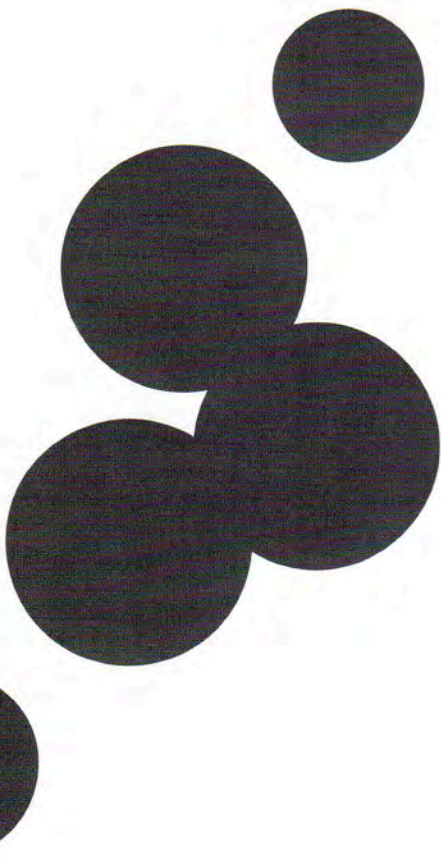


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**R** MEMORY  
POND

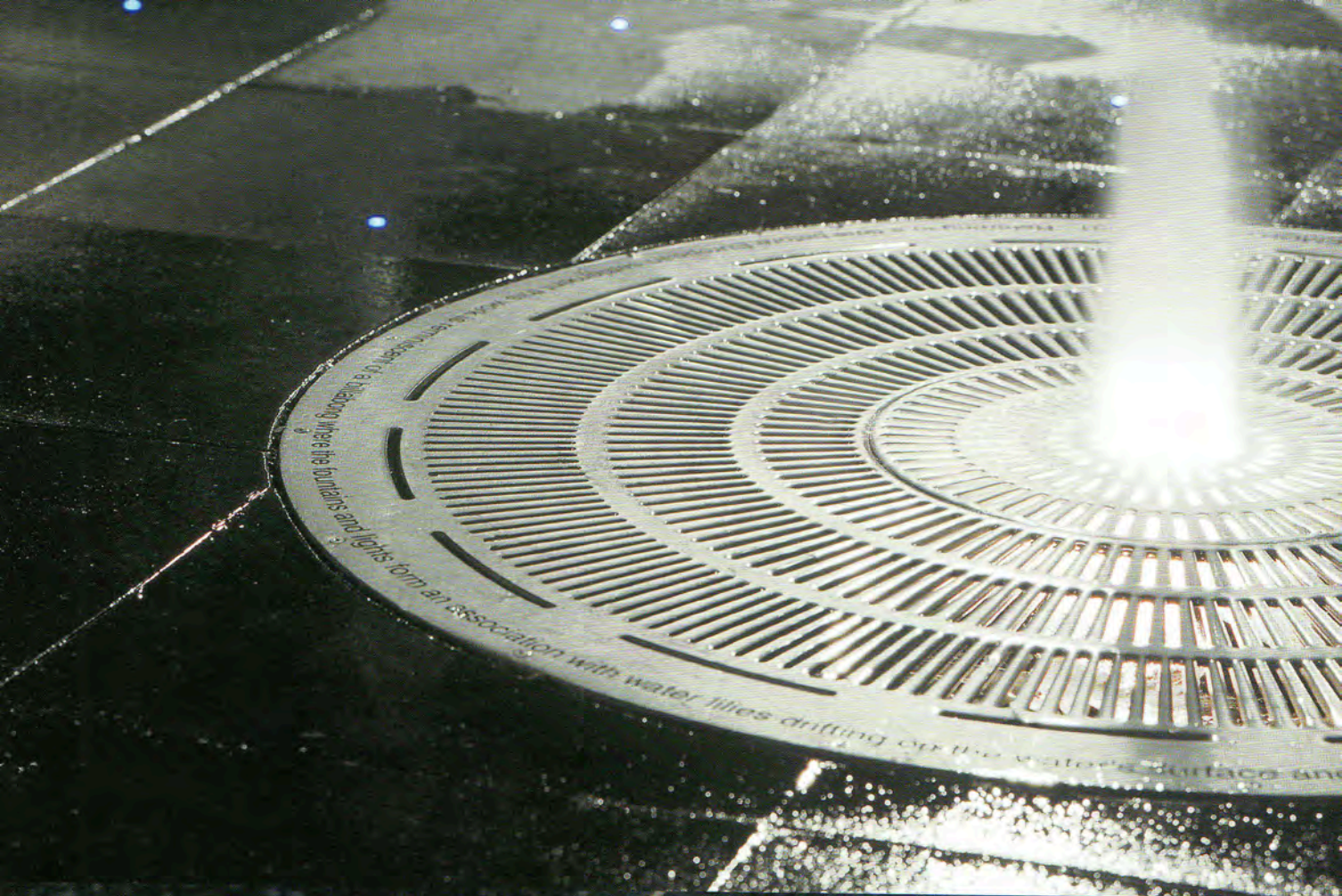
HISTORICAL MEMORY IS RECORDED IN WATER, LIGHT AND TEXT – ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A PUBLIC SCULPTURE BY ARTIST **ROBERT OWEN** AT THE GREVILLE STREET ENTRANCE TO GRATTAN GARDENS, MELBOURNE.

SECTION. PROJECT  
REVIEW

WORDS. ADRIAN PARR

PHOTOGRAPHY. JOHN GOLLINGS  
KATRINA LAURENCE





...of a building where the columns and lights form an association with water lilies drifting on the water's surface and



GANNETT  
SMITH



## DESIGNER STATEMENT

*Memory Pond* is based on the idea of a sculptural installation that emphasizes connectedness to the site through an integration of individual components into the total landscape design.

I was interested to learn that the general area of Grattan Gardens was originally a billabong prior to European settlement. It was a rich source of food gathering [mussels, fish, eels, duck eggs] and ritual for Victoria's Aboriginal peoples.

In recent times a regular market provided a community centre for gathering and exchange and, over the years, the wider area has developed into a lively commercial and cultural precinct. There is a conjunction of the social behaviour of the two food-gathering activities and between the crafts used in pre-settlement, such as fishing scoops made from folding a round mat, and the present-day market offering similar mats and baskets.

Based on water, light and language, the installation acknowledges historical memory and the flow of time. The site is reminiscent of a billabong. The fountains form an association with water lilies drifting on the water's surface and the paving lights indicate the stars that would have once left their reflection there. The patterns of the fountains are derived from basket-weaving, the bubbling water flows like a "well spring" and the five word phrases, placed around the site, offer moments of meditation on place, action and silence.

Robert Owen

AT A TIME WHEN PUBLIC ART PROJECTS ABOUND throughout urban Melbourne, there is very little that captures the imagination or escapes the pitfalls of monumentality. Public art seldom addresses the complexity of how milieu, time and the specificity of place interact, and it is even rarer for the art to expand on these factors to engage with the broader urban fabric through which they come to life.

HOWEVER, *MEMORY POND*, BY AUSTRALIAN ARTIST ROBERT OWEN, is one public art project that successfully synthesizes these elements, while also affirming the possibility of experiences that lie beyond the physical parameters of its design. With an acute sensitivity to the social and cultural history of the site, Owen has made a valuable contribution to the area and a significant gesture of reconciliation without dumbing down the complexity of European and Indigenous relations.

*MEMORY POND* IS PART OF A LARGER PROJECT in collaboration with landscape architects Taylor Cullity Lethlean in the Grattan Gardens, Prahran. Owen has made extensive use of Aboriginal history specific to the area to develop the design, which consequently took on the distinct flavour of his anthropological research. He discovered that the Grattan Gardens area was once a billabong where Victoria's Indigenous peoples regularly visited to fish, gather food and engage in communal sharing and exchange. The most common food sourced in the area included swan eggs, fish and eels caught in baskets used as fishing scoops.

TODAY, VISITORS TO THE AREA EXPERIENCE A SUBTLE inflection of landscape and habitat. Owen's design of the six water fountains at the Greville Street entrance reflects the spiral form of the baskets once used here. Made from laser-cut stainless steel, the fountains are loosely organized into a triangular formation. From the centre of the spiral fountains, which barely rise out of the ground, water quietly percolates away, forming a lovely metaphor for the silence surrounding the issue of Aboriginal reconciliation. The undramatic and slow gurgling of the fountains dispersed across the entry undermines the more traditional solid shape that water forms when spurting from fountain figurines, creating shapes here that are soft and malleable. By repeating the basket forms in his design of the fountains, Owen also references the lilies that once floated across the surface of the billabong.

BRINGING AN IMMATERIAL PRESENCE TO THE PARK AT NIGHT, blue LEDs are fixed into the paved area to diagram the stars above. The lighting also acts as a mnemonic residue for the stars once reflected in the billabong. Through gentle illumination, Owen's scheme brings to life the sinuous threads of a difficult history and the passing of time in a part of the city where this is unexpected.

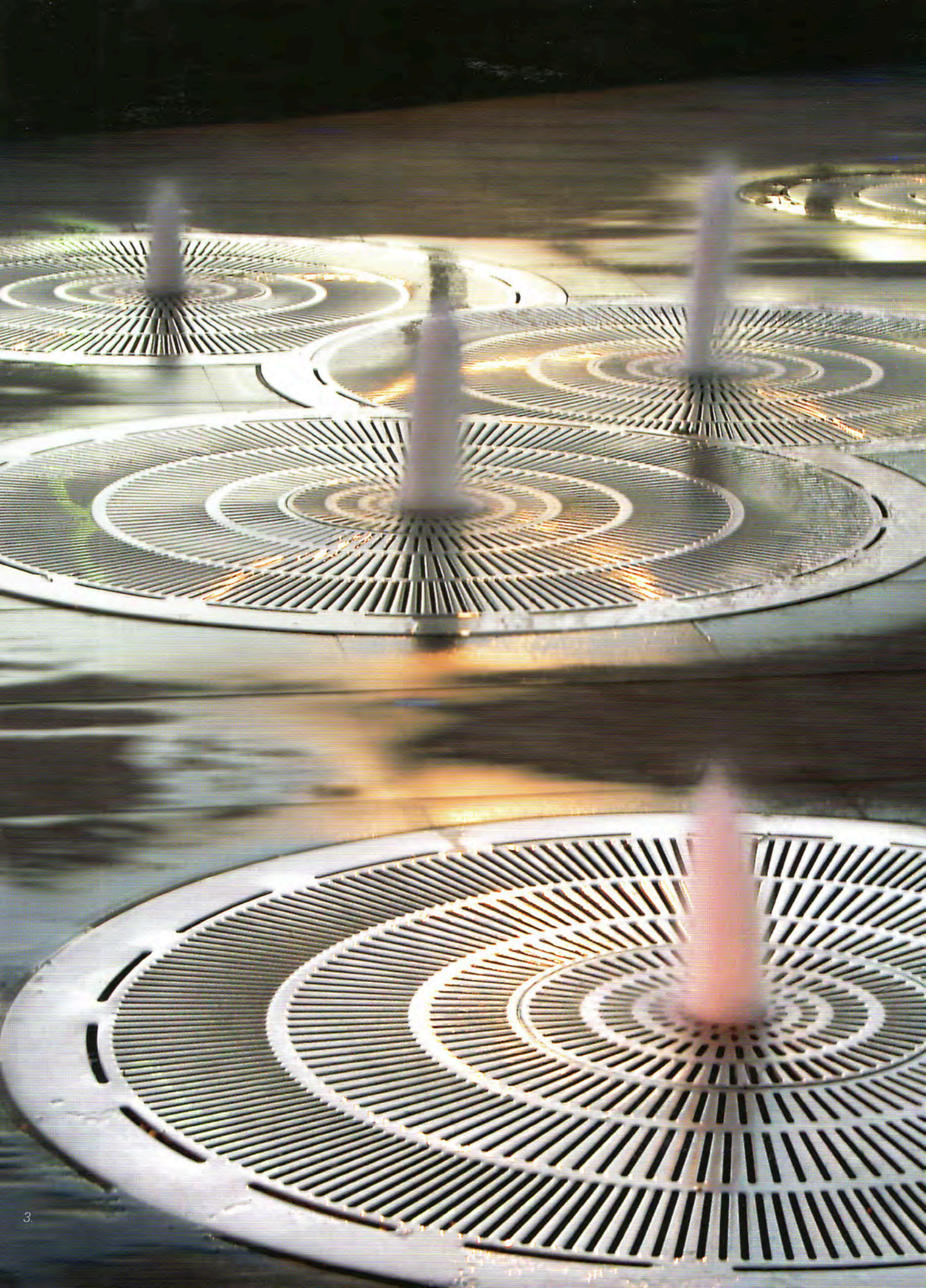
LIGHTS AND TEXT DELICATELY ACCENT THE GEOMETRIC regularity of the pedestrian walkway that leads into the Gardens from Greville Street. The perimeter is bordered with a slightly raised wall where visitors can sit and reflect as they try to read the faint traces of text in the paving. Owen's use of framing does not tidy up or physically enclose the walkway space, so much as it brings cultural and historical structures to light. In this respect the walkway still functions as a key element that directs visitors into the park's recreational spaces. However, the interplay of textual inscriptions in the dark grey stone, along with the random spread of lighting at night, produces an inversion. Here the visitor is

1.  
THE TEXT READS:  
REFERRING TO A TIME  
BEFORE EUROPEAN  
SETTLEMENT THIS  
WORK IS REMINISCENT  
OF A BILLABONG  
WHERE THE FOUNTAINS  
AND LIGHTS FORM AN  
ASSOCIATION WITH  
WATER LILIES DRIFTING  
ON THE WATER'S  
SURFACE AND STARS  
THAT WOULD HAVE  
ONCE LEFT THEIR  
REFLECTION THERE.

2.  
DETAIL OF LED STARS  
AND TEXT IN THE  
PAVING. THE TEXTS  
OFFER MOMENTS OF  
MEDITATION ON PLACE  
AND PASSING.  
[PHOTOS PAGE 97  
KATRINA LAURENCE.]

3.  
WATER QUIETLY  
PERCOLATES AWAY  
FROM LASER-CUT  
STAINLESS STEEL  
FOUNTAINS.









4.

OWEN'S USE OF THE PATHWAY IN HIS DESIGN TRANSCENDS THE UNIFORMITY OF THE PATH'S ORDER, FOR THE CONNECTION BETWEEN PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE IS NOT LINEAR. MULTIDIMENSIONAL TIME CONTAINS THE POSSIBILITY OF A VARIETY OF PATHS THE FUTURE MAY TAKE, ALL OF THEM UNPREDICTABLE.

+



5.



4.

A SLIGHTLY RAISED WALL BORDERS THE WALKWAY LEADING INTO THE GARDENS FROM GREVILLE STREET, ALLOWING VISITORS TO SIT AND REFLECT AS THEY READ THE TRACES OF TEXT IN THE PAVING.

encouraged to look down and think of the silence surrounding the issue of Aboriginal history, instead of simply walking ahead into the garden itself. Along the walkway, the paving presents five statements: "swan-egg bed", "put out of place", "stars and stones", "side by side" and "in the stream". These invite visitors to reflect on the history of the site and the implications European settlement has had for Aboriginal peoples, and to question the notion of reconciliation and their place in a history that is still very much in the making.

5.

BLUE LED LIGHTS FORM A DELICATE DIAGRAM OF THE STARS.

OWEN HAS OFFSET THE ARTICULATE AND PRECISE organization of a European garden with an elegant extension of the axial order and regular symmetry typical of such gardens. The physical coherence of the area does not come from filling the space or producing fixed relationships with built elements in and around the area. Instead, through the language of water, stone, bronze and steel, Owen has created a textual dialogue with the history of the site.

OWEN'S DESIGN RELIES ON THE PRODUCTIVE POTENTIAL of repetition, but it's a repetition of difference. It is interesting that until recently the area functioned as a craft market [now moved to a larger location], as it once did for the Indigenous peoples, also selling mats and baskets similar to those once used by the Aboriginal peoples for fishing. *Memory Pond* shows how landscape design can diagram temporal conditions and elements to express spatial connections between milieu and place – between the past and the present.

INSTEAD OF A FIXED INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY, Owen announces the possibility of transgression and transformation. Ultimately, reconciliation, if it is to carry any weight or value for Australian society and culture, is a process of change that can transform how Australians think about history. In this light, Owen's use of the pathway in his design transcends the uniformity of the path's order, for the connection between past, present and future is not linear. Multidimensional time contains the possibility of a variety of paths the future may take, all of them unpredictable. Owen's design successfully resists being too literal in its representation of what has been washed away over time, for the overall design owes more to memory and its traces than it does to symbolic gestures. Put differently, the design gives expression to the history already present within the site. Rather than colonize history, which would be simply to mimic it, Owen combines the present life of the site with its past.

TOO OFTEN PUBLIC ART MARRIES HISTORY AND LANDSCAPE to monumentality without acknowledging how both are cultural constructions. Monumentality reinforces the cultural control of history and is in effect another form of colonization. Public art, if it is to engage with the difficulties of Indigenous history, especially in the hands of white artists, needs to form a critical relationship with the past and how that past is represented.

INSTEAD OF WORKING TO PRESENT A UNIFIED VISION of Australian identity, Owen prefers to be inspired by the tensions between history and landscape, and the way each confounds the clarity of the other. Monumental sculptures neatly gloss over the difficulties of the past. In contrast, as a white artist, Owen's approach to design and site refuses to participate in the erasure of that past as neatly separate from the present. The convergence of physical and metaphysical spaces that *Memory Pond* presents to the visitor contributes to an overall sense of contemplation and reflection on the fractured nature of our history. In other words, Owen does not design on the landscape but through it.

+ PROJECT  
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Taylor Cully Lethlean

+ LIGHTING  
Barry Webb and Associates

+ ROBERT OWEN has held over forty solo exhibitions and participated in over sixty group exhibitions in Australia, Europe and Asia. He represented Australia in the 38th Venice Biennale in 1978 and in 2002 he received the Visual Art/Craft Board Emeritus Award for service to the visual arts. His public commissions include: *Webb Bridge* – a reconciliation project with architects Denton Corker Marshall for Melbourne Docklands Authority, 2003; *Discobolus* – Hellenic Tribute for Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, Homebush Bay, Sydney; *Axiom* – a permanent sculpture for the atrium of the Commonwealth Law Courts, Melbourne, 1998; and *Vessel* for the Nippon Exhibition Centre, Chiba, Japan, 1989.