

THE AUSTRALIAN

Universities rethinking campus designs to attract students

Melbourne architect Carey Lyon says campuses should offer the best of both worlds. Picture: Stuart McEvoy.

JOHN ROSS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM February 14, 2018

A dearth of affordable housing and a flood of digital offerings have dovetailed to make the campus experience more important than ever.

Melbourne architect Carey Lyon says universities around the country are re-evaluating their campus designs, hoping to inscribe distinctive identities in their bricks and mortar.

He says that with top-flight universities like Massachusetts Institute of Technology now offering online courses for free, campus experience has become a key selling point — particularly to foreigners.

And with students crammed into pricey dormitories, many view the campus as an extended living room. “Local students can come and go, but international students want to use these spaces 24-7,” Lyon says.

“They’re in little apartments that don’t have room to swing a cat, let alone invite friends over to study.”

He says universities’ reliance on foreign fees is forcing them to consider their campuses in a new light. “It’s not like you can say, ‘We’ve got the best course; if the campus is a bit shabby it doesn’t really matter’ — these days, it does matter.”

It is a reality fuelling the University of Melbourne’s New Student Precinct and the University of South Australia’s Pridham Hall project, among others.

Lyon, who started an architecture firm 25 years ago with brother Corbett, has worked on campus developments at the universities of Newcastle, Adelaide and Queensland.

In September the company unveiled the final stage of RMIT University’s New Academic Street project, a \$220 million transformation of the library, retail, student services and central outdoor spaces, as well as the School of Media and Communication.

The idea was to turn the university’s inner city setting from a curse into a blessing by reverse-engineering buildings constructed about 50 years ago.

“At the time, campuses were very institutional and more or less turned their backs to the city.”

Lyon says surveys at the project’s outset found that students headed off campus between classes, looking for a decent feed and free wi-fi. “The underlying philosophy was that if you provide them with equally interesting, diverse, useful spaces, students will choose to stay.”

If competing with Melbourne magnets such as Lygon and Degraves streets sounds like a tall order, Lyon says universities have one thing on their side: the ability to tailor spaces to the needs of students.

His recipe for a “sticky” campus focuses on flexibility. Spaces must be able to cater to rowdy discussion and sober reflection; collaboration and solitary study. Lyon says the secret is a busy, vibrant campus core with quiet spaces at the edges.

The campus also needs the ability to “flip” from the group project work typical of the start of semester to solo swotting for end-of-term exams. This requires a mixture of fixed furniture and loose seating that students can rearrange to suit themselves.

He says the RMIT redevelopment has 4000 new seats ranging from traditional work benches to couches, bean bags and deckchairs.

A kitchen with “banks of microwaves” means students have no need to go home to prepare meals. While an official analysis is still to be done, Lyon says each stage of the development has been well patronised.

Meanwhile, the university has hijacked Melbourne's coffee culture by inviting "the best cafe operators" on to campus.

Rather than forcing students out, the campus is now luring city workers in. "It's got the best coffee," Lyon claims.



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