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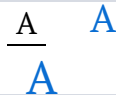
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A Rich Melange of Architecture at RMIT's new academic street

By Stephen Crafti
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RMIT University's city campus, known as the "new academic street", has a mélange of some of Melbourne's great architectural practices, from the past to the present.



There are examples of Bates Smart McCutcheon's brutalist architecture from the 1960s, Edmond & Corrigan's Memphis-inspired designs from the 1980s and more recent buildings, such as Lyons' Swanston Academic Building (SAB).

So when it came to extending the new library, café and other amenities, including a media centre, finely interweaving the past with the present was paramount.




The new academic street at RMIT University

Photo: Peter Bennetts

“We established a set of firm guidelines from the outset which applied to all the architects who worked on this project,” says architect Carey Lyon, director of Lyons, whose initial proposal was to enlist a number of RMIT architectural alumni as the team.


“It seemed appropriate to engage prominent architects who could provide their own ‘voice’, while still being integral to the master plan,” says Lyon.



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The architectural practices selected by Lyons were Minifie van Schaik (MvS), Harrison and White, Maddison Architects and NMBW Architecture Studio.

Each practice was then allocated a key area, aligned to its reputation established over many years.

Maddison Architects, for example, focused on the retail and hospitality areas, while architect Stuart Harrison, who once fronted The Architects radio program on 3RRR, was given, with his business partner Graham White, the media centre on the corner of Franklin and Swanston streets.

“The model was one of diversity rather than creating one monolithic expression,” says Lyon, whose brief from RMIT University was to ‘transform the experience of students’.

It needed places to study in quiet areas, more animated spaces in which to “hang out” and, importantly, to forge a connection with Bowen Street that runs through the city campus.

“The team looked extensively at the arcades and laneways dotted through the city, as well as the need to provide protected outdoor areas,” he adds.

While the previous arrangement was a fairly hard edge to Swanston Street, with minimal interventions apart from stairwells and lift cores, the latest scheme creates a series of covered laneways, both visible and accessible, to strengthen the connection to Bowen Street as the heart of the campus.

Light permeates the glass-covered laneways and generous glazing to the east and in the forecourts now offers a sense of transparency, both within and through each floor plate.

Although the RMIT development was a team effort, the work of each architectural practice can be clearly read, particularly by this writer who is well acquainted with each style.

NMBW Architecture Studio, for example, has come up with a beautifully honed bluestone (picking up on the city’s foundations) and timber building.

Rather than solid walls, the east and west elevations feature delicate, yet robust, mesh walls.

Large terraces either side allows students to work in a number of environments, including reclining on deck chairs looking over Swanston Street.

Others, such as MvS took inspiration from some of the features included by the late architect Peter Corrigan of Edmond & Corrigan.

They collaborated, as the other architects did, with the late Corrigan.

MvS presented a series of mirrored concertina-like balustrades to Swanston Street, capturing the spirit of Edmond & Corrigan's playful exterior from the early 1980s.

Lyons, whose building is wrapped in angular gold aluminium, adds to the 'chorus' of voices on the campus.

"We focused on certain buildings, but each practice was also involved in the master planning as well as individual spaces," says architect Nigel Bertram.

The same process was adhered to for the landscape, with Taylor Cullity Lethlean focusing on the larger outdoor areas and Glas Landscape Architecture, under the guidance of Lyons, attending to areas, such as rooftop terraces.

One of the most impressive aspects of these new kids on the block is their respect for the past. Peter Corrigan's two steel Ned Kelly sculptures and his pink 'Palm Tree' have been repositioned within an atrium at the core of the building.

Likewise, the mosaic-clad columns from the 1980s are still present, but so are a series of new structural columns, covered in small mosaic tiles, but in a different pattern to indicate the present.

Architect Peter Elliot's bright yellow steel pergola is also present and reworked to now form shelter for the outdoor cafes spilling out to Bowen Street.

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