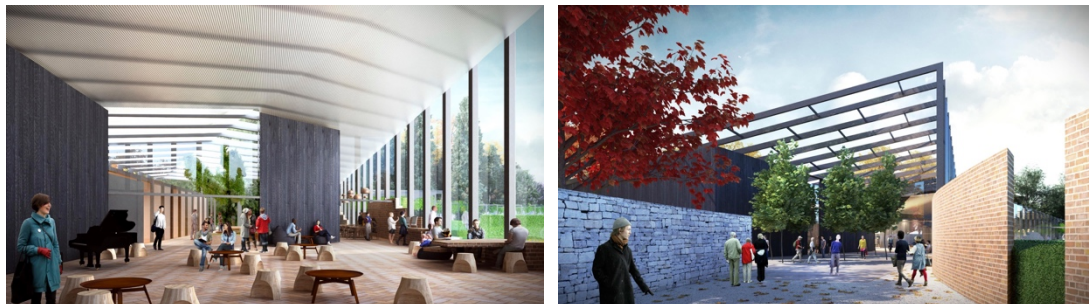
At the centre of the building are three key linked spaces – the gallery at the heart, hall and café – which will provide operational flexibility and accommodate events and functions at a range of scales. The Jury expects that the fine lines of the building will be matched by the high level of detailing and finish expected of an important and valued public asset.



The generous and lofty gallery and café are raised above the level of the town Parterre, the building providing a curated and expansive outlook and the elevated prospect anticipated by the landscape plan for the Parterre. The hall can benefit from controlled winter sun and the program arrangement provides flexibility for many and varied events and functions. Both the hall and the café can be used in many ways without detracting from other functions of the building.

The design responds to the challenges of the Highlands climate in an environmentally responsible and subtle manner through both passive and technical design measures.

A restrained and locally appropriate material palette of earthy brick, steel, blackened charred timber and glass, frame and complement the landscape. Lofty internal spaces with translucent ceilings create light and liveliness throughout.



The Jury is of the view that the design by John Wardle Architects will become a statement of Australian architectural excellence and a major contributor to the success of a destination of national and international botanical significance.

CHROFI

In one big gesture, a sweeping 'Ring' encircles and contains the Parterre, morphs into a sunny 'Entry Pavilion' with key visitor comforts and delights, creates a backdrop and inviting approach to a separate 'Villa' with exhibitions and visitor attractions and sheltered and panoramic views over the Gardens. This is a dynamic and seductive architectural response to the building's aspirations and the landscape opportunities. The Villa has an elegant concrete arched facade with crisp, glazed and lofty interiors and skillfully managed space, function and visitor flow over two levels. As in a conservatory, the Gardens extend in to the interior where the light, neutral material and colour palette are a frame and counterpoint to the living Parterre, intensifying by contrast its vibrant textures, colours and patterns. The Jury commended the innovative approach to program and sustainable design evident in the basement 'labyrinth' and throughout the building. This proposal is for *'an enduring architecture ... timeless in its expression, both nostalgic and contemporary ... an architecture that seeks to connect across generations'*.



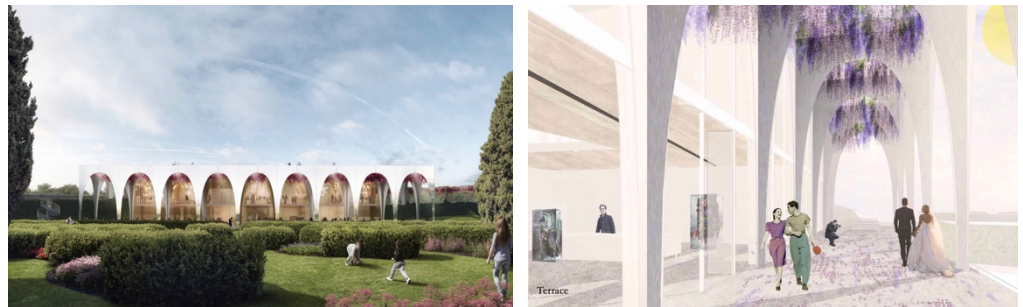
Fender Katsalidis Architects

An elegant garden pavilion, this proposal denies the temptation for a heroic architectural statement adopting rather a gentle and spiritual design approach connected to the Gardens. Two axes define a symmetrical program that supports and encourages varied ways of exploring the building and of *'discovery and dialogue'*. The formality of the design establishes a counterpoint to the organic landscape of the Parterre. At the heart of the building is an abstraction of the Highlands landscape beyond - the *'woodland sanctuary'* - a gathering space in which an oculus sheds light and connects to the ever-shifting climate of the Highlands. Materials reflective of the local condition contribute to the carefully layered composition of spaces and volumes. The building is enfolded with *'filigreed metal lattices'* – gabion frames supporting fragrant plants and deciduous climbers which would eventually encase the structure, register the seasons and change the character of the building throughout the year. This proposal *'creates a magnificent series of architectural moments for visitors to discover and cherish'*.



Hassell

Formal, fine and super-thin steel arches frame and wrap this building - a very contemporary material response which also conjures images of traditional conservatories and orangeries. The surface sheen of the steel subtly reflects the Gardens, rendering the solid apparently ephemeral. The elegant tapered arches support a wisteria trellis over a generous 'verandah' mediating zone that flows on to the Parterre arbour and to the Gardens. In contrast with the formality of the façade, the exposed laminated timber interior structure adds luxury and warmth and a sense of intimacy. In a planning move well received by the Jury, the curved entrance walk extends through the building as the primary circulation promenade thereby giving access to all key spaces in a legible and engaging fashion. Diverse visitor experiences are deftly addressed and the spatial configuration and flexibility supports a wide range of uses. A spiral stair at the heart of the building connects inside and out as well as ground to upper level and roof garden. This proposal offers a *'memorable gateway to the gardens'* and a *'doorway into diverse experiences'*.



Tonkin Zulaikha Greer

This is a romantic and striking building that draws on and reinterprets traditions of architectural expression in the Highlands. The Jury commended the bold re-siting of the building to address the northern orientation, add legibility to the visitor address and provide expansive and discrete views across the Parterre and Gardens proper. A curated series of layered visitor journeys create varied and enthralling experiences within and without the building. Heavy Bundanoon sandstone 'log' walls appear to arise naturally from the ground to support a filigreed pine truss roof responding in turn to the gentle curves of the walls. A curtilage of high level louvres deals with ventilation and draws attention up towards the sky. The interplay of curved stone walls, timber ceiling canopy and more delicate framed glazed walls suggest traditional building craft and create an attractive atmosphere balancing cosiness with the drama of large apparently natural stone formations.

This proposal *'captures the Southern Highlands spirit'* and is designed *'to embody in its architecture the innovation, place-sensitivity and design quality of the landscape plan'*.



The Competition Jury

Members of the competition Jury are:

- Elizabeth Watson Brown LFRAIA - Design Director, Architectus (Chair)
- Jon Clements LFRAIA Hon AIA – Director, Jackson Clements Burrows Architects
- Graham Fletcher FAILA
- Christopher Webb BSc Ag Assoc Dip Landscape - Southern Highlands Botanic Gardens
- Lyn Collingridge BA LLB - Southern Highlands Botanic Gardens

Professional Endorsement

The competition was endorsed by the Australian Institute of Architects.

Professional Adviser

The Professional Adviser for the competition is Annabelle Pegrum AM LFRAIA.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E. W. B.', followed by a long horizontal flourish.

Elizabeth Watson Brown LFRAIA
on behalf of the Jury

30 June 2017