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Arguments in architecture

September 11, 2009

Melbourne's universities are competing to build the best design hubs, and architecture is the ultimate winner, reports Ray Edgar.

WHILE they occupy the same street, RMIT and Melbourne University often appear a world away from each other. Compared to the inner-city urban block that houses RMIT campus, Melbourne University is a picture postcard of sandstone, lawn and quadrangles. But over the past two decades, RMIT has worked with what it has. Commissioning local architects, it has carved both a formidable physical presence and an impressive international reputation as one of the world's top architectural schools and an incubator for design talent.

RMIT's Storey Hall, by ARM, and Building 8, by Edmond & Corrigan, represent not just RMIT but the face of cutting-edge Melbourne design. Currently it is extending its campus into the surrounding blocks opposite with Lyons' Swanston Academic Building and, on the former CUB site, with Sean Godsell's Design Hub.

Melbourne University, with all its old-world grandeur, has appeared to languish.

"Coming in two years ago [as dean of architecture], it was clear to me that Melbourne University hasn't played its part as responsible citizen and patron to the arts," says Professor Tom Kvan. "We need to improve the campus experience and quality of the spaces, which is the quality of the buildings inside and outside."

Last week, Kvan announced RMIT alumnus John Wardle as part of the winning team for the \$90 million international architectural competition to design the building for the faculty of architecture, building and planning. Together with Boston practice Office dA, Wardle beat a who's who of Australian and international architects, including Pritzker Prize winners Norman Foster, Zaha Hadid and Frank Gehry. "This is the first significant building inside the main campus for decades," said Kvan. While acknowledging the contribution of the Nation Fender Katsalidis-designed Potter Gallery and Sidney Myer Asia Centre around its periphery, Kvan says

"the centre of the campus hasn't had anything this important".

Just as Melbourne pitches itself as a design capital with a vibrant architectural scene and the place to be for creative thinking, Kvan recognises that the building will help brand and promote the university itself. "It does mark a revitalisation of campus," he says. "The university is stepping up and saying we want to make our campus an invigorated place as well, along the same aspirations as a sustainable liveable city."

Of course, all institutional eyes are upon Melbourne's model. On one level, it's about whether the new building will woo new students. On another, it's how an architecture department can lead by example. For RMIT, which has based its procurement of buildings and its ethos on "curating" local talent, Kvan's international competition is being watched closely.

"The issue for us has been whether you build a culture of excellence or do you ship it in," says RMIT's head of architecture and design, Professor Richard Blythe.

Then there are also the pitfalls of the iconic building. And among the architects I spoke with, the case most often cited of a design city gone wrong is Barcelona. Its love affair with design strayed from the local, embraced celebrity foreigners such as IM Pei and Richard Meier, and ruined the hard-won relationship of buildings within the city.

However, Monash University's founding head of architecture, Professor Shane Murray, believes it's inevitable that we look outward. "This is the Asian century, it's not just local any more. For my graduates, it's not about finding jobs in Victoria but the world.

"The idea that the city can have a mature conversation with an international constituency through design - where it's not hierarchical, where we are not waiting for pearls of wisdom from the outside - is also a very good thing," says Murray. "It also allows Melbourne University to distinguish itself."

Indeed, Kvan says he is reflecting Melbourne University's responsibilities to the local and international community and its commitment to global practice. "While we wouldn't always use an international competition," Kvan says, "it sets a benchmark for future procurement. We refer to this building as a platform for research and education, not just a building for the school of architecture."

Avoiding the pitfalls of the imported icon, Kvan wants to foster a cross-disciplinary, research-based program that complements the university's reputation for academic publishing.

"We now understand how important design is," says Murray. "It's not just about branding a project. Design has a deeper contribution in facilitating the way we use and partake in education and pedagogy, and how it can enhance that experience."

On this aspect of research, all institutions cast aside their rivalries - for the moment.

"I'm genuinely excited," says Richard Blythe. "It will be a terrific building and a clear investment in architecture and design. And it raises the bar for RMIT - and I'm rapt it's been given to an RMIT alumnus."

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