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Architecture

Sylvia Walton Building

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'The revolution in architecture brought us freedom but robbed us of taste,' wrote Roy Simpson of Yuncken Freeman Architects. So what would Simpson think of the addition to 'his' Sylvia Walton Building by Lyons Architecture?



Tobias Horrocks reviews for Architectural Review Asia Pacific. All images courtesy of Dianna Snape.

'The revolution in architecture brought us freedom but robbed us of taste,' wrote Roy Simpson of Yuncken Freeman Architects. So what would Simpson think of the addition to 'h Sylvia Walton Building by Lyons Architecture? Simpson was the architect of the La Trobe University masterplan and of the primary buildings on the Bundoora campus in Victoria late 1960s. He died shortly after receiving the Royal Australian Institute of Architects Gold Medal in 1997, but not before penning his opinion on contemporary architecture.



http://www.australiandesignreview.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/AR_body52.jpg

Simpson believed 'that most buildings are required to play a background role in order that the occasional special one can exert its proper emphasis in the group composition'; the one being a new opera house or an old cathedral. Lyons' teaching facility makes the most of its freedom – from the constraints of rectilinearity and consistency. It is loose with the effect of 'order'. While the Lyons facade does not outright reject its immediate neighbour's precedent, it morphs the existing geometry of windows in vertical stripes and makes them zig-zag. The effect is spiralling and dynamic rather than balanced and static. Brick is abandoned for precast concrete, brown is replaced by coloured aluminium inserts, seeking their visual complement in the bark of surrounding gum trees rather than buildings.



Informal social spaces offer opportunities for interaction, as well as casual learning

Yuncken Freeman established an extremely cohesive context for the Sylvia Walton Building – an ordered and symmetrical array of east–west oriented blocks, all at the same level, sober and understated brick. Lyons' initial figureground diagrams tell a story of maintaining the width of the existing 1960s buildings (a model with good natural light and ventilation well as great flexibility and adaptability in planning) but instead of conforming to the orthogonal grid of the masterplan, they coil the linear block on itself, in a form that sits snugly the curve of Simpson's moat. In the end, Lyons fills the centre of the coil with a lift and service core and the new building has a deep plan, more like a city office tower, where the offices are located on the perimeter for light, than Yuncken Freeman's narrow blocks.

Of course the building is first encountered from the facade, but as Lyons principal James Wilson explains, 'it's more about the interior'. The internal circulation is a sequence that slowly upwards around the core, a continuous pathway punctuated by destination nodes, with views to the outside, which encourages walking. The lift and service core is partially in mirror, spatially obliterating its presence and reflecting the leafy views outside.



http://www.australiansdesignreview.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/AR_body32.jpg

There is a small engineering miracle involved in making this seamless journey up five levels to the library. Normally, fire regulations would demand isolating doors that interrupt the generous concrete ceilings mean that smoke can gather at a safe height overhead in an emergency.

Each public/student space that springs off the circulation path has an asymmetrical, zig-zagging double-height ceiling profile. At times, simple design moves create complex reverberations: for example the ceiling of the ground floor entry lobby continues across the level two corridor and, seen out of context, appears as randomly jagged timber. What makes sense from the interior clashes with the exterior and vice versa. The high-ceilinged public spaces punch through the precast concrete facade to meet the exterior as glazed, blackbordered 'holes' in the pattern. The morphed 1960s fenestration system on the exterior meets the interior as jumpy and chaotic windows that contrast with flat floors, ceilings and work surfaces.



The distinctive red paint colour at the pathway stair allows for ease of circulation and is a striking moment in the interior volume

The Sylvia Walton Building is an education facility for local and international students seeking to gain the academic standards that will allow them entry into undergraduate courses at Trobe University. Known as the 'Pathways' program, it was formerly off-campus. The new building has no cafe or retail functions, ensuring the students use the main facilities with the undergraduate students in the university. The building itself goes out of its way to connect to the rest of the campus – in this, Lyons share Simpson's view of the primacy of 'precincts over buildings' in architectural design. Lyons successfully proposed a new footbridge over the moat, above and beyond the brief, which merges with the level two pedestrian circulation of the campus, extending northward to become an outdoor courtyard teaching space and connecting to new campus areas to the south. Extensive decking and seating elements further blur the boundaries between the Sylvia Walton site and its surroundings.



The north entry point invites users in with its angular entrance canopy

Drawing on its own previous research Lyons has injected cutting edge teaching strategies to the project. For example, a lecture theatre has two rows of seating per tier rather than one so that it can perform in 'interactive mode', where the students turn their chairs to face each other, such as in a tutorial. Lyons designed and prototyped a series of custom tables to suit different teaching modes – some geometries accommodate arranging the tables in rows and some preclude that possibility. It's an assertive aesthetic, maybe enough to make Simpson turn in his grave? The two primary realms of architecture – interior and exterior – are allowed to clash and collide in this building, without much reconciliation. It all adds vibrancy and complexity to the visual experience. And it is the student and teaching experience that takes primacy in Lyons' design, both within the building and beyond. Maybe Simpson, less of a turning and more of a winking.

PROJECT: Sylvia Walton Building, La Trobe University

LOCATION: Bundoora, Victoria

COMPLETION: April 2014

TOTAL GFA: 7200sqm

ARCHITECT: Lyons Architects

CLIENT: La Trobe University

ESD AND SERVICES ENGINEER: Norman Disney & Young

STRUCTURAL AND CIVIL ENGINEER: Bonacci Group

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: Outlines Landscape Architecture

HYDRAULIC ENGINEER: CJ Arms and Associates

ACOUSTIC ENGINEER: Aecom

BUILDING SURVEYOR: PLP Building Surveyors and Consultants

DDA ADVISER: Architecture & Access

CONTRACTOR: Kane Constructions

QUANTITY SURVEYOR: WT Partnership

Editor's note: Kane Constructions was originally listed as Kane General Contracting. We apologise for the error.

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