

## Back to Watergate

### Elenberg Fraser

Buildings rarely enter language; Luigi Moretti's 1961 Watergate complex, Washington DC, became a byword for scandal at the highest levels. The break-in at the building in 1972 led to the end of President Nixon and the infamous Watergate scandal as uncovered by journalists Woodward and Bernstein. Since then there have been a litany of scandal suffixes such as Koreagate, Irangate, Dianagate, Monicagate....

Elenberg Fraser's Watergate Apartments in the Melbourne Docklands pay homage to Moretti's design by employing balustrades to form a staggered façade – but more specifically it enters into a language informed by dock machinery and ships. In addition it explores the concerns Elenberg Fraser expressed in their Liberty Tower project (2003) in nearby Spencer Street on the old edge of the Melbourne city grid. Docklands has shifted this edge and expanded the city to the water. Like Liberty Tower the project uses perforated aluminium balustrades and different shades of curtain wall glazing to good effect. Whereas Liberty was an urban corner block, Watergate sits more independently as the development model for Docklands tends to dictate – the design goes some way to address this issue of separation by producing a building that attempts to form part of an urban edge.

The Docklands can be read as an extension to the city rather than a separate precinct or suburb. Callum Fraser compares their new building with the late Gas and Fuel Buildings, Flinders St, (Perrott Lyon Mathieson, 1967). This is an interesting choice given the general disdain that building suffered before its demolition in 1997 (to make way for Federation Square and a supposed new connection to the river). The comparison also makes evident the two-tower strategy, a broken slab block, and perhaps suggests a rougher aesthetic – this is also indicated when Fraser discusses the hard seemingly metallic aesthetic of docks. This is evident in the perforated aluminium and strangely robust angular balustrades that dominate the building from both city and water sides. Ships come to mind, as does Le Corbusier's obsession with ships – the ultimate modern building, a floating metal machine.

The building successfully attempts to shift the podium-tower model (dominant at the Docklands) to a more ambiguous middle ground between that and a '60s-style slab block. This occurs by making the podium and tower partially share the same edge and then having the towers fold back in to produce a small podium top. This zone, with back-illuminated screens, features pool and gym, and the inherent symmetry in the scheme plays out here - pool one side and a lawn area on the other. This symmetry is further developed on the main (parkside) façade, where a central glazed stairway reverses the orientation of the tilted balustrade panels. This 'mirror-line' protrudes up to separate the two halves of the building. From a distance looking generally perpendicular to the main street façade, the building's width is revealed. Here, a giant U shaped form is evident, creating a fragment of an urban wall. When viewed obliquely, the building's sharpness is more readable – a soaring sensibility plays out, like viewing a ship from dock level. The desire to eliminate the podium results ultimately in shifting as low as possible - becoming the ground level strip of straight black glass. This street like edge of entries and tenancies is a counterpoint to the main podium and towers of jagged form with sharp ends, that intermediately overhang.

Internally, simple linear corridors with glazing at each end are juxtaposed with the desire for a shifted angular form that operates externally. This non-orthogonality is made possible by a precast slab system tied together by a steel slab edge that is expressed on the fully glazed pointed edges. Like Liberty Tower, the foyers use the language of mirrors and commissioned artworks (by John Nixon, Kerrie Polliness and Stephen Bram) to provide content that is reflected, repeated, reversed. The foyers are given depth and an amazing quality through reflection in mirror, stainless steel and black plastic. Black (rather than more conventional white) is used to generate a sense of space. The residential foyers all have different and engaging mail rooms – one is like a 'predator mask' and sits like an object in the space, another is minimally lit. These mail rooms celebrate the most communal space in this type of building. The foyers feature black Barrisol plastic stretching down over light fittings to produce a John Soane-inspired tent-like ceiling, that are beautifully reflective. The apartment interiors use either a black or white colour scheme and are simply treated with glazing and mirrors on fixtures, with stone or stainless-steel benches. The apartments on the pointed edges of the tower enjoy full-height glazed views in both directions; in the other apartment types the perforated and folded aluminium balustrades typically stretch across the balconies and continue past full height glazing to produce depth to the façade treatment.

Callum Fraser stresses that this was not a big-budget building. Using lessons learnt from Liberty Tower, including a detailed investigation of construction sequencing to establish efficiencies, allowed budget to be directed on the more design-based elements, such as the non-rectangular floor plan and perforated profile screening. It also includes just one fire stair in each tower, enabled by pressurising the lift and stair core in a fire situation so both lifts and stairs can be used for emergency egress. The fire stair itself is the slightly kinetic metal construction stair and adds to a sense of a ship, along with the noises of the machine.

The building features a cross-ventilation system that helps address the need for good natural air movement in double loaded corridor apartments. When a balcony door is opened, a vent can be opened that provides connection to glazed vertical air stacks at the end of each corridor. Vertical air movement can be assisted when required to draw air up and across apartments; thus reducing the need for air-conditioning, which is also provided using split systems.

As buildings begin to incorporate the techniques of sustainability they perhaps are becoming more like machines, and raise again the rhetoric that surrounded early Modernism in architecture. The biggest machines at the docks were the ships themselves, to be read as buildings on the extreme urban edge. Watergate's mechanical ventilation system, the extensive use of metal and the pointed linear form that suggests this building as a sort of ship, sitting at these former docks.