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Get A Sneak-Peek Into RMIT's New Academic Street Led By Lyons Architecture

The newly refurbished campus connects Melbourne's CBD to the university, transforms the student experience and is arguably one of the most majorly epic projects we've seen this year.



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BY TESS RITCHIE ([HTTPS://WWW.INDESIGNLIVE.COM/AUTHOR/TESS](https://www.indesignlive.com/author/teess))

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When Lyons Architecture (<https://www.lyonsarch.com.au/>) was approached to do the redevelopment of RMIT's New Academic Street (<https://nas.rmit.edu.au/>), which called for the removal of perceived barriers between Swanston Street and the centre of the campus and to create “a radical new student experience”, they turned to the city itself for inspiration. As lead architect Carey Lyons says, “RMIT is a extraordinarily unique University occupying a significant area within the central city grid of Melbourne. This suggested to us different ways of thinking about what the campus might be like, to make it more ‘city like’.” Crucial to that, says Lyons, was “characterising the city as an experience of diversity.”

Not only would they channel diversity in the design, however, but Lyons decided that to achieve this vision they would bring in four other design practises – all RMIT alumni – to collaborate on the 32,000 square metre project: NMBW Architecture Studio (<https://nmbw.com.au/>), MvS Architects (<http://www.mvsarchitects.com.au/>), Harrison & White (<http://haw.com.au/>) and Maddison Architects (<http://www.maddisonarchitects.com.au/>). The idea was that through working with a number of architects on the redevelopment, whereby they would develop an agreed design framework and each undertake

their own specific design elements, they could “create an environment that would have something of the diversity of the city... [and] build a unique student experience which was like the city, offering [students] a choice as to the types of space that might want to occupy”.

Channelling the very fabric of Melbourne city, the architects agreed on creating a series of laneways or arcades as the primary framework for the redevelopment of the precinct so that the result is a network of high-tech, connected, student-oriented spaces. By working with the existing 1960’s buildings, many of which are Brutalist in style, the overall design creates a dialogue between new architectural features and the urban landscape it is situated in. One of the most obvious manifestations of this, as Lyons Director and Project Lead Carey Lyon points out, is the major new stairs leading up from Swanston Street to the main campus level. Made of bluestone, the stairs “essentially extend the footpaths of the city of Melbourne directly into and through the campus.” On a practical level, the laneway framework also transforms the way in which students move between spaces within the campus – from a complex and convoluted one, due to various ad-hoc developments that had happened over four decades, to one of ease.

In a similar way, the architects conceived the Library as a series of spaces rather than a singular unit. Each room is divided from the other by a laneway or arcade, creating a library experience akin to passing through an urban structure. “Every time you circulate the library you are always looking back down laneways either to the city, or to other activities within the redevelopment,” adds Lyon. Nodding to the idea of the city as a place of diversity, the flexibility and multi-faceted nature of this design lets students use it in the way that suits them and their various needs best; if they want a space for quiet study and scholarship they can seek out a room away from the main entrance, or if they need to have a quick chat there are plenty of spaces nearer to the centre and escalators, which are noisier and intended for student collaboration.

A key element of any project based around learning and ways of working, of course, is technology. While in terms of the design process this brought challenges, such as how the architects worked with the University to positively but radically transform their services, for example how they would combine student services and library services into one space, a context in which technology is flourishing also questions the very role of the campus. As Lyon says, “one of the interesting debates, which has now been going on for over a decade, is what impact the growth in online education, including MOOCs, will have on university campuses.” While the obvious inference from that is that as online platforms increase, campuses will be less important, Lyons has experienced the opposite: “Although students are able to access information, knowledge, and resources in a seamless way using technologies, it’s still extraordinarily important for them to have a ‘campus experience’.” In fact, he adds, “As virtual worlds expand, physical places matter more than ever. And the New Academic Street project is a perfect example of this way of thinking: a space – or series of spaces – that enhances the student experience.

Photography by Tess Kelly (<http://www.tesskelly.net/>)

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