GARDNER'S
REMIT

Photographer: Earl Carter
The RMIT vice-chancellor is an unlikely property developer but, as Andrew Cornell writes, Margaret Gardner's instinct that buildings in their own right showcase and develop academic purpose has turned around the fortunes of the 132-year-old Melbourne institution.

Melbourne's grandest avenue, its defining sight line, is the St Kilda Road-Swanston Street axis, from the War Memorial on the edge of the Botanic Gardens in the south to Victoria Street in the north. That backbone of the city runs past the National Gallery, over the Princess Bridge, past Flinders Street Station, through the CBD to the State Library then on to RMIT. Historically, and fittingly, the axis once finished with the imposing terracotta brick fortress of Carlton United Brewers. Those on the War Memorial steps could see the brewery and, beer in hand, the memorial was the focal point from the brewery.

That building, though, was demolished in 1989 and its 22,000 square metre site has lain barren ever since, leaving that grand axis awkwardly unbalanced. Gone, too, is Melbourne's lesser known and even more nefarious vista of flesh, bookended by the classical nude portrait of Chloe in Young & Jackson hotel in the south and the less classical nudes of the Shaft and Barrel adult complexes to the north. Though it is fair to say the gaping emptiness of the CUB bomb site has had a more profound visual impact.

Since it ceased to provide sustenance to Melbourne, the brewery site has had a particularly intemperate history. Bought initially by the government of Nauru, that benighted island's profligacy saw it sold to RMIT for $25 million as the university outgrew its historic location diagonally opposite. But RMIT's own prodigality, a disastrous computer system
implementation and fuzzy revenue targets, saw another forced sale, this time to Daniel Grollo's Grocon in 2007, of all but one crucial corner of the site.

“There had been a review of RMIT's property holdings when I arrived [in 2005] and the university was looking at what should be disposed of or held,” vice-chancellor Margaret Gardner tells the AFR Magazine. “The decision had been made to put the brewery site to market.” But she was determined not to lose that archetypal Melbourne sight line and RMIT held on to the southeast corner, a 3000-square-metre plot, for which plans had to be suitably imposing. “I excised that corner from the sale so that we could have a significant building,” Gardner says. “And with the sale to Grocon, we have continued to engage with the developer and ensure the CUB site all works together.”

That 'significant' building is the $80 million Design Hub, due to be open and occupied in September. Melbourne has no shortage of classic, grand and controversial buildings; RMIT – and in its former guise as the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology – has always been in the vanguard of presenting the latter. From its brutalist main building whose sheer grey concrete cliffs dominate the southwest block of Franklin and Swanston Streets, to the post-modern, Doctor Who-ish whimsicality of Ashton Raggatt McDougall's 1994 Storey Hall extension, to a series of striking campuses across the city and suburbs.

The Design Hub on such a prominent point has emerged as another in that dramatic architectural narrative, a solid oblong of classic dimension but which, as one rumbles closer on a tram, reveals itself to be sheathed in thousands of discs. It is sequined – a description Gardner uses frequently. “It is a very, very elegant building, so light-filled, a highly desirable space with long, enticing view lines internally, right through the internal exhibition spaces, the lecture theatres,” she says. “And stylistically, it just glistens, with the glass, the Webforge steel webbing and structures, and it is hugely transparent. When it rains, the etched glass discs [the sequins] which provide shade in the sun become transparent. It is glorious.”

The building is the work of renowned architect and RMIT graduate Sean Godsell. Best known for his confronting residential and public infrastructure work – most famously the multi-award-winning St Andrews Beach House in Victoria – this is his first large-scale commercial project. Godsell did however work on major public buildings with Sir Denys Lasdun in London and The Hassell Group in Australia before launching his own firm, Sean Godsell Architects. RMIT describes the project as having a “unique building facade comprised of 16,000 semi-translucent, sandblasted glass cells with the capacity for solar technology to be incorporated into the cells. The Design Hub facade offers shading that is critical to the delivery of energy efficiency and indoor environment quality for the building.”

The striking etched-glass disc second skin and the design approach to environmental concerns owe much to Godsell's residential work, particularly projects in Nevada and China, the architect says. “Double facades emerged in Europe in the 70s but for almost the opposite reason to how we used the idea in Nevada and now here. In Europe, it was in cold climates where the glass skin allowed sunlight to disseminate. Here, we're using the skin for shade and, in the future, probably for energy generation.”

Dramatic built form was only the most visible element of the RMIT commission. Gardner envisages the Design Hub as a catalyst for cross-disciplinary creativity at RMIT. “This building will bring together a great diversity of our researchers and post-graduate work in areas like engineering, architecture, landscape, industrial design – so you might have fashion designers working alongside automotive designers, games designers working with Audi. It's incredibly fluid because the building encourages it,” she says.

The Audi collaboration with RMIT's Games & Experimental Entertainment Laboratory (GEELab) has developed a rear-seat entertainment system using holographic 3D projection, gestural interaction and location-awareness. The research was presented at the Audi Urban Future Summit, during the 64th International Motor Show in Frankfurt, Germany. GEELab is an international research facility focused on developing products and technology for the...
gaming, entertainment and media industries, with offices in
Melbourne and Stuttgart, Germany. The project will be one of
the Design Hub’s first tenants.

Godsell’s brief, then, was to offer large, open-floor plates to
e ncourage this collaboration along with the provision of all
the necessary storage and administrative infrastructure to free
up that space. “This was a really exciting part of the
university’s agenda, designing a building that was about how
people work and how to present that work to the public,” he
says. These core principles and philosophies behind the Design
Hub are engraved in RMIT’s guiding five-year infrastructure
plan for property, which covers the institute’s global campuses
in Australia and Vietnam.

The other exciting challenge for Godsell was to future-proof
the building. The signature glass discs presently offer an
elegant solution to light and shade but in the future can be
adapted for solar power, water harvesting and other self-
sustaining activities. “We have to create the building in that
interstitial space between now and the future, the skin works
e nvironmentally today but who knows? In 20 years, this
building may power itself.”

The Design Hub may be the most iconic structure in
Gardner’s building program for RMIT but it is not, by any
stretch, the most ambitious. Wrapped around the Oxford
Scholar Hotel, one of the traditional centres of RMIT
culture, the $200 million-plus Swanston Academic Building
will also open this year. Strikingly designed in its own right, it
has a mosaic-like multifaceted façade that looms over the
northern CBD. The university says the building is its biggest
investment in a teaching and learning facility to date and the
largest construction project RMIT has ever undertaken. The
35,000-square-metre building is the new anchor of the
university’s “Swanston Street precinct” or what Gardner calls
Melbourne’s ‘RMIT Quarter’.

Designed by Lyons Architecture, fundamental to this
building, too, is the psychology of the workspace. Architect
Carey Lyon says he was struck by how RMIT students de-
camped to nearby CBD shopping centres and cafés to work
together. The Swanston building is designed to give them that
freedom of space on campus. The idea is for a ‘permeable’
building that encourages movement. There will be seven
themed ‘portals’, or common areas, for students. A ‘cloud’
portal has soft, white furniture, a cool southerly aspect and an
emphasis on quiet discussion whereas the ‘nightclub’
courages music and socialising. An ‘industrial’ portal is
aimed at capturing the chic-grunge of the city’s laneway scene.

Gardner is unapologetic about the scale of
her property ambition, the portfolio value of
which is about $1.3 billion covering more
than 80 buildings. Nothing is “just another
building” for Gardner. The scale of the
building projects also emphasises just how far
RMIT has turned around its financial
performance since her arrival. Her
predecessor Ruth Dunkin resigned under intense public
pressure in 2004 following losses of $17.7 million, largely
due to a faulty student administration system launched in
2002. RMIT had appeared to recover from that but
then reports emerged of a budget shortfall of $20 million to
$30 million as student revenue numbers were questioned.
Today’s building programs alone will entail more than
$500 million of investment.

In its latest annual report, RMIT reported an overall surplus
of $55.3 million on revenue totalling $819 million. Underlying
earnings were up 14.4 per cent. In the report, Gardner says this
performance enabled RMIT “to continue investing in
e ducation and research. In particular, [the continuing]
construction of the Design Hub – supported by the
Commonwealth through a grant of $28.6 million from the
Education Investment Fund and the Swanston Academic
Building”. Capital expenditure in the 2011 financial year was
$178.2 million, compared with $194.6 million in 2010. The
report notes “property-related capital expenditure was a large
proportion of the total capital expenditure for the year”.

The five-year property plan maps out investment through to
2016 and stresses attributes that have established the
university’s “identity and brand”: strong outcomes for the
built environment in terms of architectural, urban design
and sustainability; and excellence in spaces for teaching,
learning and research. These strengths, the plan says, “will
continue to reinforce RMIT as a vibrant, urban, and
innovative university”.

The plan’s strategic objectives include using innovative
design to reinforce the institution’s “role as an urban university
and provide a physical expression of its mission”. Gardner stresses the point: for her, the building program is a “very important part of what we do. RMIT has a really significant strength in design and research. These projects speak to our strengths, they’re very symbolic. And it’s very important that we use our own graduates, like Scan, when we do this”.

That strength and commitment to adventurous architecture predates Gardner, speaking to RMIT’s tradition as a technical institution. Indeed, like other former tech colleges it has made the challenge of adapting to city campuses, without the glorious architectural legacies of the sandstone universities, one of its hallmarks. There is, deep in the culture, that industrial, structural design DNA.

Gardner herself is an economist and Fulbright scholar with a PhD in industrial relations. She established herself as an academic manager with administrative roles at Deakin and Griffith Universities and Queensland University of Technology. Married to University of Melbourne vice-chancellor Glyn Davis, the two shifted to Melbourne together, establishing not just Australia’s most powerful academic couple but an academic jousting field up Swanston Street. The Parkville-South Carlton centred Melbourne University has its own territorial expansion program.

RMIT interviewed a panel of architects but Gardner says Godsell’s ideas about how to promote inter-disciplinary activity, together with his RMIT credentials, were very important in his selection. “Various members of our staff have worked around the world and have experience in working with architects but it was not a question of us interviewing and saying ‘here is our template’. We didn’t want that,” she says.

“The building is a product of the architect’s creative response to the brief and the brief was about the changing the way people work, what they want from their workplace. The scary thing for me is just how much the building turned out like what I had imagined such a building to be.”

For Godsell, the conversational nature of how the project developed was demanding. “As architects, we are problem solvers, we like to work out how to solve a challenge in a brief so we struggled at first with how broad this one was,” he says, pointing to a 44-gallon drum-sized bin full of sketches – many of which don’t look remotely like what has arisen on the site. “The biggest mistakes come from asking the wrong questions or incorrectly defining the problem. So we had this process of getting the problem correctly defined.”

The signature glass discs, for example, came into the design well into the process. “The idea of the façade we had early on but we had a completely different conception of it,” Godsell says. “We had been debating the number of levels, the orientation of the building, those very, very important things, to get the concept right. That’s where the battle is won or lost – and that’s why we have this collection of apparently meaningless diagrams where we explore possibilities. The client wanted a façade that wasn’t fixed, that wasn’t just about shade but looked nice. And we had used a version of these discs in our residential work.”

While Godsell emphasises the connection between this building and his other work, particularly the second skin which to some degree recreates the natural air-conditioning of a Coolgardie Safe (where airflow through wet hessian creates a cool interior), he also credits RMIT with being prepared to take risks with the building. “You need a client like RMIT, which is prepared to imagine the possibility of this kind of building,” he says. “Then, too, the building is designed to encourage design collaboration and that has a commercial imperative: design is a growth industry and Melbourne is a design heartland. I argued right from the start that the building be its own laboratory, constantly testing new ideas.”

Along with future-proofing the structure, Godsell aimed to build flexibility into the working spaces. Floors can be reconfigured to suit the tenants; set up to display projects or for research, for instance. “Everyone benefits from good design, from more efficient cars to better seats to sit on, so if this building can promote the development of better design research and outcomes, that will be very rewarding,” he says.

The outside of the building and its obvious engineering interest is, then, just one part of the project. The other is how the building would be used. The long, open floor spaces are designed so different disciplines are literally adjacent. Stairs and elevators are at the ends of the building so the occupants walk past one another frequently, bringing together people from very different disciplines. “We worked with the client to understand these spaces, how warehouses and storage and exhibition spaces would work,” Godsell says.

He too believes fervently in the collaborative, cross-fertilising nature of the building. “You only have to look at how modern industrial success stories like Apple work,” he says. “As my son says, Apple is like NASA was in the 60s, bringing together all this design and engineering genius.” Nor are the potential occupants fazed by the idiosyncratic work environment. Gardner says there has been no shortage of interest in moving in. Project teams might occupy space for just a few months, or a year, or several years.

RMIT’s property portfolio spans the gothic, modernist, post-modernist, the 1920s, ’30s, ’60s. The Design Hub and Swanston Academic Building are a physical restatement, then, of the university’s return to financial stability and its imperative: design is a growth industry and Melbourne is a design heartland. I argued right from the start that the building be its own laboratory, constantly testing new ideas.”

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RMIT vice-chancellor Margaret Gardner photographed in the Design Hub building in May before the fitout began.
Design karma

Sean Godsell (left) says it was a "nice bit of serendipity" that fellow RMIT alumni, longtime friend and client Earl Carter (far left) took the official photographs of Design Hub featured in these pages. In 1998 Godsell designed the Carter/Tucker house in the dunes in Breamlea, Victoria. Carter sponsors an annual award at RMIT for the best student in fashion/editorial photography.