

A TIME CAPSULE INTERVIEW POST COMPLETION RETROSPECTIVE

FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE, BUILDING AND PLANNING The University of Melbourne + SPOWERS

As told to Peter Hyatt in Monument, October 2013
by Nigel Fitton, Ros Magee and Robert Pahor

BUILT PEDAGOGY ORIGINS



“The design concept developed by Spowers has emerged as one of the great stories of any recent campus development. It is the story of a remarkable communication program that carefully responded to brief and provided other, unexpected, dimensions that have delivered a remarkable result.

While it is a collection of buildings and interconnecting spaces, it also reflects the very essence and fundamentals of architecture and planning that provide shelter, organisation and delight.

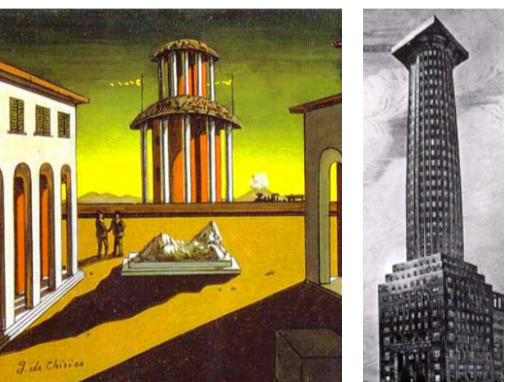
Clients invariably expect the first two qualities as a given. Delight is potentially more problematic, but the result clearly demonstrates a cultural fit and philosophy that aligns The University of Melbourne’s aspirations with that ‘otherness’ of delight that Spowers has been able to provide.

In an age of ever-changing technologies, the architect has been able to guide The University of Melbourne towards a sequence of structures and spaces that are truly of their time and place. Rather than adopting a universal, or global, model, Spowers has evolved a response that is uniquely Melbourne.



The city’s reputation for design has emerged by developing a faith and confidence in its own voice. In this regard, the architecture and planning that this cultural confidence advances has little to do with the idea parachuted in from offshore. The design language used throughout the project was shaped by the ideas and voices of The University of Melbourne’s leaders and those who use the Faculty on a regular basis.

Spowers took the view, and this was reinforced by research, that The University of Melbourne would be better served by a series of carefully sited, connected facilities rather than a block-buster ‘mega school’ structure. Because of the way the campus is established, it became apparent that, as it extends, its centre of gravity fragments into many smaller portals and doorways that, in turn, open to labyrinthine experiences much like that portrayed in Umberto Eco’s ‘Name of the Rose’.



This quality of multiple layers contributed to a complex whole, rather than existing as a stand-alone mega structure based on one or two ideals. Its labyrinthine qualities exist in that way of being mysterious rather than ambiguous or perplexing. In this way it reflects some of those nuances and complexities we associate with the Gothic era or in the late 19th century emporium with their implicit layers of richness.

The adopted solution was less preoccupied with the architectural gesture than about genuine place-making, as evidenced by the ‘Five o’clock Friday’ Seminars which draw crowds of interested design-orientated people to the University - a crucible of learning.



The successful outcome was not one building. It was not a mega structure that encapsulated and then put together all the faculties into one brand. It was an urban design solution based on land art, smaller building types, prototypes; and that collage came together to form a precinct in The University of Melbourne that actually evolved into faculties.

Spowers likened the process to taking a chunk of granite and breaking it with a sledgehammer. Still part of the same stone, there were then a number of different pieces that became far easier to manage and were far more interesting, than one big rock.

This process produced a fine grain and authenticity throughout the project rather than attempting to superimpose synthetic artefacts from other cultures, experiences and places.



Academic armatures and causeways provide the collective tissue and theatre for each of the faculties to illuminate the iterate scholar and heighten enquiry.

Where a molecule is made up of protons and neutrons; each held in perfect balance. The facility provides the gravity to hold the faculties together whilst showcasing the electricity between them.

Comfortable Courtyards
Sunny Squares
Didactic Laneways
Bustling Alleyways

“Something with a story to tell... something with a bit of poetry or sensuality about it”.

Cliff, Final Year Student, The University of Melbourne - [Australia’s Next Top Architecture Student 2008](#)

How will this be done? By consultation, good programming, the determination to proceed and plain hard work and dedication by all.





This is not to say the results are a study in introspection. Rather they are informed by international standards and a local language that values economic design, visible construction techniques and zero tolerance for carbon emissions as much as the grand design statement.

The great success of the Spowers vision was its willingness to understand The University of Melbourne at that multi-complex level from Vice-Chancellor to first year student. Those involved on the journey of design discovery between 2009-2013 all learned an immense amount from each other in that true collegiate spirit of higher education.

At this time and place, The University of Melbourne has justly earned itself this remarkable family of buildings that will successfully contribute to its culture of education as inspiration. ”

THE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT THE TRANSCENDENT UNION

“Spowers approach was to satisfy and exceed the parameters provided by the brief. That was a given. As a practice they also wanted to imbue the work with other qualities relevant to such a high level of international competition. This included a superior level of enquiry and exploration above and beyond the recommended framework.

The University of Melbourne and Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning wanted something vividly architectural so felt comfortable with an approach that was a serious piece of architecture matched by standout pragmatic and functional qualities. It really came back to this idea of reconciling Spowers identity as a practice and feeling comfortable with what would help enhance The University of Melbourne’s global identity.

This led to a series of design propositions based on research within The University of Melbourne across the entire strata from Vice-Chancellor through to the first year student body.

The design solution adopted flowed from architecture critical of its time and place. There were real benefits that emerged from Spowers appreciation, knowledge and nuances of the local Melbourne culture. There was due recognition of client, site, flora, climate change and the results of Spowers research of the diverse client groups. Ultimately this awareness informed the results and brought all these issues into an alignment not always understood by major international practices.

Performing as an international practice but also being on home ground, ultimately worked in Spowers favour despite the tendency for many Australians to suffer from the cultural cringe that imagines that imported is superior to local.

Referential to the past and incorporating Joseph Reed’s Bank of New South Wales and the extraordinary juxtaposition of the Japanese Room, the building straddles three centuries of architectural theory and manages to respect and challenge each of them.

Ultimately Spowers approach of meticulous preparation contributed to a convincing authenticity. The University of Melbourne appreciated that this was critical to a luminous vision which was home sown and grown.

In this regard the design understands those few vital degrees of difference that separates superior local from standard global. It is described in the expression of the planning and built forms that are formal and yet not so circumscribed by practice precedent that speaks of repetition and rigidity rather than rigour and invention.

The design recognises that the informal qualities of contemporary education are unfolding almost faster than anyone can possibly predict. Nevertheless it was imperative that the architecture inspired and symbolised the importance of shared learning.

In this way Spowers was able to provide that vital lifeline to encourage education of extraordinary excellence. It was imperative therefore that the buildings that had to symbolise this and were entirely credible in all of their variations and dimensions.

It was also an opportunity to put back into Melbourne and The University of Melbourne something that wasn’t simply the ‘architecture school’, but a facility that sits in the heartland of The University of Melbourne itself. In turn that has actually become an international beacon to illuminate parts of Melbourne all over the planet. It clearly had to invite discussion and debate by other academics and Vice-Chancellors on a global basis.

As a practice, Spowers might be viewed as this little tiny dot on the bottom right hand corner of the globe. In one sense they are boutique and yet that allows them to move swiftly and with purpose. Yet because they are fully hardwired into the global system they compete on the large scale of thought and technology.

The students should speak in volumes, areas of a civic scale to encourage and envelope that steely reserve that is required for a public forum.

The academic environment, due to the degree of motivation expected must provide a strategy to tune the internal qualities to cater for an adaptive pedagogical environment.

The aim is to provide a school without walls or barriers; providing a frantic interface of exchange and discussion whilst ensuring solitude and reflection can co-habitat and perhaps even contrast different learning styles.

Flexibility of environment provides for long life of buildings and minds.

Providing a ‘horses for courses’ flexibility, not a one size fits all regardless.



Since the competition result, as alumni of The University of Melbourne, Spowers recognise that it is an extraordinary privilege to be able to go and revisit 'their' campus in these circumstances. Having 'lived' on the campus for the past four years they have been able to embrace the spirit of both Faculty and University."

THE DESIGN STUDIO THE POWER OF MORE THAN ONE

"This project encapsulates the notion of change. Of all the Arts, Architecture is never static. This fluid, evolutionary quality demanded a building that could be modified during its lifetime; yet retain its integrity as a facility dedicated to a built environment that paid full regard to the natural environment.

Perhaps the best part has been the appreciation by the various client and user groups of just what is now available to them. That full understanding of facility's potential has now changed and it is an extraordinary outcome because it rewards the collective effort and exceeds the early individual expectations.

The Design Studio really reflects the input of students and staff who were quite instrumental in the design of these buildings. Those dreams and aspirations were fed back into the design and that was one of the great skills of the practice, to free up all that rich source of information from the staff and student body. Spowers would like to claim the credit, but really, the result came from the University itself.

Across all disciplines the interaction between academic environment and design studio allows students and academic staff to regularly run charettes for problem solving. Sometimes those charettes might have nothing to do with architecture, building or planning and simply have to do with air quality or landscape for instance. An important aspect of pedagogy is inevitably going to concern itself with enquiry and posing questions and future making, but in the context of delivery; an outcome which is dependent on the veracity of research. You cannot make people learn to work together, respect other peoples opinions, address cross cultural ideas, work harder, and give up family and friends.

What Spowers has done is create an environment that provides a reawakening for the younger undergraduates that places them within a larger global culture and with guidance, wisdom and hope.

The design studio reflects ideas of work that are realistic to society.

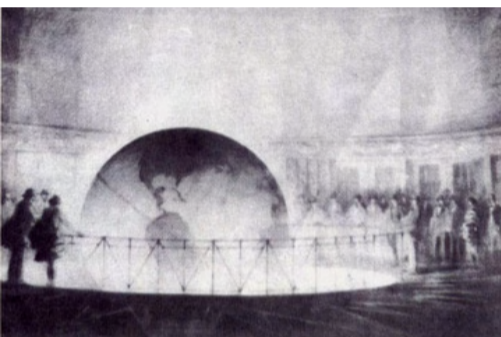
Ultimately it relies on the focus of a credible, effective collegiate environment in a series of buildings within the The University of Melbourne. It is a think- tank that makes its own tradition and history. In many respects the building and its academic/ student body are inseparable from their working and learning environment. It is of the moment and of the future, without excluding the past."

In the past the design studio has been a bastion for the architectural faculty. This has been proven as an elitist proposition.

The new studio will be ethereal, social and physical, a bit like Mount Everest. The external will require cross disciplines to enter into dialogue, to establish base camp relationships; and from there plan an assault on the summit.

The social level will require the strengthening of the ethereal relationship into a rapid frame work of cross talk, mapping and dialogue.

The endeavour is to create a socialisation as the studio environment that relates to an environment which is yet to be defined; that being the post laptop age. The time when digital natives learn to draw and think as everything else is intuitive.



THE LIVING BUILDING DESIGN IS A JOURNEY

"Winning the competition is a culmination of 10 to 15 years of work by a relatively small group of people who cared passionately about achieving a fantastic result. But it was also about not simply coming 'out of the blue'. Spowers proved that by winning this project they could deliver on a single building all the way up to the substantial urban schemes completed in the Middle-East.

There is a misconceived notion "Those that can 'do', and those that can't 'teach'." Spowers managed to disprove this as fallacious and to dissolve the boundaries that separate theory from practice.

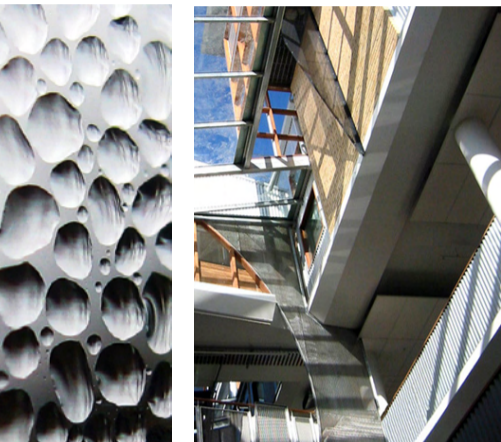
The solution is actually driven from a far more inclusive ideology and design process. It was not simply process driven because that risked being incredibly boring and lack-lustre. Instead they listened and harnessed the client's collective wisdom and insight. This process was instrumental in providing the necessary sparkle. The result is a series of fully connected buildings as lanterns for learning visible from around the planet.

Spowers design metaphor and orientation point was the idea of education as an exhilarating journey and experience. To this end they treated the composite of structures as a series of glider aircraft that were vividly expressed and which invited a strong sense of occupant/pilot connection in their design and operation.

The skill is to bridge the immediate difference between the academic and the professional. This requires a leap of faith; and excellent accountable advice.

We would engage in the social sciences of Sociology, Anthropology, Scientists, Ethnographers and other disciplines to find allied research regarding social interaction. Perhaps this will become a future faculty within the structure.





Spowers understood that buildings only ever fully come alive once they are well used and appreciated and this attitude informed the quality of the experience and the paring of structure to achieve the highest level of function throughout. In other words the buildings could not afford to carry unnecessary ballast or embodied energy. This has resulted in demonstrably lightweight buildings that have that incongruous balance of robustness and delicacy. That is why the metaphor of the glider has worked so well throughout the project.

As a result, the project has established a truly sustainable result achieved less by 'ticking of the boxes' than working in a tangential way that delivers all of the necessary parts but are uniquely and beautifully assembled.

It is a building of the earth and the sky, of sun, water, air and elements.

It addresses advanced communications, data handling and technology impacts in an open-ended manner, reflecting on the fact that 50 years ago, buildings had minimal air conditioning, basic telephony and no computers in daily use.

Central to the design philosophy is the proposition that the new building is likely to have a design life equally as long as its predecessor.

Concurrent with the academic and student stream, structure, servicing, finishes and the basic processes of the building came under close scrutiny.

The building allows demand on scarce resources to be managed but also acts as an educational model for students, continuing Spowers history of research and enquiry into sustainable development with The University of Melbourne.

Economy of means in the fabric and systems produced a philosophy of generating only that which was necessary to answer the problem set and the functions perceived. The building stretches materials to their functional and economic limits and is the culmination of Spowers twenty five year odyssey in sustainability.

CAPABILITY AND PROCESS

“One of Spowers great strengths on the project was to fully surrender to the process required. They structured the office in a way that resulted in team leaders and support staff being located at The University of Melbourne for extended periods. It was this willingness to commit to total immersion that was a contributing factor in their selection. They were on site, and ‘hands on’ in those critical areas of project design and management that require instant response rather than remote control or smoke signals. The key factor was for Spowers to, in effect, relocate it’s design office to the campus.

Spowers dedicated a team comprising design directors, senior associates and highly experienced architects. The philosophy was wholly inclusive on so many levels. There were some 40 individual seminars held on the project with qualitative and quantitative involvement gathered from more than 1,500 people.

After accumulating this broad information base, Spowers were then able to interpret the key findings and evolve the most suitable response based on needs, desires and recommendations.

As architects it became apparent that the needs for a flexible social environment were no less important than the critical quality of education spaces. In a real sense this understanding enabled Spowers to structure lucid, legible platforms that can be expanded and interchanged as necessity dictates.

There were also the vital elements of expression that reflect the scholarship of staff and students and to this end Spowers have incorporated flexible display areas for physical and electronic representation to encourage debate, discussion and learning. These low and high-tech panels can be displayed externally and internally, thereby adding to the legitimacy of the buildings’ grain. Neither structure or decoration, but bold exhibition gestures, these panels are a direct result of the student and academic body’s desire to take architecture to the widest possible audience.

The process of enquiry resulted in many other minor and major discoveries and the are incorporated in the various structures, spaces and circulations zones.

The process of great design inevitably involves translation and Spowers ability to interpret and adapt the throw-away line and discarded comment, as much as seizing upon the lofty principle etched in stone, explains how they were able to help The University of Melbourne realise such an exceptional result.

The living building provides a resilient membrane, adaptable and changeable, a translucent envelope allowing the palimpsest to be evident externally without the need for full body armour. This innovative new develop and environment will be extensively measured, to align the Pre-design

“Your work in sustainability and creating environmentally friendly buildings is an example for many Australians, and I hope that it inspires more people to take action to protect the environment, our most valuable resource.”

Simon Crean

Outstanding performance in 2009 could well be underwhelming in 2013. The final design to live beyond 2013 will need to become highly adaptive.

The building simply ‘does more with less’.

“Spowers’ innovation ... broad range of sustainability, implemented to a high degree... attractive, healthy building.”

Banksia Award

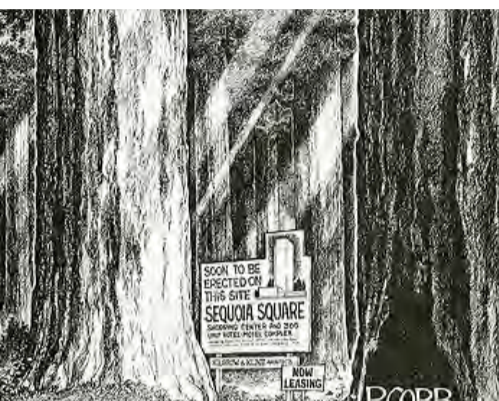
“Architects who we value so much”

Sir Gustav Nossal

“I like their international approach and I always work with their best people”

Sheikh Hisham Al-Khalifa





2005 to 2009

Project Scale and Budget
 35 projects up to \$20,000,000
 6 projects \$20,000,000 - \$100,000,000
 4 projects above \$100,000,000
 1 project above \$1,000,000,000

Design Team

Nigel Fitton	Director
Ros Magee	Director
Robert Pahor	Director
Scott Allardyce	Senior Associate
Andrew Rutt	Senior Associate
plus CADD Resources	

Project Types

Box Hill TAFE - 3 projects
 Metropolitan Fire Brigade
 Australian Technical College
 Reef Island, Bahrain

SPOWERS ARBV No: C50058

Previous Works

Box Hill Institute of TAFE
 Alison Fincher
 Ph: (03) 9286-9340
 Email: a.fischer@bhtafe.edu.au

Metropolitan Fire Brigade
 Charlotte Barty
 Ph: (03) 9665-4363
 Email: cbarty@mfb.vic.gov.au

Robert Houston
 Ph: 9420 3944
 Email: rhouston@mfb.vic.gov.au

Australian Technical College
 Andrew Williamson
 Ph: 0418 331 117
 Email: awilliamson@atcsunshinecom.au

Reef Island Bahrain
 Sheikh Hisham al-Khalifa
 Ph: +973 (17) 790090
 Email: hisham21@batelco.com.bh

Williamstown High School
 Steve Cook
 Ph: (03) 9399-9228
 Email: sc@willhigh.vic.edu.au

MERIT

MAJOR CONFERENCES

- 'Sustainable International Case Studies' - University of Melbourne, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, October 2008
- 'Natural Ventilation Case Studies' - University of Melbourne, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, October 2008
- 'Environmental Rating Systems' - University of Melbourne, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, October 2008
- 'A Reflection on Sustainability' - Property Victoria, April 2009
- 'Low Carbon Buildings - How Easy are They?' - Green Cities Conference, Sydney, February 2009
- 'Water and Architecture' - RAI @ Loop, November 2008
- 'Towards Zero' - Aldar, Abu Dhabi, October 2008
- 'Sustainable Development - Millennium War Stories' - Australia Institute of Project Management, August 2008
- 'Sustainable School Design' - VPA Conference, May 2008
- 'Doing It - Sustainable Common Practice' - Economic Development and Australia, April 2008
- 'Building for Learning' - Green Cities Conference, Sydney, February 2008
- Timber Building Design Conference, Melbourne University, 2008
- 'Leading Sustainable Education Design' - Education Forum for all Universities in Victoria, October 2008
- VPA (Victorian Principals' Association), 2008
- VAASP (Victorian Association of Secondary School Principals) Conference, 2008
- 'Project Zero' - Corenet Summit, August 2007
- RAIA Education Forum, 2007 - RMIT Sustainable Design Conference, 2007
- DEECD Sustainable Design Presentation - 2007
- 'Al Waha Resort' - Cityscape Dubai, August 2006
- 'Green Buildings - The Future for the UAE' - Government of Abu Dhabi Energy Board (now MASDAR), December 2006
- 'Clean, Green and Healthy' - Australian Conservation Foundation, November 2006
- 'Green Development Courses' - Investa Property Group, 2006 to present
- 'Delivering Green Buildings' - RMIT, August 2006

PUBLICATIONS

- "Champions Racing Museum"
[Artichoke](#), Issue 11, 2005
- "Australian Racing Museum"
[Artichoke](#), Issue 8, 2004
- "A Touch of Green and Gold"
[Australian Financial Review](#), 18 July 2007
- "Spowers Carves Name at School Awards"
[Australian Financial Review](#), 11 October 2007
- "60L Green Building"
[Monument](#), October 2005
- "Building 8"
[Architecture Australia](#), July/August 2005
- "60L Green Building"
[Architecture Australia](#), September/October 2003
- "An Island in Bahrain"
[Architecture Australia](#), March/April 2003





METROPOLITAN FIRE BRIGADE



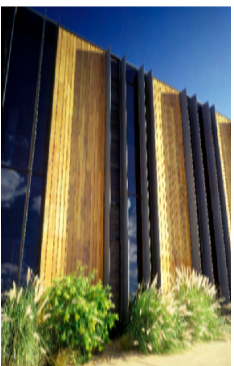
BOX HILL INSTITUTE OF TAFE



WILLIAMSTOWN HIGH SCHOOL



REEF ISLAND, BAHRAIN



BENDON MONASH UNIVERSITY, CHURCHILL CAMPUS



AUSTRALIAN TECHNICAL COLLEGE



MELBOURNE MUSEUM



THE GREAT EGYPTIAN MUSEUM



GREEN SQUARE, SYDNEY

RESEARCH

Joint activity with University of Melbourne Department of Architecture
"60L Green Building Research" 1999-2003

PRODUCTION OF OUTSTANDING MERIT

Metropolitan Fire Brigade Emergency Services Headquarters, Burnley Victoria
http://www.resourcesmart.vic.gov.au/documents/Metropolitan_Fire_Brigade_Cobeii_Case_Study.pdf

Box Hill Institute of TAFE, Building 8, Box Hill Victoria

Williamstown High School, Williamstown Victoria
<http://www.sustainabilityawards.com.au/?p=92>

Reef Island, Bahrain
<http://www.reefisland.com.bh>

Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE, Echuca Victoria

Monash University Churchill Campus

Australian Technical College, Sunshine
http://www.worldarchitecturenews.com/index.php?fuseaction=wanappln.projectview&upload_id=11481

60L Green Building
<http://www.60lgreenbuilding.com>

AWARDS

2009 World Architecture International Education Awards - Final Shortlist (announced 7 May 2009)

2009 Shortlist - Interior Design Awards

2008 Premier's Sustainability Award Winner

2008 Interior Design Awards, Sustainable Design Winner

2007 Master Builders Association Awards Winner Excellence in Construction of Commercial Buildings

2007 School Design Awards Winner Best Secondary School

2007 School Design Awards Winner Best Overall School Design

2005 Interior Design Association of Australia Public/Institutional Interior Design Winner

2005 Art Directors Club, New York Environmental Design, Gallery
Museum Exhibit/Installation Distinctive Merit

2005 Interior Design Association of Australia Colour in Commercial Interior Commendation
www.interiordesignawards.com.au/2005results

2004 Royal Australian Institute of Architects Commendation In Association with Simon Anderson

2004 Royal Australian Institute of Architects Commendation In Association with Di Carlo Potts

2004 Royal Australian Institute of Architects Commendation

2003 Master Builders Australia National Building Environment and Energy Efficiency Award Winner

2003 Royal Australian Institute of Architects Award of Merit Winner

2003 Banksia Environmental Award Leadership in Sustainable Building Winner

2003 Premier's Business Sustainability Award Winner

2002 Royal Australian Institute of Architects Commendation

2002 Royal Australian Institute of Architects Commendation

2001 Royal Australian Institute of Architects Award of Merit

2001 Royal Australian Institute of Architects Colourbond Steel Award

PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP

Property Council of Australia (Victoria), Chair, Sustainable Development Committee

RAIA, Large Practices Committee

National Association of Women in Construction, Treasurer

Corenet, Chapter Committee

TEFMA, Member

INTERNATIONAL COMPETITIONS

Won:

Reef Island, Bahrain

Metropolitan Fire Brigade Emergency Services Headquarters

Premiated:

Melbourne Museum

The Great Egyptian Museum

Green Square, Sydney

Wagga Civic Centre

FILM / TELEVISION

Reef Island, Bahrain - Al Yaum

Bahrain TV 1, July 2006 (Arabic)

Al Waha Resort Launch, Al Yaum

Bahrain TV 1, March 2006 (Arabic)

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