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RMIT's new business centre draws attention

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RMIT's newly-opened \$200 million Swanston Academic Building is emblematic of the ongoing evolutions in university teaching, breaking through the city scape like a shiny multi-coloured technological creature shaking out its spiky sun shades and saying "look at me!"

Interiors feature escalators and staircases switching back and forth, with a mix of materials, bold colours, double height student spaces, study nooks and open air balconies.

Internal windows open onto multi-story lecture theatres and class rooms where students work around collaborative desks with networked laptops.

They sit on swivel chairs so they can easily switch from group work to watching the class video screen, to looking to wherever their tutors may be speaking from. There are no rows and no lecterns.

It is laced with wireless connectivity providing access to student software and printers. Appointments with the help desk are arranged by text message.

It opened earlier this month and from day one students moved about unfazed as if they had been there for years, simply waiting for the physical world to catch up with them.

But even in this brash and technologically savvy new space there is still some vague uncertainty. At a time when online content is making traditional lectures redundant, for how long will some of the building's shiny big, tiered-seated lecture theatres be needed?

Rather than second-guess the future, RMIT has sensibly gone for flexibility, so the SAB's lecture theatres can be readily re-floored into smaller spaces if needed. Not that RMIT's dean of learning and teaching Geoffrey Crisp is planning any changes right now.

"The lecture isn't dead," he tells the HES. "Even in the future we will still need a small number of spaces where we can get a reasonable number of people together in a fixed location for special occasions.

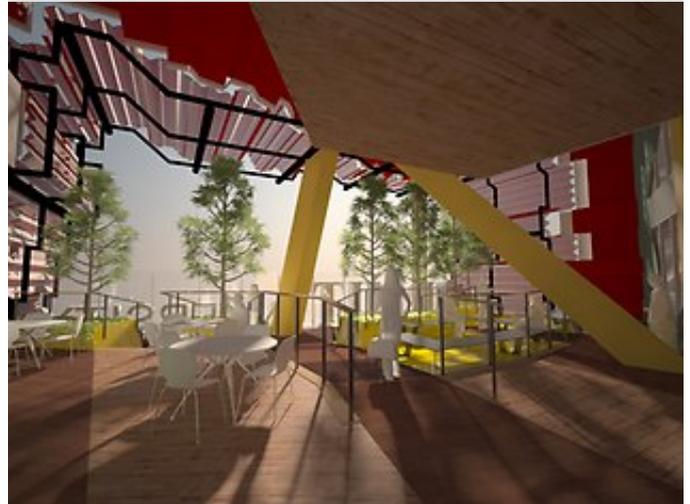
"This building provides us with variety, and this is the way teaching is going. We need a variety of approaches to break up the classes," he said.

"It is built on the premise that collaboration and interaction between students is the core of what we want to happen in the class room," he said.

As the new home for the college of business, mostly catering to business students, and the spaces include a large simulated trading room similar to a bank's.

Designed by Lyons Architects, the 11-storey building boasts 64 teaching spaces, 12 lecture theatres ranging from 90 to 360 seats each, and office space for staff. It is built on Melbourne's Swanston Street across the road from the main campus.

RMIT media students Thomas Hatchman and Kris Vanston said they felt immediately at ease in the building. The HES had run into them in one of the "informal" learning spaces where they were working on their laptops and chatting while looking back across Swanston Street at the concrete walls of the Student Hub.



One of the student spaces at RMIT's new SAB, artist's impression. Source: Supplied

"There is a very strong intimacy to the building. There are lots of colours and shapes, it just makes you want to be here," said Hatchman. "Here you don't feel left behind."

Their only beef is that there isn't a pedestrian bridge leading over the road from the Student Hub. Instead students are having to constantly jay walk across Swanston Street and its trams.

And they would also have liked barbecues in the outside areas. Now there is an idea.