

Concurrent Session D
Monday 31 August
2.25pm – 3.15pm

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30 Aug – 2 Sep 2015
Novotel North Beach Wollongong



Session 6

Problem Child to Star Pupil - RMIT's New Academic Street, a Creative Refurbishment

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Edward Berry is a practice leader at Lyons in the management and delivery of large scale higher education and institutional projects. Ed's specialist expertise includes managing multi-level client and consultant groups to deliver excellent design outcomes for large complex projects. He is at the forefront of developing BIM technology, both in leading consultant design teams in a full 3D model environment, but also working with contractors to generate efficiencies through integrated 3D documentation. Ed was the Project Architect of the RMIT New Academic Street project and has led the multi-faceted consultant team for this challenging and innovative project.

The New Academic Street (NAS) project takes a radical approach to creative refurbishment, urban design and design collaboration to transform the heart of RMIT University's City Campus. This paper will outline how the design team achieved the University's brief to enhance student experience, provide an expanded student realm and strengthen the connection between the campus and the city. This ambitious project will be delivered in the midst of a live University environment and the innovative techniques employed to research, investigate and test the existing buildings and how this influenced the final design will also be discussed.

As with many university campuses, RMIT has a legacy of aging building stock, which in this instance, no longer supports their requirements. As a dense urban campus with a high demand for space, renewal through wholesale demolition was not an option. The street frontage dominated by a series of 1960's towers which were specifically designed for laboratory and office functions in the late-modernist idiom of the technical university. These buildings present challenges of poor connection to the surrounding city, difficult navigation and limited pedestrian permeability, aging services infrastructure, a vertical transport system at breaking point and insufficient social study spaces to retain students on campus.

The NAS project footprint extends across five buildings, over seven levels and will deliver over 30,000 sqm of student focused space. Adaptive refurbishment on this scale called for an innovative design strategy. Lyons partnered with four other emerging and specialist architectural design practices to create a 'consortium of ideas'. This approach has allowed a diversity of design responses to be proposed for different precincts of the project.

To increase the connection of RMIT to its urban context, the City Campus has been re-imagined as a microcosm of the city itself. A series of 'laneways' and 'streets' have been introduced, creating multiple new entries from the surrounding streets. Supported by a system of new lifts and escalators, the laneways break through the existing maze of stairs and corridors to move high volumes of people efficiently through the campus, while also providing a clear system of navigation and orientation for campus users.

RMIT has made a strategic step towards improving the student experience by combining their student services, library and retail operations. Dissolving these boundaries allows the NAS project to become a seamless merging of diverse student space supported by flexible retail offerings, combined with the academic research opportunities of the contemporary library.

An innovative 'Triage Model' of student services engagement has been developed between RMIT and the design team which utilises mobile technology and a responsive staffing strategy , and is supported by roving concierge, hip-to-hip consultation points and flexible interview rooms. The space is designed to be used in a way that responds to the fluctuations of the academic calendar, eliminating queuing at the peak times while repatriating space for student use during the quieter periods. Similarly spaces around the library are uniquely designed to support different student self-organised 'doing' activities; variously named; the reading room, the journal balcony, the design library and the play ground by way of example.

RMIT's New Academic Street project will be presented as a case study of how the creative refurbishment of existing campus buildings can transform dated assets into vibrant centres for student engagement, peer-to-peer learning , enriched student experience, and create a new identity for a University in its city. This presentation will be co-presented by RMIT University, Lyons (Architecture) and AECOM (Services Engineering).