



## observatory gate, melbourne royal botanic gardens

**location** st kilda road melbourne australia

**status** completed 1999

**client** royal melbourne botanic gardens

**photography** john gollings

Observatory Gate is a dramatic new gateway to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne. Located in Birdwood Avenue opposite the Shrine of Remembrance, it incorporates the former Melbourne Observatory and Latrobe's Triangle sites.

The inclusion of the Observatory site into the Gardens provides an important new venue for visitors, both as a destination in its own right, as well as the front door to the Gardens. The site is rich in scientific history and includes a significant collection of restored nineteenth century astronomical buildings now open to the public.

The focus of the development is a new public plaza and Visitor Centre building, which contains a Cafe, the Gardens shop, and visitor reception and orientation spaces. Set among the existing Observatory buildings, the new Visitor Centre forms a backdrop to the plaza. As a public place, Observatory Gate has many qualities, for it is a natural gathering space set in beautiful surroundings.

The design approach was to establish a new spatial framework of urban, landscape and built form based upon the existing site features. The combined sites offered enormous possibilities as a special "place" rich in history and largely unknown by Melbournians.

Joze Plecnik's concept of constructing urban space as a series of interlinked episodic events became the model to emulate. Here the designer unravels space and events as a "journey" seen through the eyes of the visitor. Each event is orchestrated to surprise, delight or lead the eye from one outdoor room to another. By contrast to the masterly landscape rooms of the Royal Botanic Gardens, the Observatory would be a more "urban" experience.

The new public plaza and visitor building forms the main activity focus for

Observatory Gate. The Visitor Centre acts as an anchor or backdrop to the site, drawing people through a foreground of curious and beautiful astronomical structures. The new building is planned around four stepped spatial layers that peel away to reveal an inviting, light-filled interior - a single, long top-lit gallery space that becomes a stage setting for visitors. The internal planning maintains a strong distinction between served and servant spaces (a la Louis Kahn).

The building fractures and steps at its outer edges to negotiate and interlock with the surrounding historic structures and gardens. As new architectural object, it has an equivalent weight to its context - a robust pavilion form topped with two prominent cubic glass lanterns. They provide a dramatic roofscape element as well as opening the interior to the sky.

This is a building designed to last. It is very carefully assembled and detailed, using quality materials like stainless steel, stone, Rheinzink and glass to create a stunning contemporary structure befitting its rare and special location.

*"Observatory Gate, Royal Botanic Gardens is exemplary. This is a meticulous work, almost archaeological as it reveals the original hilltop site...these are relaxed, urbane, browsing spaces. Elliott is retelling the story of this city bit by bit, expanding the utility of the city and explaining its delights to a wider audience." Leon van Schaik, Architecture Australia Vol.88 No.3 1999*

*"You sense an overwhelming spirit of place as you approach this building. It has to do with the civic pride of its context, the proximity to notable public edifices and a reverence for our unique Botanical Gardens. The building and its public plaza are inseparable. One defines the edge of the other. This is a building that instils calm, warmth and pride in the user." AIA Public Architecture jury 2000*



