

Hippocampus inspiration on campus

STEPHEN CRAFTI

THE Melbourne Brain Centre, in Royal Parade, Parkville, is the latest building to emerge on the Melbourne University campus.

Accommodating three organisations — the Florey Neuroscience Institutes, the Mental Health Research Institute and the University of Melbourne Neurosciences faculty — this monumental building brings together medical researchers in collaborative workspaces.

"We met with over 500 scientists, leaders in epilepsy, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, MS, stroke and trauma," says architect Neil Appleton, a director of Lyons, the architects.

And although each research arm has its own requirements, the brief to Lyons was to create flexible spaces that could be easily reconfigured to allow for new machinery.

"Every floor has a different research focus, but in a sense each level is quite generic," Appleton says. "The nature of research changes so quickly that it wouldn't be feasible to design one specific laboratory."

However, the seven-level precast concrete building, a five-star green star design, will remain in its present form, at least for the foreseeable future.

Featuring large windows concealed behind fixed aluminium louvres on the north, west, and east facades, the building has a large concrete "porch", to provide a sense of arrival.

The sandstone base of the centre links to other period sandstone buildings on the university campus. While not literal, there is a connection to the building's function, in the way the brain, with its grey matter, is held together within the skull.

While the exterior of the Melbourne Brain Centre is relatively austere, the foyer is extremely animated. As well as a vibrant red reception counter and stairs, a double height space includes a vast curtain made of digitally printed fabric.

Appearing almost like steel, this curtain conceals white screens, which allow the foyer to also be used as a theatre for 250 people, Appleton says.

A second theatre for 250 people is state-of-the-art and includes acoustic equipment to provide for some of Melbourne University's musical performances.

Inspired by a PET scan, the enclosed theatre features a network of LED lights in the ceiling, evocative of brain signals.

"You feel like you're entering a brain," Appleton says. And like the human brain, which has a left and a



The Melbourne Brain Centre, on the Melbourne University campus. Every floor has a different research focus.

right hemisphere, there are references to this structure in the treatment of the main lobby.

Massive columns in the lobby, for example, are split down the centre, half being granite, the other half bluestone.

Likewise, a bluestone floor meets white ceilings. "The materials are a play on

how the brain functions, but some of the colours, such as red stairs, purposely lead you to the upper levels," Appleton says. The ground floor is also earmarked for a cafe, as well as a bookshop specialising in neurological literature.

And to the rear of the building is an education centre, together with the Dax

Centre, already displaying artwork from patients who have experienced mental illness and have used painting as a form of therapy or expression. An impressive exhibition was in progress at the time of writing — not surprising, since the Dax Centre has the third-largest collection of creative works in the world in this genre (Switzerland and Germany being the first and second countries).

As expected of a building of this nature, there is exceptional light throughout; aided by two atriums, offices and laboratories are light-filled.

Louvred windows at the apex of each atrium also purge the hot air. And due to the collaborative nature of the research, Lyons included lounge-style breakout spaces on each level, as well as an informal meals area, complete with a library.

One of the most challenging aspects of designing the Melbourne Brain Centre was ensuring everything could be easily reconfigured, meaning moveable work stations and entire laboratories able to cater for new technology.

According to David Foxley, director of project commissioning and building development at the Brain Centre, only six weeks into the building, spaces are already being reconfigured.