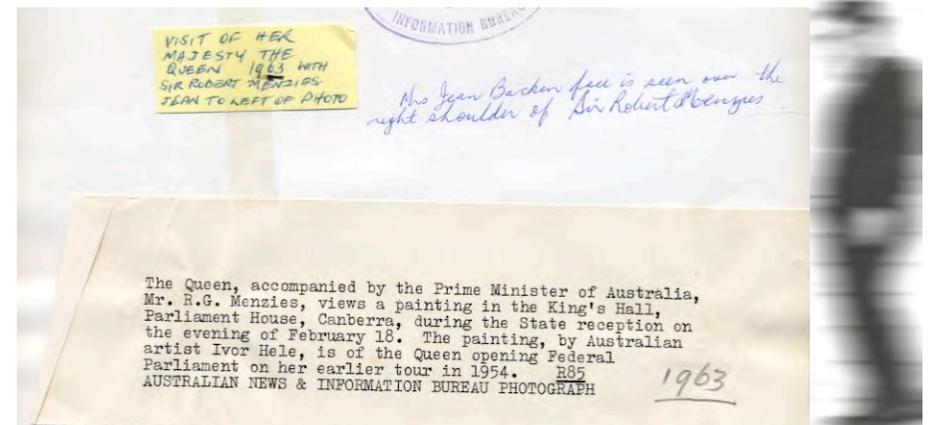


king's hall
public art commission

Walls that Whisper

old parliament house



r o b y n b a c k e n

old parliament house

Old Parliament House sits in an important and extensive landscape stretching between Mount Ainslie and Capital Hill. This iconic 1920's building represents the birth of Canberra, the federal capital of Australia.

The building was designed by the Scottish architect John Smith Murdoch. In designing the Old Parliament House he paid attention to classical principles: symmetry, centralised order, proportion, harmony and spatial unity. His style of work is in line with other art deco designers of the 1920's such as J.Hoffman, B.W.Griffin, C.R. Macintosh and Lloyd Wright.

Along with the design of the building Murdoch was responsible for the design of the furniture and the fittings. More recent additions to the original collection of the furniture and furnishings reflects the increased demands that were placed on the building to accommodate new functions and the increasing number of occupants. These items are significant as evidence of changes to the form and function of the building, reflecting the everyday use of the building over 61 years of Australian democratic history.

King's Hall

The character of King's Hall is enhanced by the use of decorative skylights, elegant pendant lights, and parquet flooring. The Hall features bas-relief busts of prominent personalities related to federation, the judiciary and of the first Parliament in 1901 on its colonnades, and portraits of the prime ministers on the walls, as well as the statue of King George V.

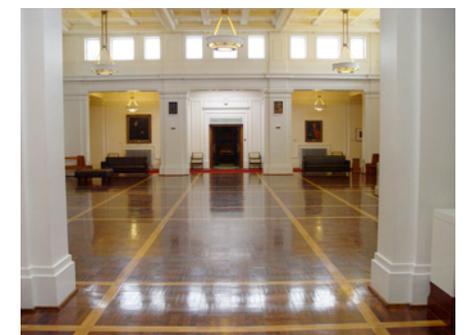
The space sits in waiting with the two chambers on either side of the hall; the colonnades, coffered ceilings and clerestory windows of King's Hall, help to reinforce the dignity and grandeur of these spaces, reflecting the central function.

The colonnades, coffered ceilings, suspended light fittings, parquet floor, skylights and clerestory windows of King's Hall, contribute to the dignity and grandeur of these spaces, reflecting the central function.

King's Hall and the Chambers have special significance for their association with Royal visits. Dates of key Royal visits are 1927, 1935, 1945, 1954, 1963 and 1974.

Reference

National Heitage List -Nomination for the Old Parliament House and Curtilage – document held in National Library archive.



Walls that Whisper

r o b y n b a c k e n

Personal History and Old Parliament House

My initial response to the site and the brief is contained within a personal history which I will use to build upon. This history relates to my childhood, growing up in Canberra with a father working for the Prime Ministers Department. I have vivid memories of meeting my father after work at



King's Hall and another of my mother dressed in a pink ball gown with long white gloves waiting to meet Queen Elizabeth. This personal history resonates and opens a path for the mediation of public and private experiences that are present in such a significant space.



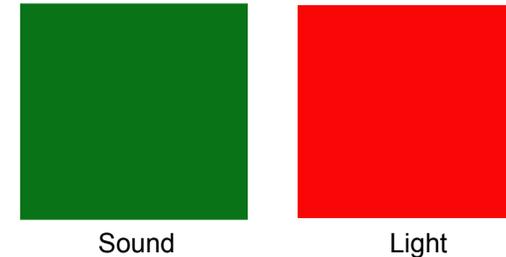
Above: 1. Mr Jim Backen with Menzies Family 1958 2. Mr Jim Backen on Stairs at OPH 1959

Left: Mrs Jean Backen at State Ball 1963

Artwork and Site - Walls that Whisper

- *Walls that Whisper* will honour the past uses of the space and those that populated it. The artwork will continue the commitment of making the old parliament house dynamic and relevant.
- The artwork will incorporate the multiple uses of the space as an active parliament house and as it functions now as a place that represents and honours the layered history of the building.
- My proposal will respect the space and work within the existing heritage and conservation guidelines. I am aware of the culture and historical significance of the building and its contents. This proposal will pay particular attention to the building's heritage needs. The *Walls that Whisper* will engage the space while not physically touching or impinging upon the structure of the building.
- The artwork is not a didactic representational reworking of the history of the building rather it works off sensorial and tactile experience of the space. The work will engage with a playful knowledge of what has happened and what has been lived within this space – King's Hall.
- King's Hall is a place that is often awaiting the presence of people – the audience. In this waiting time or time of reverie, the space is quiet and calm. Murdoch is present in the architecture and in the furniture of the space. The King stands proud and is circled by the bas-reliefs portraits of significant others. They commune in the hall in anticipation of the visitors.
- The *Walls that Whisper* will be made up of two elements: **sound** and **light**. They are not dependent upon one another but will create subtle layering effects. This will invite a journey of experience that is not dependent upon prior knowledge.

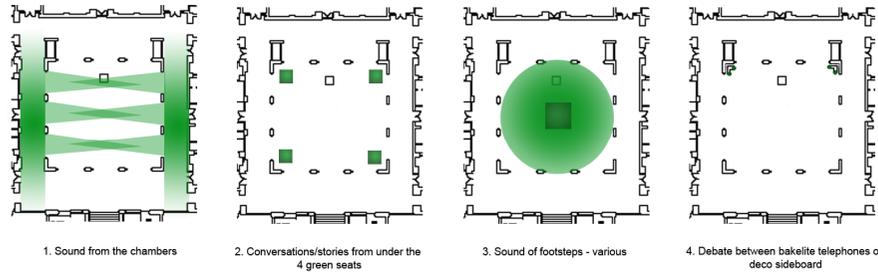
two elements
light and sound
are used to
activate the
space and
the imagination
of the audience...



Sound and light will be introduced into the space in a subtle and at times activated manner. The work will play off the formal character of the building, respecting the authority of the space. King's Hall is a space which is open to the unpredictable, each group that passes through has a new way of experiencing and reflecting upon the space.

Randomness will be an important element in the artwork, building upon the unpredictable. For example, sounds, voices and floating images will be activated in a non-linear manner. This will be established through a sensor system directed by a computer—located in a discrete space.

s o u n d



concept

Another possible sound event could be via bakelite telephones. This is optional as it would be a physical addition to the space. The bakelite art deco telephone is appropriate to the time of the building. Now that the telephone is so common I thought that it might be a way of bring people in to the present via the past. It would also allow for very intimate listening.

Furniture would need be produce by Canberra based crafts person in keeping with the art deco design. The telephone could be permanently attached to the side board and a simple sound device attached to the ear piece.

After a period of time the sound will quieten down and light projectors will spill images into the space and along the colonnades.

Voices to be heard in the sound work will depend upon the material found in the archival search. Voices may be of prime ministers and other politicians (male and female), journalists, the public and voices of the people working in the building. The voices may be of actors.

Single person or small group

The audience enters the space: If more that 1 person enters and walks around the space one or more sensors a will be activated to trigger a subtle sound works – one that is intimate a will be in communion with the small audience.

Large group

If a large group enters the space a series of sensors will signal the activation of a sound work which will be emitted from speakers hanging from the hooks in the ceiling.

This sound will fill the space ...it will be directional sounds of rumble coming form the 2 chambers on either side of the Hall – bringing the space to life with shouting, laughter, rumble, along side of the opening and closing of the chamber doors.

Voices will be spun around the space activating the bas-reliefs the sound will bounce of the wall of the relief, drawing attention to figure sculpted into the wall. A speaker above the king will play
A rhythmical sound that honours a king.

Calm again and time for a little rest. Now if some is sitting or sits on the green ottomans a vibration and sound will omit from the chair. The sub-woffer will vibrate then allow sound to be heard...a story, a news event, music from a ball etc. This sound can only be heard by those sitting on the chair.

Equipment and Technical Issues

Wireless connection would be used where possible.
Sounds and images would be selected from the ABC archive and the Film and Sound Archive.

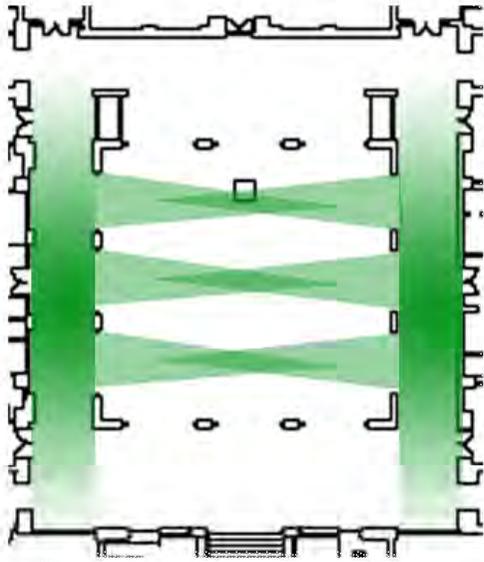
Walls that Whisper

r o b y n b a c k e n

s o u n d

concept

1. Chambers



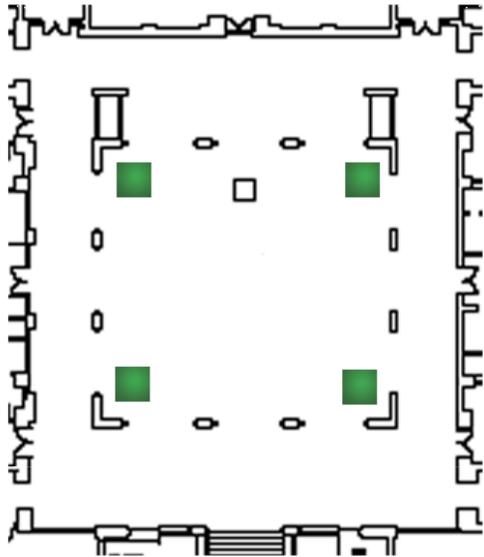
- sounds from the 2 chambers - senate and representative
- calls, clapping, voting, distant shouts, laughter...
- surround sound to create tension between the two
- sounds bouncing in the space
- rumble from both sides



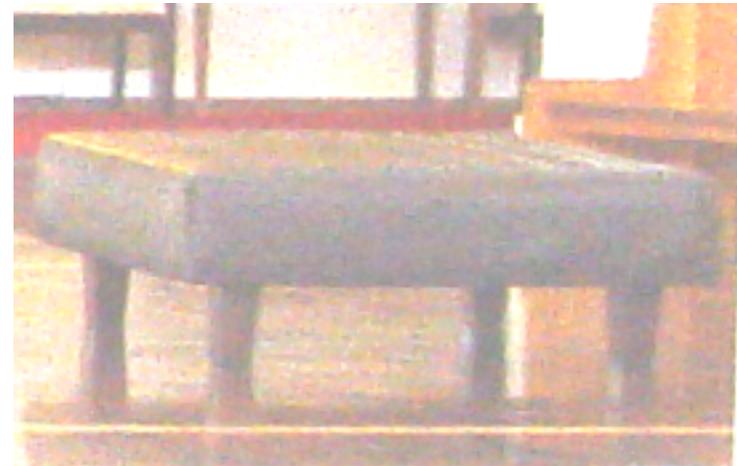
Walls that Whisper

r o b y n b a c k e n

2. Green Seats

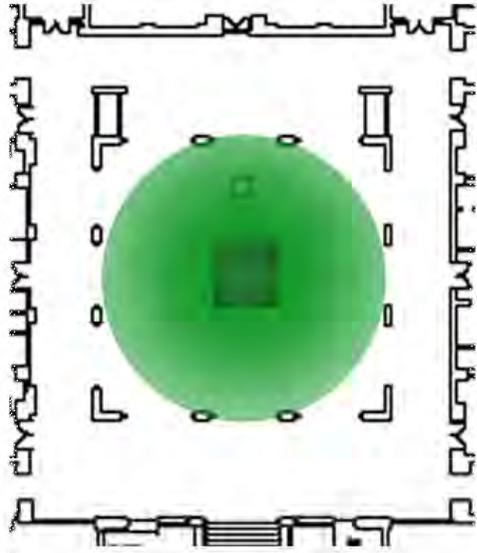


- 4 green seats in King's Hall (not heritage)
- pressure sensors activate sound when sat upon
- intimate stories about the hall
- the short stories from public and politicians
- actors will reenact some of the stories



s o u n d

3. Footsteps



- speakers hang from the 8 hooks in the ceiling
- sounds of footsteps hovers through the hall
- sometimes only one person gently strolls
- the gliding of couples waltzing to chamber music
- large groups pass between chambers

Walls that Whisper

concept



Girl guides strolling



Politicians striding



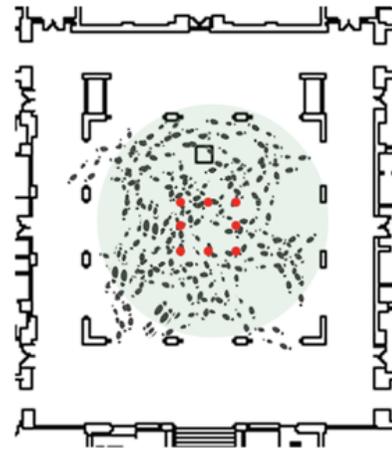
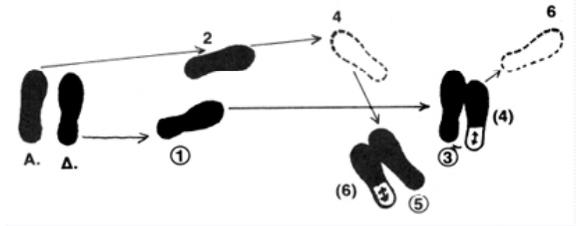
Queen gliding



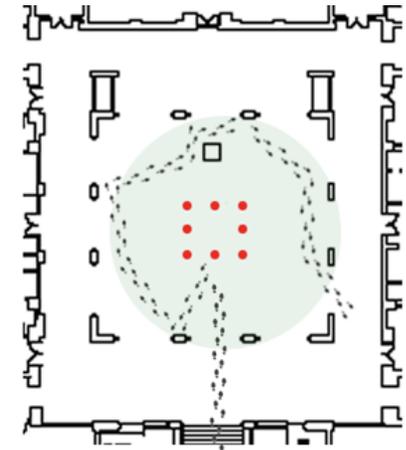
Military marching in line

r o b y n b a c k e n

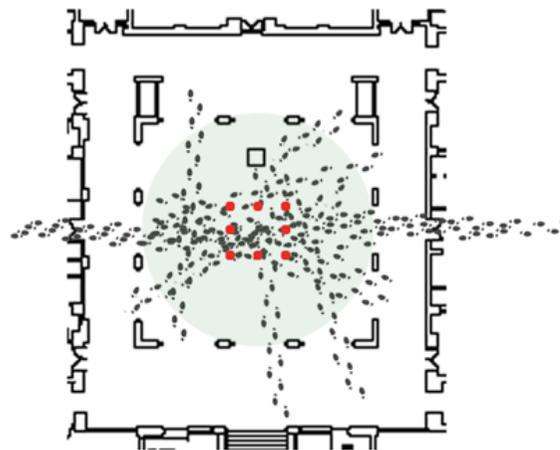
3. Footsteps...continued



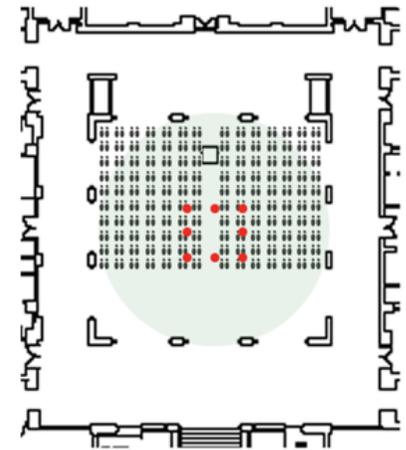
Dancing at the ball



Single person



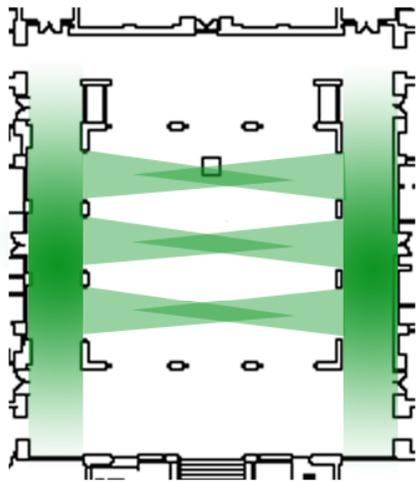
Moving between chambers



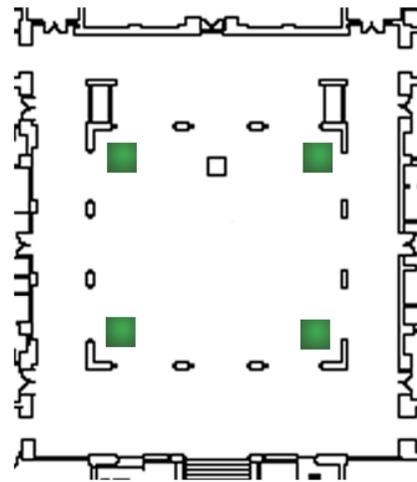
Military or formal occasion

Four Layers of Sound

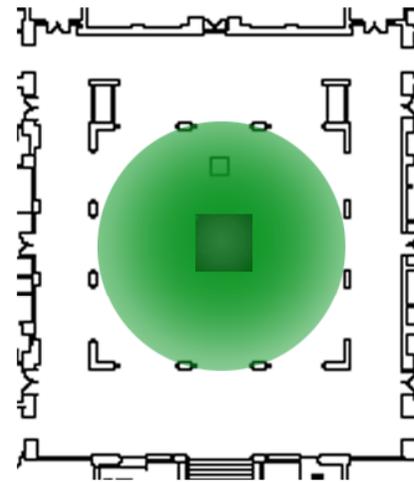
1. Calls from the chambers
2. Voices of the people
3. Footsteps
4. Telephone debate



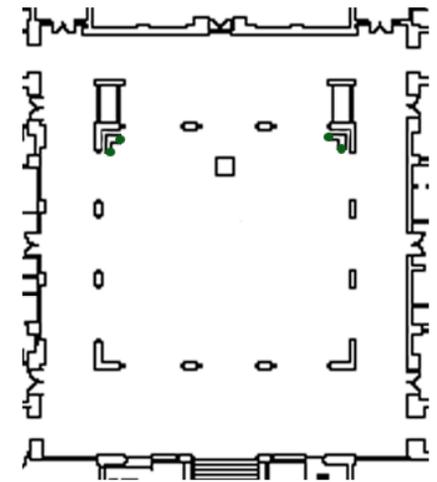
1. Sound from the chambers



2. Conversations/stories from under the
4 green seats



3. Sound of footsteps - various



4. Debate between bakelite telephones on
deco sideboard

light

concept

Video projections of ghost like figures hovering over the walls and corridors. Floating in the space drawing attention to the details of the room, the bas-reliefs, the paintings and the king ...

The floating images will be of

- Suited men
- Women in ball gowns
- Marching soldiers
- Groups of journalists
- Young children on excursion
- Blurs of history

Storage of hardware

A computer and various hardware will be needed to control the artwork. The work will be installed on the ceiling of the 2 small rooms at the top of the stairs.

Equipment

2 LED projectors – Panasonic

(These projectors are new on the market and use LED bulbs rather than the metal halide bulb. Metal halide have a shorter life and are very expensive to replace therefore these projectors are more energy efficient).

Wireless sensors

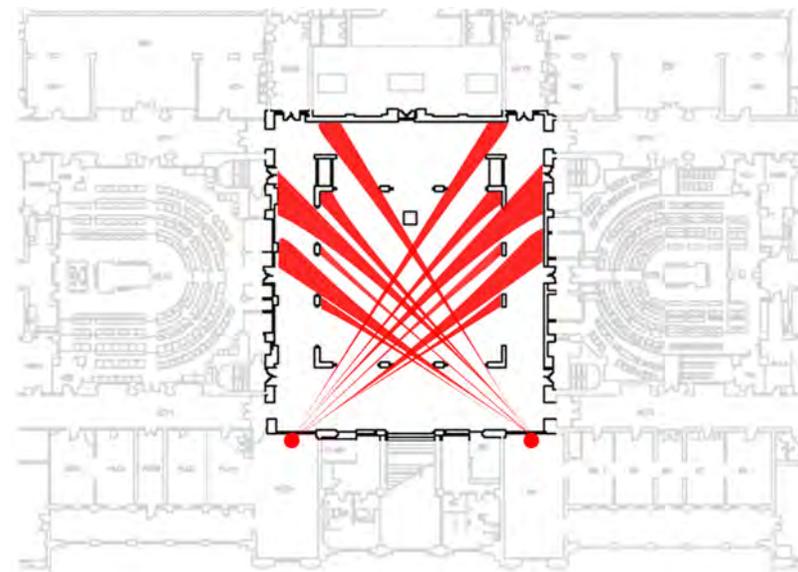
There will be 4 sensors to activate the projector.

There will be a short projection period and then the projector will turn off.

The projection will not be on all the time.

1 computer

this computer will drive the projectors and the sound works.



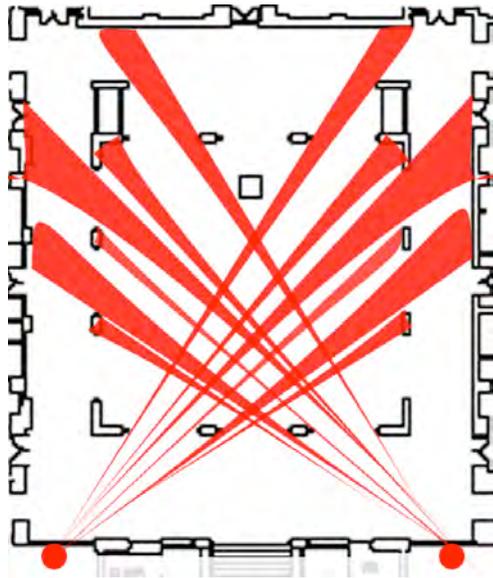
Walls that Whisper

r o b y n b a c k e n

light

concept

Light Projection



- 2 video projectors spill images into the hall
- blurred ghost like moments
- seen from the corner of the eye
- a capture moment of history
- random event not to be repeated



Walls that Whisper

r o b y n b a c k e n

light

concept



Seeing Double 1985 Robyn Backen and Chris Fortescue



Video projections into the hall

Walls that Whisper

r o b y n b a c k e n