

RMIT's latest is a building to navigate as well as to inhabit

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August 20, 2012 Stephen Crafti

RMIT University's city campus has developed a reputation for heroic contemporary architecture.

In the early 1990s Edmond and Corrigan's Building 8 in Swanston Street shook up the city's streetscape. A few years later Ashton Raggatt McDougall's Storey Hall became a topic of conversation, with its cave-like appearance.

More recently, architect Sean Godsell's pared-back Design Hub has made an impact. And just recently unveiled, although hardly a secret, Lyons' Swanston Academic Building is drawing attention.

Lyons' Swanston Academic Building interior. *Photo: John Gollings*

The "new kid on the block" speaks to the other landmark buildings, as well as to the three-dimensional facade of Elenberg Fraser's apartments in A'Beckett Street.

While "context" was paramount for Lyons, the brief from the university was to design a student centred building, where students could engage with friends, or spend time on their own.

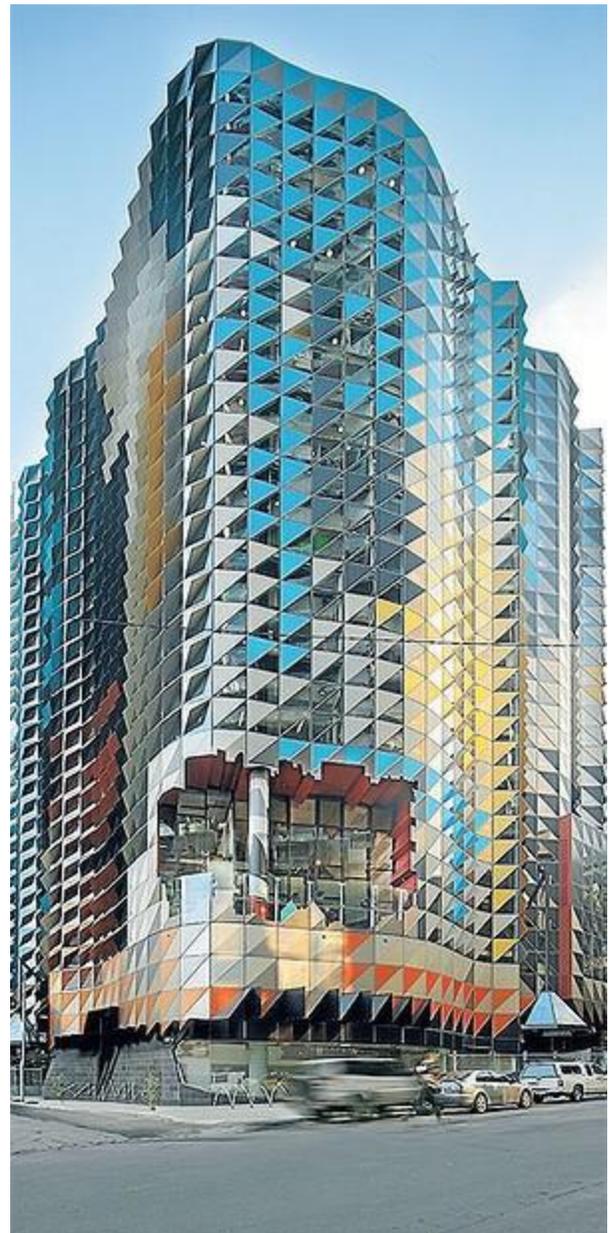
"We wanted the building to be interactive, as well as connecting to the street and other parts of the campus," says Professor Ian Palmer, pro vice-chancellor of the Business College and vice-president of RMIT University.

"Connectivity is a key word. You can see this connectivity not only in Lyons' design, but as importantly in the technology," says Professor Palmer, who enjoys seeing students navigate their way through the building using their iPhones.

Home to 800 staff in the Business College, the 11-storey building has 35,000 square metres of floor space. Snaking around the Oxford Scholar Hotel, the facade is animated by thousands of anodised aluminium panels attached at numerous angles.

Coloured from grey to blue, the facade picks up on the colours of the city, from the intense grey buildings to the blue sky. "The idea was to wear the 'cloak' of the city," says architect Carey Lyon, a director of Lyons.

Although the cloak is one metaphor for Lyons' design, several other



ideas were woven into the architecture. One of the key drivers was determining how students learn, not only today, but into the future. While the building has lecture theatres, some accommodating up to 360 students, the design promotes interaction, using the latest technology.

Some theatres, for example, are termed "lectorial", a hybrid of the lecture theatre and tutorial room. Three or four teachers may be circling several interconnected spaces to assist students. And in some lecture theatres, student chairs can swivel around to allow collaboration with students sitting behind.

There are also many "portal spaces", both inside and outside on terraces, where students can set up their laptops. One of the most impressive of the outdoor spaces is on Level 7. Referred to as the "Sky Garden", the vistas, as well as the facilities, are impressive.

As well as being able to choose from a multitude of seating arrangements, including high-backed gold chesterfield lounges, students can control their immediate environment. Students choosing to stay late, for example, can turn on a switch to heat up their nook. Cross-ventilation is also paramount, giving the building a five-star green star rating.

Lyons' design is also about exploration. "There isn't a traditional front of house," Professor Palmer says. Even the lecture theatres include a glazed rear wall to allow passers-by to see into the space. As visible are the "Trading Rooms", an environment loosely based on the stock exchange format. And just about to open is the "pop-up" business space, a place that will allow students to speculate about operating a business as well as put their ideas into practice.

One student, who has spotted the architect, is keen to give him some feedback. "I feel like it's my patch, even though I'm in media and communications. It's beautifully crafted." What better endorsement?

Lyons' Swanston Academic Building interior. *Photo: John Gollings*

