

## Financial Review -

Jun 29 2018 at 11:00 PM  
Updated Jun 29 2018 at 11:00 PM

# Top Vic architecture awards go not to buildings, but the spaces between them

by [Michael Bleby](#)

Victoria's top architecture awards were won on Friday not by new buildings, but by designs that connected existing buildings and made them more efficient work and urban spaces.

RMIT University's New Academic Street project, which connected four 1970s concrete buildings on Melbourne's Swanston Street with large staircases that became public thoroughfares and informal spaces for students, won the top awards for urban design and educational architecture and awards for interior and sustainable architecture.

The Lyons-led work, which also won the Victorian Architectural Medal for top overall design as well as jointly winning the Melbourne Medal, shows the growing need for design [in cities that are becoming more dense](#) to make better use of their existing facilities rather than seeking to build everything new from scratch.

"It's tinkering in a big way with existing infrastructure," said juror Shelley Penn. "There's a much stronger awareness of the need for architecture to do more than just be a great building within itself."

The project, which took two years to complete, connected the previously isolated campus of the CBD-based university to the city and also created new, informal spaces for students to gather and meet.

"It's very informed by new thinking about teaching and learning and the fact that students learn best when they are connected and engaged in an informal way," said Ms Penn, a former national president of the Australian Institute of Architects.

"They just find corners and occupy spaces and the spaces are quite diverse so different groups and individuals can get together in different ways that suit them."

The project, which recognised the need of the growing numbers of students living in rented accommodation to have spaces to hang out socially, benefited from Lyons' decision to get four other architects – NMBW Architecture Studio, Harrison and White, MvS Architects and Maddison Architects – to design different parts of the new laneway grid to make it more lively," Ms Penn said.

"They recognised that really successful cities are organic," she said. "There was not one hand designing the whole thing."

There was a similar theme to the state's top commercial architecture winner – the Barwon Water head office in Geelong, which used a new light-filled tower to connect two previously detached brutalist concrete buildings, and created a central stair and staff breakout spaces in between.

"They've taken this cold concrete building that was pretty dysfunctional – the two wings weren't very well linked – and repurposed the whole building," juror Reno Rizzo said.

The renovation designed by GHDWoodhead also linked the building to Geelong's emerging cultural precinct which includes a library, art gallery and performing arts centre in a way that benefited not just the water utility, but the wider community. It shifted the building's entrance from the main street to the side, creating a new public forecourt in the process.

"That forecourt gives a more interesting approach to the building but also keeps going and forming a link to a cultural precinct behind the building," Mr Rizzo said.

"Even though it's a commercial building, it's forming links which are of value to the public."

The top awards for multiple housing residential and sustainable architecture – as well as a joint win with RMIT of the Melbourne Medal – was Nightingale 1, the architect-led housing development by Breathe Architecture that followed on from Breathe's earlier award-winning project The Commons.

Nightingale 1 in Melbourne's Brunswick is the first rollout of a model of sustainable housing that is [more affordable due to a covenant](#) that limits the scope for price appreciation. The Nightingale model is now being rolled out in [other projects](#), including in a village of seven buildings elsewhere in Brunswick and in Perth's Fremantle.

"It shifts perceptions about housing and what design, coupled with finance, legal and urban design can do for housing," juror Ann Lau said. "It is exciting."