

## **ANTHONY WHITE**

### **Marie Hagerty, Peter Karmel Building Façade, Canberra School of Music, Australian National University**

#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines Marie Hagerty's façade for the Peter Karmel Building, Canberra School of Music, Canberra. The squares, triangles and trapezoids of Hagerty's façade design emphasise the architectonic forms of the building by framing the outer surface of its rectangular shapes with black outlines. At the same time, because these outlines incite a reading of those surfaces as folding planes or window frames, as the visitor circumnavigates the building, successive impressions of the building swing into view that undermine the volumes of the building. As I argue in this paper, by reiterating the given forms of the architecture, on the one hand, Hagerty has responded to the modernist principle of transparency, with its connotations of honesty and clarity. On the other hand, the fibre-cement wall panels of her façade literally mask the building and offer an alternative reading that both denies and confounds that same transparency. In opposition to the modernist idea that a building should be experienced instantaneously by an abstracted viewer, Hagerty opens the architecture by creating an illusion that relies on a physical experience of the building that takes place in time. Whereas modernist architecture had used glass to reveal a building's static internal structure, Hagerty's façade draws attention to the necessarily temporal dimension of any encounter with architecture, highly appropriate for a structure designed to promote the inherently temporal art of music.

#### **Marie Hagerty, Peter Karmel Building Façade, Canberra School of Music, ANU**

In this paper, which examines Marie Hagerty's *Façade* for the Peter Karmel Building of the Canberra School of Music at the Australian National University in Canberra, I argue that Hagerty makes an eloquent visual argument through the language of modernism for a dialogue between art and architecture in which neither discipline takes the upper hand.

The Peter Karmel Building, a two-storey structure within the Australian National University campus, which was completed in 2001, was designed by the Canberra-based architectural firm Mitchell Giurgola Thorp (MGT), now known as Guida Moseley Brown Architects (GMB). The building houses practice, performances and administrative spaces for the Canberra School of Music's Jazz and Percussion departments as well as the Centre for New Media Arts. Certain elements of the building, such as the 'smooth flush elevations' of a solid volume suspended on narrow columns over a transparent void, as well as the horizontal windows and extensively glazed entrance foyer, refer to the history of modernist architecture.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the design complements the neighbouring School of Music designed by Daryl Jackson and Evan Walker in 1976, an earlier, brutalist-style building characterized by a 'boldness of form' and 'assertive cubist arrangement' in its highly articulated, bare concrete elements. The architects of the Peter

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1. GMB, 'Annex "A"'. Design Brief — Façade Design Commission for School of Music Addition, Institute of Arts — Australian National University', 2000.

Karmel Building sought to create a structure ‘which maintains the Jackson’s logic of surface, penetration, and volumes but expresses them in a lighter, less dominant form’.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the building has a close relationship not just to the history of modern architecture but also to its pre-existing architectural context.

Hagerty’s façade for the building was created in polyurethane paint silk-screened onto fibre-cement wall panels which clad the upper floor of the building, red paint applied to the ground floor of that same wing, and vinyl film on the two-storey glass walls of the main entrance foyer. The design on the upper floor of the building uses a strongly geometric motif of white squares, triangles and trapezoids framed by black borders. In focusing on geometry, a limited colour palette, and by responding to the given dimensions of the architecture, Hagerty’s façade refers to the history of modernist painting’s application to architecture. To take just one example, there are several similarities to the Café Aubette in Strasbourg by Theo Van Doesburg and Sophie Tauber Arp, in particular the latter’s design for the foyer-bar, with its rectangular forms in stark red and grey on the walls and ceiling. In their design brief for the façade, the architects argued that the commission was conceived as an opportunity for the artist to ‘work with the large scale architectural forms ... to create a patterning, “marking”, and enlivening of the glazed and solid surfaces of the building’s exterior’.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I will argue that, in the tradition of the Dutch De Stijl modernists to which Hagerty’s work strongly relates, the façade achieves far more than an enlivening of the building’s surface, in that it complements the modernist architectural forms of the building while simultaneously transforming our perception of their volumes.

In a discussion of Hagerty’s easel paintings, Matthew Holt once argued that ‘each work seemed to set itself a problem and then refuse to solve it ... as if the problem was always greater than the individual work devoted to its formulation, working through and resolution. Each work is ... in process and on trial’.<sup>4</sup> One of the many unsolved problems in Hagerty’s paintings is the dialogue between the internal space of the canvas and the material basis of the support, a conversation in which neither dominates the other. Similarly, Hagerty’s painted façade neither succumbs to the architectural given nor imperiously asserts itself over the building.<sup>5</sup> The façade marshals the two dimensional nature of painting to challenge our perception of the three dimensional structure, thereby raising several questions about the relationship between art and architecture, the nature of each discipline’s autonomy, and what the hinge might be that brings them together.

## **Architecture and Narrative**

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2. Jackson, 1996, p. 30. See also: <http://www.gmbarchitects.com/projects/educational06/index.html>; accessed 23 March 2010.

3. GMBA, ‘Annex “A”’. Design Brief — Façade Design Commission for School of Music Addition, Institute of Arts — Australian National University’, 2000. See also: GMB Architects, 2011, <http://www.gmbarchitects.com/projects/educational06/index.html>; accessed 23 March 2010.

4. Holt, 2002, p. 34.

5. For this reason, we may consider the façade a site-specific work, because of the way in which retains a sense of the painting’s autonomy while insisting on its connection to the architecture. A precedent for thinking about the work as site-specific rather than simply a mural or façade is provided by Wyong Shire Council, see: Wyong Shire Council, 2007, p. 5.

The *Façade*, which is visible from the main vehicle approach to the Peter Karmel Building, looks out onto the entry court that the building creates between itself and the main School of Music Building opposite.<sup>6</sup> The title of Hagerty's work suggests a frontally-oriented surface of a building facing in a single direction. However, there is no real architectural façade in this sense to the Peter Karmel building, as there is no single architectural plane serving as the principal or main elevation. Accordingly, Hagerty worked over five discrete sections of the building's outer skin, which between them face three different cardinal points. In this sense, unlike many mural paintings, such as Richard Beck's 1955 *Hosie's Hotel Mural* in Elizabeth Street in Melbourne, for example, Hagerty's façade does not treat a single architectural surface as a support for a painting.



Fig. 1. Marie Hagerty, *Façade*, Peter Karmel Building, Canberra School of Music, Australian National University, Canberra. (Photograph courtesy the author.)

Nor did Hagerty treat each differently-facing surface of the building as a separate support for a different painting. Although each surface of the building covered by the work is treated differently, the repeated black outlines and white squares are identifiably similar across the differently oriented surfaces. Two surfaces of the building, those closest to Childers Street and facing West and South respectively, are composed of a black

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6. 'The two-storey building was designed as a new addition to the Canberra School of Music to accommodate numerous practice, performance and administrative functions for the School. It creates a new entry court to the complex.' See: GMB Architects, 2011, <http://www.gmbarchitects.com/projects/educational06/index.html>; accessed 15 July 2010.

rectangle abutting two trapezoids and a triangle, one simply the reverse of the other. Further away from Childers Street, we find two surfaces, one facing West, the other East, composed of a single rectangle and yet another made up of only two trapezoids and a triangle which faces South. This level of continuity and diversity is deliberately handled so as to create a sense of both the independence and inter-dependence of the five surfaces that are contiguous, and therefore linked, at the architectural level. In this sense, Hagerty's conception of how painting might relate to architecture can be compared to that of the Dutch De Stijl artist Theo Van Doesburg, whose modernist work was characterised by 'the use of colour to relate or connect various surfaces that otherwise constitute discrete architectural planes'.<sup>7</sup> Although this connecting of surfaces is most clearly evident in the red colour through which Hagerty linked three adjacent walls on the ground floor, the same observation can be made about the complex interplay of connections between surfaces created by the black and white coloration of the first floor.

By breaking the surface up into several contained quadrilaterals with a repeating but varying pattern, the visitor who turns from Childers Street into William Herbert Place, the principal access road along which to enter the building, is invited to read the sequence of shapes as a continuous surface, from left to right, which forms a series that has three sections and can be expressed in the following manner, ABC BCA ABCA. In the first, West-facing section closest to Childers Street we see a rectangle 'A' followed by two trapezoids 'B' and 'C' on a flat wall; in the second, South-facing section we see two trapezoids 'B' and 'C' followed by a rectangle 'A' on another flat wall, and then, in the third section furthest away from Childers Street, we see encounter a West-facing rectangle 'A' followed by two trapezoids 'B' and 'C' facing South with a final East-facing rectangle 'A', which completes the sequence. Analysing the building in this way, it becomes apparent that in the façade a structural pattern is established, reiterated and varied.

Now, the design brief for the façade design produced by the architects in 2000 was very clear in stating that there was no expectation or desire that the mural refer to music, or even contain 'direct visual connotations to cadence, rhythm, sequence, and other essential components of "making" in sound.'<sup>8</sup> And indeed there are no musical or rhythmic connotations in Hagerty's design, which, as the artist has explained, she was determined to resist.<sup>9</sup> In spite of this, the series of shapes and their alternation in space does raise the possibility of a reading through time in the manner of a frieze. Moreover, the nature of the two-dimensional medium of painting and the repeated pattern of slightly altered, repeating characters, a device encountered in poetry and prose, implies a reading similar to that of lettering or text. In reading the façade this way, one not only approaches it through time but also as a flat surface, and, one would think, thereby disavows the three dimensional nature of the building and denying the substantial change in physical orientation crucial to how one reads it as a visitor or viewer. Nevertheless, by inviting us to read the façade as a kind of sequence or pattern in two dimensions, Hagerty does not

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7. Troy, 1983, p. 82.

8. GMBA, 'Annex "A". Design Brief — Façade Design Commission for School of Music Addition, Institute of Arts — Australian National University', 2000.

9. Hagerty, 2010.

deny the three-dimensional but rather creates a dialogue between the two-dimensional art of painting and the three-dimensional discipline of architecture, refusing to privilege one at the expense of the other.

This dialogue can be demonstrated by examining the part of the building I referred to above as constituting the third section, which is significantly different to the other two sections. This is not only because there are four rather than three shapes in it, but also because the third section is extended over three walls that are adjacent but facing at ninety-degree angles to each other. If we read the entire sequence of shapes in the façade as a narrative series, the third section, which, unlike the first two sections, incorporates differently-facing architectural surfaces into its internal structure, can be read as a synthesis of the first two sections' structures (in so far as each of those sections are on differently facing surfaces of the building). The sequence develops, through time, an idea of the relationship between art and architecture that moves from a more static conception of painting as an application to another architectural surface to a more dynamic one in which the painted surfaces take into account the three-dimensional nature of architecture. In this way, Hagerty's façade, which is multiple yet unified, takes into account the spatial complexity of the architectural structure by drawing on the power of the temporal and two-dimensional qualities of written narrative.

### **Illusion and Transparency**

In her paintings from this period, Hagerty created effects of three-dimensionality that were involved in an unstable dialogue with the two-dimensional character of the canvas surface and the geometric basis of the canvas support. As Sebastian Smee observed in 1998, although her works are 'based broadly on the classic modernist grid ... each plane seems to push out from the one "behind" it, so that each painting has its own aura of quiet movement.'<sup>10</sup> Sasha Grishin has similarly commented that in her painting, 'two dimensional patterning and a very flattened picture space' is juxtaposed with an 'impression of three-dimensionality.'<sup>11</sup> Similar effects are produced in her façade design.

The rectangular shapes of the façade are deduced from the flatness of the building's wall surface, and follow the pre-existing grid of the Vitrapanel upon which the shapes rest, therefore reiterating their support.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the rectangular shapes, the trapezoidal forms introduce a sense of projection or recession and give the impression that the wall is either pierced or in relief. As Hagerty wrote in 2001:

Window frame-like elements and neighbouring corners in black fold and stretch ... creating movement and air through hinged cubic spaces. White shapes interplay with these folded screens, swelling, compressing and

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10. Smee, 1998, p. 19.

11. Grishin, 2008.

12. In the first and second section of the façade, there are white intervals separating these rectangular shapes apart from the double trapezoid shapes that abut them. What this tells us is that the rectangular and trapezoidal shapes are to be seen as existing in separate domains. In the third section, there are no such white breaks, with the differences between the rectangular and trapezoid shapes asserted by the differing orientation of the wall on which they are painted.

concealing spaces, created layered masses and contradictory tensions. The window creates an illusion of space that simultaneously protrudes and recedes and envelopes.<sup>13</sup>

The illusion of space created by Hagerty's façade is no arbitrary decoration of the building. As Hagerty has pointed out, she felt ambivalence toward what she initially saw as the 'reactionary process of embellishing a strongly modernist building' and was determined to work with design techniques similar in spirit to those evident in the building itself.<sup>14</sup> Hagerty achieved this by referring in her façade to several, pre-existing aspects of this building and its environment. The illusionistic breaking of the façade surface — similar to how entrance, door, and window perforations break up the solid surface of a wall — evoke the open area of the ground floor of this wing of the building, which consists merely of a series of pilotis holding up the first floor, and mimic the transparency of the glazed principal entrance foyer. Additionally, the sense of openness created by the illusion of recession into space also refers to the Canberra School of Music building opposite. Large areas of glazing on that earlier structure, which are evident on the Childers Street side of the building, express the foyer spaces associated with the hall and thereby connect the inside and outside of the structure.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, as Daryl Jackson has explained, other glazed surfaces of that earlier building, which give visual access to the offices within, are intended to be welcoming to the public: 'the exterior key faces are invitational. They invite entry and profess to say to people that this is for you, it's your building and you're welcome to come in.'<sup>16</sup> Hagerty has extended these invitations in both buildings to either visually look through or actually enter the building across the relatively uninterrupted walls of her façade on the upper floor of the Peter Karmel building. Additionally, the sectioning of the first floor external walls by the façade design expresses in an approximate manner the nature of the internal spaces in that part of the building. For instance, several audio and audio-visual studio spaces with similar dimensions to the façade's shapes sit behind the rectangular and trapezoid shapes of the façade.

The window-like nature of Hagerty's façade raises the issue of the relationship between the interior and exterior of the building. Modernist architectural theory advocated that the various functions and structure of a building should be apparent from the outside. One of the modernists' chief ways of achieving this was the use of extensive glass curtain walls, which not only separate the load-bearing and space-enclosing functions of architectural columns and walls respectively, but also promote the visibility of the building's internal workings. In the Peter Karmel building, such literal transparency was only possible in the entrance foyer, due to the function of the building as a music school, rehearsal and performance space.<sup>17</sup> In other spaces such as the studios and performance area, extensive soundproofing was required to prevent the flow of noise through their internal and

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13. GMBA, Marie Hagerty, 'Facade Commission: Peter Karmel Building', 2001.

14. Hagerty, 2001, p. 14.

15. Canberra School of Music: <http://heritage.anu.edu.au/index.php?pid=1112>; accessed 13 July 2010.

16. Nixon, 2008, <http://news.anu.edu.au/?p=453&pg=2>; accessed 12 July 2010.

<http://news.anu.edu.au/?p=453&pg=2> Viewed 7/12/2010.

17. GMBA, 'Annex "A". Design Brief — Façade Design Commission for School of Music Addition, Institute of Arts — Australian National University', 2000.

external walls. In a statement of their design intent, the architects have argued that their goal was to ‘create a building whose design language is simple and clear in expressing the functions of the spaces which are accommodated within its walls.’<sup>18</sup> The contrast between the opacity of the studio and performance spaces on the first floor, all of which are deprived of windows and therefore not visible from the outside, and the transparency of the entrance foyer certainly does express the differing functions of these spaces. However, the unbroken surfaces of the external walls created what Hagerty has described as a ‘bunker’ quality to the building. Against that impenetrability, her façade reasserts a form of transparency albeit through the means of painting rather than architecture.

Modernist painting, unlike modernist architecture, was generally characterised by opacity rather than transparency. Both have as their goal a type of honesty, but achieved in completely opposite ways.<sup>19</sup> Whereas modernist buildings, such as Walter Gropius’s Bauhaus for example, achieve the literal transmission of light through a surface so that what is beneath becomes visible, modernist paintings by the Dutch De Stijl painter Piet Mondrian assert their own materiality. Rather than suggest a window onto another world, such painters drew our attention to the surface on which their paintings are made. In *Façade*, Hagerty combined principles of opacity and transparency in the same work. The rectangular shapes, rather than giving access to a world beyond the surface of the façade, declare that surface as present and in this sense adhere to the modernist idea of painting’s opacity. On the other hand, the trapezoid shapes, which do not give actual access to the space beyond the surface but lend the impression that the exterior walls of the building have been punctured by angled cavities, defeat the sense of surface with an illusion of recession or projection that relies on painterly transparency. In this way, painterly transparency is used to suggest a form of architectural transparency. This understanding of transparency shares a quality with what Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky have called ‘phenomenal transparency’, in which succeeding architectural planes or layers refer to the inner structure and spaces of a building rather than reveal it literally through actual visual access using glass.<sup>20</sup> Although to a certain extent Hagerty’s façade can be explained within this modified conception of architectural transparency, the forms of her work, rather than allowing physical or visual access to the building’s interior by literally revealing the structure of the building or its inner workings, substitute a radically transformed experience of the building’s actual volume for the idea of architectural transparency, whether literal or phenomenal.

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18. GMBA, Annex “A”. Design Brief — Façade Design Commission for School of Music Addition, Institute of Arts — Australian National University’, 2000.

19. See: Boxer, 1998, pp. A19, A21 for the discussion of this question.

20. Rowe and Slutzky, 1997, pp. 159-84.



Fig. 2. Marie Hagerty, *Façade*, Peter Karmel Building, Canberra School of Music, Australian National University, Canberra. (Photograph courtesy the author.)

## **Collaborations**

In the convex corner of the façade closest to Childers Street at which the longer East and South facing walls intersect, an illusion is created that the acuteness of the architectural corner has been changed from ninety degrees to something else. This is due to the illusion of recession created by the trapezoid forms of the façade, which makes us read the adjacent sides of either corner as further away from the eye than they actually are. A similar effect is achieved in the other two convex corners of the façade, although to a lesser degree, in that one of the visual elements is a rectangle and the other a trapezoid, so that one side simply reasserts the ninety-degree angle and the other a more acute one. In the case of the two shapes adorning the concave angle of the building between the three aforementioned convex corners, the ninety-degree angle is simply reasserted. Because of the relationship between the façade shapes and the building volume asserted in the other two cases, however, we are encouraged to read this relationship as something other than a simple reassertion of volumetric reality. Moreover, once the viewer is set in motion in a physical encounter with the building, the angle appears to change shape because of the parallax effect that dictates that the relationship between objects appears to change in response to the viewer's movement. The corner transforms from a more oblique angle to a more acute one before the viewer's eyes. Even though the walls retain the same position relative to each other, they appear to open and close, like a book, or a window frame, revolving through different relationships in response to changes in perspective, producing

what has been described as ‘a tantalising experience of the space’.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in spite of the fact that the three other illusionistic corners formed by pairs of trapezoids are fixed for all time, in that they are inscribed on a flat surface, because of the apparent changes in the concave corner, the effect is that the static dimensions of the mural also appear to change. In a similar fashion, the De Stijl artist Vilmos Huzsar refused to adhere to ‘the neutral surfaces provided by the architecture but instead used colour to obscure them and thus to question if not deny their integrity’, and Theo Van Doesburg’s oblique colour proposals for the buildings of his compatriot JJP Oud were rejected as they would have broken up the ‘predominantly orthogonal character’ of the buildings.<sup>22</sup> The evocation of De Stijl art and architectural designs in *Façade* additionally recalls the modernist device of the corner window, which Hagerty has expressed her enthusiasm for, and which, famously, in the Schroder house by Gerrit Rietveld, worked to undermine the tectonic basis of the architectural structure, pulling away any appearance of load-bearing function performed by the corner of the building.<sup>23</sup>

For this reason, it is inaccurate to argue that the façade is simply a ‘patterning, “marking” and enlivening’ of the surfaces of the building as the architects originally had in mind. Rather, the façade works to both enhance and challenge the volume visually, working with, against and alongside the architecture. As Hagerty commented in 2001, her work on this project involved in ‘a process of subverting a part of the façade using ... Modernist techniques of pictorial distortion.’<sup>24</sup> Shifts in perception produced by each element of the composition draw attention to the two-dimensionality of mural painting while simultaneously emphasising the three dimensionality of the building, and, in the process, give precedence to neither. Rather than merely emphasise the three-dimensionality of the structure, the façade exploits the effects possible within the two-dimensional medium of painting to modify and question our experience of the building’s volume. The conception of the relationship between painting and architecture that is envisioned here, as a result, is fully collaborative.

This collaborative quality reflects the design brief composed by the architects in 2000 for the original commission. There it is stated that the artist’s design for the façade

should not be an entirely personal gesture ... with only private meaning, but rather should have some degree of accessibility for each student, staff member, concert-goer, and member of the public visiting the school. The opportunity for collaborative making ... by design professionals in league with the community ... [is] to be considered by the Artist in determining his/her approach.<sup>25</sup>

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21. Australian National University, 2005, p. 32.

22. Troy, 1983, p. 47, 82.

23. Bois, 1990, p. 119.

24. Hagerty, 2001, p. 14.

25. GMBA, ‘Annex “A”’. Design Brief — Façade Design Commission for School of Music Addition, Institute of Arts — Australian National University’, 2000.

The ideal of accessibility here is provided not because the building is literally accessible in the normal sense associated with entranceways and windows or glazing giving visual access to the interior of the structure. Rather, collaboration and accessibility are embodied in the process whereby the ambulatory visitor to the building is actively involved in transforming the volumetric appearance of the structure, a transformation that works to both reassert and undermine the given architectural structure. In their active, visual encounter with the building, the architecture becomes a work that is continually reworked in the visitor's perception; a collaborative work between architect, artist and members of the public.

The argument of this paper has been that the squares, triangles and trapezoids of Hagerty's façade design open the architecture of the Peter Karmel Building with illusionistic devices that transform the physical experience of the building. As the black outlines incite a reading of those surfaces as folding planes or window frames, when the visitor circumnavigates the building, successive impressions of it swing into view that both stress and undermine the architectural volumes of the building. Whereas modernist architecture had used glass to reveal and express a building's function and internal structure, Hagerty's façade draws attention to the necessarily temporal, embodied dimension of any encounter with architecture, thereby drawing architect, artist and visitor into a collaborative relationship.

*Anthony White is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. After completing a PhD at Harvard University in 2000 he was appointed Curator of International Painting and Sculpture at the National Gallery of Australia, a position he held until 2002. He is the author of Lucio Fontana: Between Utopia and Kitsch (MIT Press, 2011), has edited two books, Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and Mexican Modernism (2001), and Jackson Pollock's Blue Poles (2002), and published several articles in peer-reviewed journals, including October, Grey Room, Papers of Surrealism, Reading Room, and The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art. In 2005 he was a Visiting Fellow at the Humanities Research Centre at The Australian National University and in 2006 he was the Ailsa Mellon Bruce Visiting Senior Fellow at the Centre for Advanced Studies in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC From 2007–2009, he was the recipient of an Australian Research Council Linkage Project Grant for the project 'Framing Marginalised Art'.*

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