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## Feature

### Tom Kvan talks: Uni Melb's 'benchmark' comp

03.09.09

Professor Tom Kvan discusses setting a benchmark for academic buildings, and the University of Melbourne architecture school competition.





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**ADR:** We've been getting a lot of good reports from people involved in the competition about the process itself and how well managed it was. What was the strategy there and what were your objectives?

**Tom Kvan:** We recognised that the building has the opportunity to set a benchmark for how we develop academic buildings, after decades of under funding and in the current climate in which funding is becoming available. Given the focus of our research and teaching, we think we had the obligation to step up and set a standard. That led us to thinking carefully about how to go about procuring a building for a well-informed client such as ourselves. Through consultation with alumni, professionals, students and staff, we identified the four dimensions we used to frame the competition in question. That allowed us to take the focus away from the geometry and form of the building and concentrate on the substance of the building.

**ADR:** So, the program?

**TK:** Not even just the program – it was the four questions: 'What is a living building?', 'What is a pedagogical building?', 'What is the future of studio teaching?', 'What is the future of academic work?'. These are threshold questions. When we used that in the first phase to screen the 133 entries, they became very useful differentiators between those who understood we were asking a question, and those who thought we were simply asking for an answer.

**ADR:** So the initial stage of the competition wasn't about an idea for a site, but how a practice

positioned itself in relation to those four questions?

**TK:** Yes, and without any reference to geometry or building shape. There was nothing about a building that they could answer. They didn't have a site, and they had absolutely no brief. So what we needed were answers to questions such as, 'What is the future of academic work?' Some people articulated that they were interested in that question and had some thoughts about how it might be answered, other people simply said, 'Well here's an answer,' and others ignored the question altogether. It was the first group that we looked at in order to find a possible short-list. We wanted practices that understood that we were an intelligent client articulating deep questions.

**ADR:** And those questions related primarily to what exactly a contemporary architecture faculty building should be?

**TK:** It's actually more than just a faculty building. This is the first building that has been commissioned in the middle of the University of Melbourne campus for decades. This is not just a building that will house the staff and students of the faculty, but also a platform for experimentation and research into sustainable building and sustainable cities. To do that, we bring in colleagues from the faculties of science, engineering, land and environment, and other faculties around the campus. It is very much a university facility – not just a faculty building.

**ADR:** That's interesting, especially because the University of Melbourne has been considered to be quite a conservative campus. Has the University as a whole been supportive of the outcome, a partnership between John Wardle and a fairly radical practice, Office dA?

**TK:** The University is completely behind this. The vice-chancellor chaired the jury. If you look at changes to our curriculum over the last three years, I think we've demonstrated we're not conservative at all. We have created a Bachelor of Environments – a landmark degree for this country – a way of saying that anyone who is interested in developing a career or an understanding of how they can influence the environment can do so in a holistic manner, instead of saying, 'If you want to be an architect come here'.

**ADR:** Which goes back into the multi-disciplinary objectives of this competition.

**TK:** Absolutely. And the building will demonstrate that. Governance, technology, design and social dimensions of building forms and city forms and the environment are all being investigated. And when we say 'pedagogical building', we mean that the people who are in the building will be informed on a continuing basis. There will be a monitoring and feedback system. By living in the building you should learn from it, and that learning you can carry to other buildings.

The four questions we discussed earlier also helped our decision making in the second phase. We gave each of the six short-listed teams a detailed brief of what the building might contain, articulating numbers of offices, studios, workshops and things like that. But we asked them to address the four questions. So we were less interested in the exact form of the building, and more in how the form helped us understand what the future of academic work is. What a 'living building' might mean.

**ADR:** Was that an open invitation to challenge the brief's requirements?

**TK:** Yes, they were statements of what we needed, but how each practice responded to them was open to challenge. And some of the teams did come back and say, 'We've taken several dimensions of what you listed and merged them together, and here is a way of addressing it'. Any good design not only addresses all of the constraints in the brief, but also opens up opportunities. That is really what good design is about.

**ADR:** It's quite interesting, of the six short-listed entries, there were only two purely local teams. The winning design comes from a partnership between a respected local practice, John Wardle Architects, and an up-and-coming practice that is increasingly well recognised on the international stage, Office dA. Is that something the jurors were conscious of when they were making their final decision?

**TK:** No, we didn't go into this with any preconception about configuration of teams, whether they would be local or not. What was important was the capacity to innovate at a level of intellectual enquiry that befits a university; as well as a clear professional capacity to deliver. As a responsible client, we can never be ignorant of the need to have someone who can really deliver a building. But great architecture is about things beyond that, and we're looking for great architecture.

**ADR:** In what respect do you think the winning submission addresses the key requirements of the competition?

**TK:** The team demonstrated a deep understanding of the opportunities to engage in discussions about new construction technologies, about the way students learn in a space, about how this building could inform other inhabitants of the campus. They demonstrated a capacity to understand the many facets and opportunities that this project is going to offer to us.

**ADR:** It almost seems like a concerted effort on the part of the competition organisers to move away from this idea of the icon. Do you think it's necessary to have a building of iconic status with regard to the university's position internationally?

**TK:** I believe iconic status is earned. I don't think you design an icon, which then works; you design a building that works profoundly, which becomes an icon. We're focusing on the first part.

**ADR:** So this project has the capacity to become an icon, potentially?

**TK:** Absolutely.

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