



# RMIT opens door to creative design

STEPHEN CRAFTI

RMIT University's Bundoora West Campus, in Plenty Road, Bundoora, is just detectable from the road. "Our clients wanted this building to form a gateway to this campus, something that would be noticed by the broader community," says architect Allan Powell. "A sense of arrival without dominating the site."

Previously a greenfield site, the brief from RMIT University was for a 350-seat lecture theatre that stood on its own, an iconic design separate from the other buildings on campus. Initially a glass-like pavilion was suggested. However, given the wind conditions a glazed free-standing pavilion was not ideal.

"Often, it's also more engaging not to see everything all at once and it makes people more curious about taking a look inside," Powell says.

Those driving along Plenty Road will certainly be drawn to this new building. The curvaceous form, constructed from 30-centimetre-wide concrete panels, has a monolithic presence. And rather than the usual front entry, there's a series of openings that beckon people to enter.

"It's not an obvious plan. There is no clear front door," says architect Ed Glenn, a partner in Allan Powell Architects.

The walls of the lecture theatre are set back from the concrete panels to allow for a series of outdoor gardens that are paved and planted with trees. Used by students to catch up before or after a lecture, these spaces also provide protection from the wind. "We saw the design as a high-tech object placed within this naturalistic form," Glenn says. An inherent part of this natural form includes the ageing of the concrete over time.

Allan Powell regularly incorporates courtyards behind walled gardens, sometimes in a

domestic setting. Spaces within spaces set up a more intriguing relationship between the indoors and outdoors. "With our designs, there's not a strong delineation between these spaces, with one merging into the other," says Powell. The garden aspect is also crucial to the building's interior, with floor-to-ceiling windows framing trees in the courtyard.

Like many educational buildings of the early 21st century, the emphasis is on flexibility. As important as the lecture theatre are the interstitial spaces surrounding the theatre. Students can use these areas, meet informally or sit on their own with a laptop.

"Before we even started to develop the scheme, we looked at technology worldwide, to see where educational trends were heading," says Glenn. One distinctive trend is to provide a variety of spaces where students can meet in various group sizes. The lecture theatre, externally clad with white timber boards, allows for these irregular spaces. "We've also learnt that people develop affection for certain spaces, tending to gravitate towards these," he says.

The lecture theatre, with its black painted ceiling and embedded fluorescent lights, allows two screens to be projected, as well as providing the technology for broadcasting to online students. Part of the architects' brief from RMIT University was for "future adaptive reuse" schemes that would allow the theatre to be transformed into eight separate tutorial rooms if required.

The theatre is an object that immediately engages viewers. Allan Powell Architects has successfully managed to achieve both form and function, creating an elegant and sculptural gateway to the campus.



Eye-catching:  
RMIT University's  
new building at  
Bundoora.