

RMIT DESIGN ARCHIVES JOURNAL

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Cover Image

RMIT Design Hub.
Sean Godsell Architects
in association with
Peddle Thorp

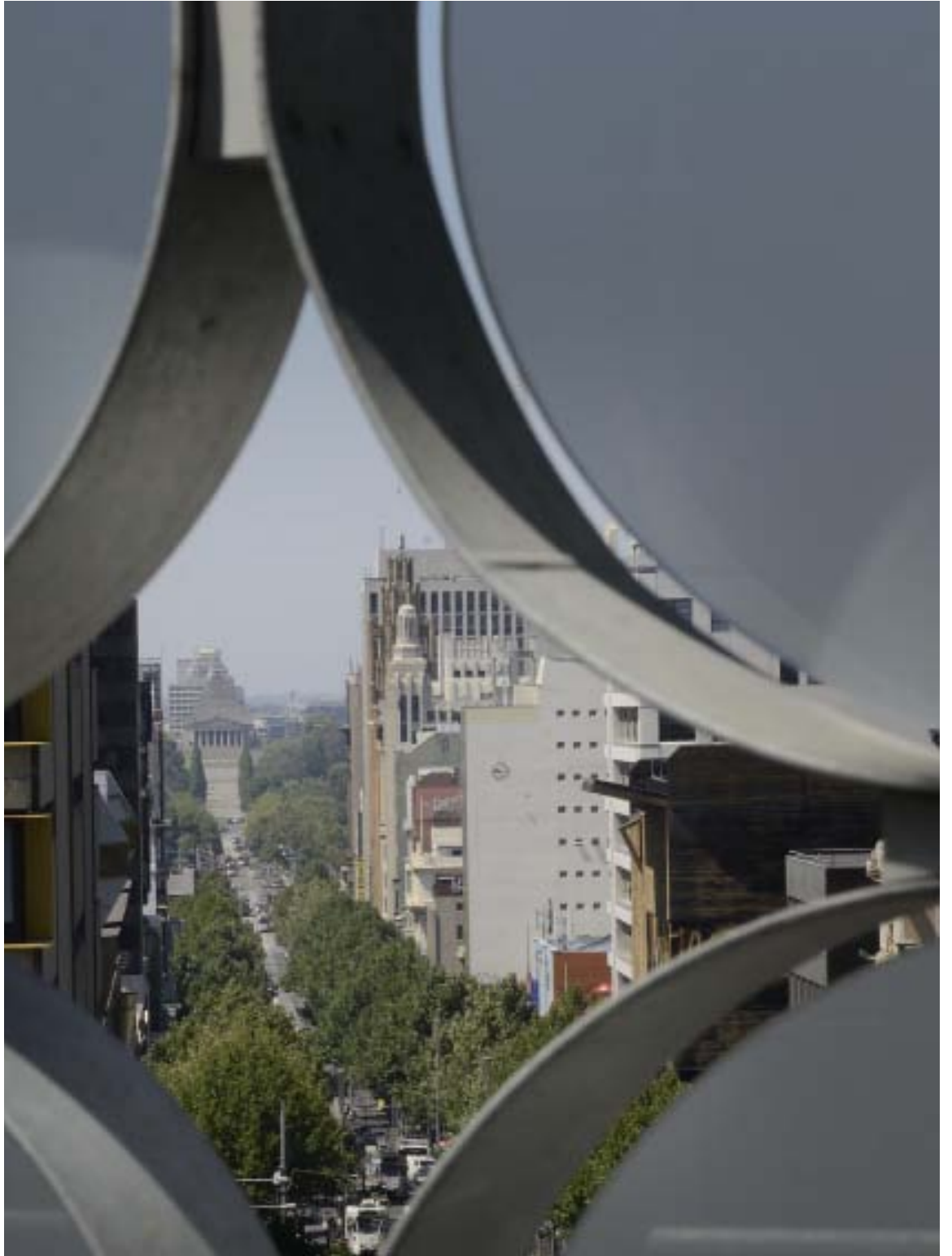
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Earl Carter

In September 2012 the RMIT Design Archives moved into its new building within the RMIT Design Hub, at the north-west corner of Victoria and Swanston Streets, Melbourne, on the former Carlton United Brewery (CUB) site.

Having occupied one large room in a 1940s brick building on the city campus for a number of years, the Design Archives finds itself in very illustrious company. The Design Hub is the first centre of its kind in Australia, an \$80 million development that brings together design academics, industry partners and postgraduates in a trans-disciplinary collaborative environment that supports the sharing of ideas between disciplines, fosters collaboration and innovative research, and exhibits design. When fully occupied, the building will be home to about 250 academics and postgraduate researchers from a broad range of design disciplines including architecture, creative media, game design, engineering, landscape architecture, industrial design, textiles and fashion, interior design and urban design.

The physical adjacency of the RMIT Design Archives to this research centre has the potential to create vital new meanings for the way we understand archives and their role in the research economy of the University. And to mark its future role, the Design Archives has transferred from the School of Architecture & Design to RMIT's Research & Innovation Portfolio, indicating both its university-wide focus and its research-led mission.

Harriet Edquist, DIRECTOR



Providing an environmentally sustainable collegial base for RMIT's postgraduate researchers in design, this new Design Hub is architecture in pursuit of beauty. A somewhat mechanical, poetically industrial façade veils architecture possessing a certain romance. This building, with its now much discussed translucent skin, has provoked an intensity of emotion and public reaction. Indeed there is much to find provocative – even beautiful. Forming a kind of jewel-like monument placed on the former Carlton & United Breweries (CUB) site, one of Melbourne's most desired city locations, the scheme comprises two buildings enclosing a central public forecourt. Ten storeys high, the Design Hub occupies the prominent Swanston and Victoria Street corner, while a smaller but no less impressive RMIT Design Archives building is aligned to the Shrine of Remembrance and faces Victoria Street. From the exterior at least, this is architecture that relies on the power of an unyielding tenacious repetition.

Following a trajectory of 20th century modern art and architecture – abstraction, repetition, and a certain love of the industrial object – glass, steel and operability prevail. A finely crafted detail of rotating frosted glass discs held within a delicate steel frame is repeated to form the skin for the Design Hub's entire façade. The Archives building by comparison, is less jewel and more bunker-like in appearance. Whilst the Hub is veiled, revealing movement and activity within, the Archives building is more robust and directly a container. Concrete walls enclose and protect, and where the walls are glazed on the eastern and northern sides, a muscular steel screening system spans the length of the building. In both buildings however, the exterior form does not account for the spatial narratives within. As in Godsell's domestic projects, these appear at first glance rational but are in fact more concerned with rituals of occupation and shelter.

Although it is the Design Hub building that dominates the first impression, I will begin this story with the Design Archives building whose program and content give clear insight into the romance, the tension Godsell pursues between the container

and what is contained. A three storey elongated structure, the building is the new home for the RMIT Design Archives. Directed by Professor and architectural historian, Harriet Edquist, the Design Archives holds collections and various ephemera of designers and design practices with relevance to Melbourne, and Victoria, from the twentieth century to the present.

These include Frances Burke, a textile designer and astute businesswoman who studied at RMIT in the 1930s; Dresden-born textile designer, Gerard Herbst, who worked at Prestige Fabrics during the 1940s and then went on to head-up the Industrial Design Program at RMIT; Frederick Sterne, who was responsible for transforming Interior Design into a degree course; Phillip Zmood, the first Australian head of the GMH Design Studio; industrial designer, Robert Pataki, and, graphic designer, illustrator and animator, Alex Stitt. The private archives of German-born architect, Frederick Romberg are also included along with drawings, documentation and photographs from his partnership with Roy Grounds and Robin Boyd. Interestingly, this archive was brought into the collection by Romberg's widow, Diane Masters, a well known fashion model from the 1940s and 1950s who was also a journalist and donated material which documents her significant career.

These collections speak to Melbourne's design history and culture but also to the very nature of design itself. Edquist makes the point, that while the Archives hold various objects and artefacts of significance, it is not a museum but rather something far more active and alive that tells the story of design processes, of how design itself happens. From the drawings, letters, photographs, slides and various ephemera, stories can be uncovered and revealed and then fed into current design research and design projects. One of the building's many successes is that the architecture actively engages in this process both in its direct connection to the Design Hub building and its design research and education facilities, but also in the way the building is organised.

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RMIT Design Hub.
View from rooftop
along Swanston
Street to the Shrine
of Remembrance

Sean Godsell
Architects in
association with
Peddle Thorp

Photographer:
Georgina Matherson

RMIT BUILDING 100:
A CITY ARCHIVE
CONTINUED





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RMIT Design Hub. Stair between exhibition space and service core. Sean Godsell Architects in association with Peddle Thorp. Photographer: Earl Carter

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RMIT Design Archives south elevation. Sean Godsell Architects in association with Peddle Thorp. Photographer: Earl Carter

Bottom

RMIT Design Hub. Service core between Warehouse space and Longroom. Sean Godsell Architects in association with Peddle Thorp. Photographer: Earl Carter.



The planning and spatial arrangements respond to the precise processes and requirements of working with archives. This includes the way archives are brought into the building and are then unpacked, examined, accessioned and housed. On the basement level, collections can be delivered and moved directly into a room for sorting and temporary storage. In an adjacent room, objects can be stored long-term in compact units and additional shelving.

A lift connects the basement level to the 'active archive' room on the second ground floor level, and also to offices, sorting and storage rooms across the 2nd and 3rd levels. Importantly, spaces are large enough to allow things (objects including plans, large drawings, rolls of fabric) to be seen and seen differently, in a way that might open up further possibilities and connections. The 'active' archive is a dramatic space, voluminous and grand enough

to allow for exhibitions and events. One wall supports floor-to-ceiling shelves which one day may house the growing collection of models and maquettes, while the other is glazed and looks out through a transitional liminal space to the Design Hub. Entirely bespoke, everything in this building is particular and designed.

Symbolism is layered and found across the buildings directly and indirectly, overtly and covertly. Openings and passages – some concealed and hidden, others surprisingly direct and bold – are woven into the plan in a labyrinthine way. At the basement level a corridor leads directly from the Design Archives through the multipurpose foyer to the Design Hub. As Edquist says, the facility belongs in the research environment, and visually and physically, the connections work across the entire site.

Continuing ideas begun in Godsell's earlier projects, his own Kew House (1996–1997), the Carter Tucker House (1998–2000) and the St Andrew's Beach House (2003–2006) there is an investment in – a love of – operational and abstracted form that is given texture, scale and luminosity through operable, porous but very unified skins. Internally, planning and spatial relationships reveal Godsell's extensive study of Japanese and Chinese architecture and also, closer to home, the informal spaces found in Australian homesteads with their enclosing veranda spaces and sunrooms. While the scale of this project is obviously not domestic, these types of ambiguous circulatory spaces and simple - appearing somewhat rational - planning arrangements are clearly evident in the two buildings.

In both buildings planning is organised in a linear manner around concealed service banks or cores. In the Hub this core holding toilets, kitchens, store rooms and lifts, is contained within a densely perforated steel skin. Open 'Warehouse' spaces animated by the play of light and shadow, span the width of the building and can be partitioned and used as required to support the cross-disciplinary ambitions of the research centres.

Flanking the Hub's eastern side and spanning the building's length and also entirely open, are the 'Long Rooms'. Hovering between circulation and occupiable space, with framed views of the former CUB malt store, and propelling one forward towards the building's periphery, these rooms appear to extend time and space. The Long Room at the Swanston and Victoria Streets ground level becomes more of a pedestrian arcade, an extension of the city's footpath, offering an alternate route protected from the rough and tumble outside. With a steel clad wall on one side, the glass screen on the other, an over-scaled digital clock overhead, the rubber tread underfoot and the vast uninterrupted space

ahead, this is an intense architectural experience. More than a little European, certainly a little Jacques Tati, one is both withdrawn from the city proper and yet intensely aware of its presence.

The Hub's Level 1 holds a multipurpose space and foyer, workshop, machine rooms, a virtual reality centre, an immersive theatre and display suites. A grand exhibition space with its double height void and access to the lower level of the public forecourt, is on level 2. Just above this and linked by lifts, ramps or stairs is the lecture theatre and access to the café and Swanston Street. There are great stairs to be found across Godsell's work, the hidden stair of the Peninsula House (2000–2002) being one example, and this project has provided the opportunity for two fantastic and monumental staircases worked into dramatic narrow void spaces, positioned within the threshold of one zone and another. The first one runs between the Hub's double height exhibition space and the service spine, whilst the other separates the Design Archives from the public forecourt. Like the other circulation spaces, and also the Warehouse and Long Room spaces, these stair spaces reveal Godsell's fascination with threshold spaces found in Western and Eastern vernaculars. And this building demands much circulating. Rooms and spaces don't always logically flow from one to another. Someone two stories up looking down may require serious navigating to reach them. Visual access does not necessarily equate to commensurate physical access.

Dispersed in varying degrees of separation across the Hubs' rooftop terrace are four seminar Pavilions that further demonstrate Godsell's fascination with in-between spaces. Liminalities and thresholds reveal themselves between the two layers of the buildings' skin, one pavilion and the next, and between the top storey service core and adjacent Long Room. Held somewhere between a 'course outer layer' and a more 'nurturing inner space', this is an experience of aisles and promenades, of continually being in-between.

Viewed from the exterior, program or context is not particularly legible in any of Godsell's buildings. Orientation and climate, yes, but unlike the dominant local architectural discourse this is not an architecture of overt contextual or cultural dialogue. Not intentionally at any rate. Nevertheless, Godsell's determined position, defiantly held and internationally recognised, that by default and by contrast draws the architecture into this local debate, defines an alternative position with relentless surety and prowess. Positioned on the very edge of the city grid, aligned almost perfectly with the Shrine of Remembrance and with views directly down Swanston Street through the veritable thicket of RMIT's best known buildings - Edmond and

Corrigan's *Building 8*, Ashton Raggatt McDougall's *Storey Hall* and more recently Lyons' *Swanston Academic Building* – the Design Hub has an undeniable and provocative presence.

The building's acute difference from its familial neighbours demonstrates quite poetically the 'tri-polar' pedagogical model of architecture and design research established by Professor Leon van Schaik. One pole includes ARM and Edmond and Corrigan with their robust, highly visible almost audible dialogue with context and local culture; a mode where symbol and reference are slammed hard against the architecture. Lyons alternatively, perhaps a little more elegantly, certainly a little less brashly, pursues architecture engaged in the workings of the city. Skin, synthesising and wrapping program whilst reflecting the grain of the city, is a more homogenous or integrated affair. And now Godsell, always present, but now visibly so, defines another very different position. His architecture is more resonant with ideas of the phenomenological and the experiential. Details are refined, honed, and en masse, form abstracted surfaces, orthogonal and almost defiantly without any obvious legible reference to context. There are no curves or angles and colour is muted. However no one figure really dominates this tripartite conversation, with all examples equally intense and architecturally satisfying.

The future will see high-rise apartments fill the remainder of the GUB site with the Design Hub forming one access into that new precinct. And right next door an apartment building designed by ARM will overlook this Godsell building, surely not unintentional? Nevertheless, as Edquist said at the International Confederation of Architectural Museums (ICAM) Conference held in Frankfurt in September, it is just this architectural and cultural diversity in Melbourne that keeps her optimistic!

Anna Johnson is a Lecturer in the Architecture program of the School of Architecture & Design, RMIT, and an architectural critic and author. Her books include *LIVEWORK: Collective Housing Projects* (2011); *The Australian House* (2008), *Woha: A Monograph* (2008); *New Directions in the Australian House* (2006). She is currently completing her PhD at RMIT.

Opposite Page

Top

RMIT Design Hub. Warehouse space. Sean Godsell Architects in association with Peddle Thorp.

Photographer: Earl Carter

Bottom

RMIT Design Hub. Rooftop with view of Pavilion. Sean Godsell Architects in association with Peddle Thorp.

Photographer: Earl Carter



A double height glazed atrium occupies the northern end of the RMIT Design Archives, a beautiful space that catches the shadows and changing light through the colonnade as the sun moves across the courtyard. This space is referred to as the Active Archive. By this we mean both a physical space and a way of going about things.

Firstly, it is the place where researchers who have come to use our collections are given space to work. For example, these might be architects or property owners looking to original records of buildings they are restoring or altering; curators wishing to borrow items for exhibitions; postgraduate students engaged in doctoral research; academics from other institutions wanting material for research or teaching; or representatives from industry who are interested in their design history.

Secondly, the 'active archive' describes the Design Archives' approach to collecting and research. The Archives is unique in both the scope of its collections and its physical setting. Design archives and museums world wide are generally of three kinds: they focus on the built environment (architecture and landscape architecture), on product design (industrial design, graphic design) or on fashion and textiles. Occasionally the last two are combined, almost never all three. From its beginning in 2007 the RMIT Design Archives has collected across all design disciplines, reflecting the inclusive culture of design thinking at the University. One consequence of this collecting policy has only emerged recently. As major collections in various disciplines from the second half of the twentieth century have been brought together, they have begun to 'talk' to each other. Invariably the represented designers knew each other socially, or were taught by each other or lectured in the same institutions. We can begin to see growing on the shelves and in the compactus an interwoven network of relationships which is a fundamental part of Melbourne's twentieth-century design culture.

The second unusual feature of the Design Archives is its physical situation on the Design Hub site. It is

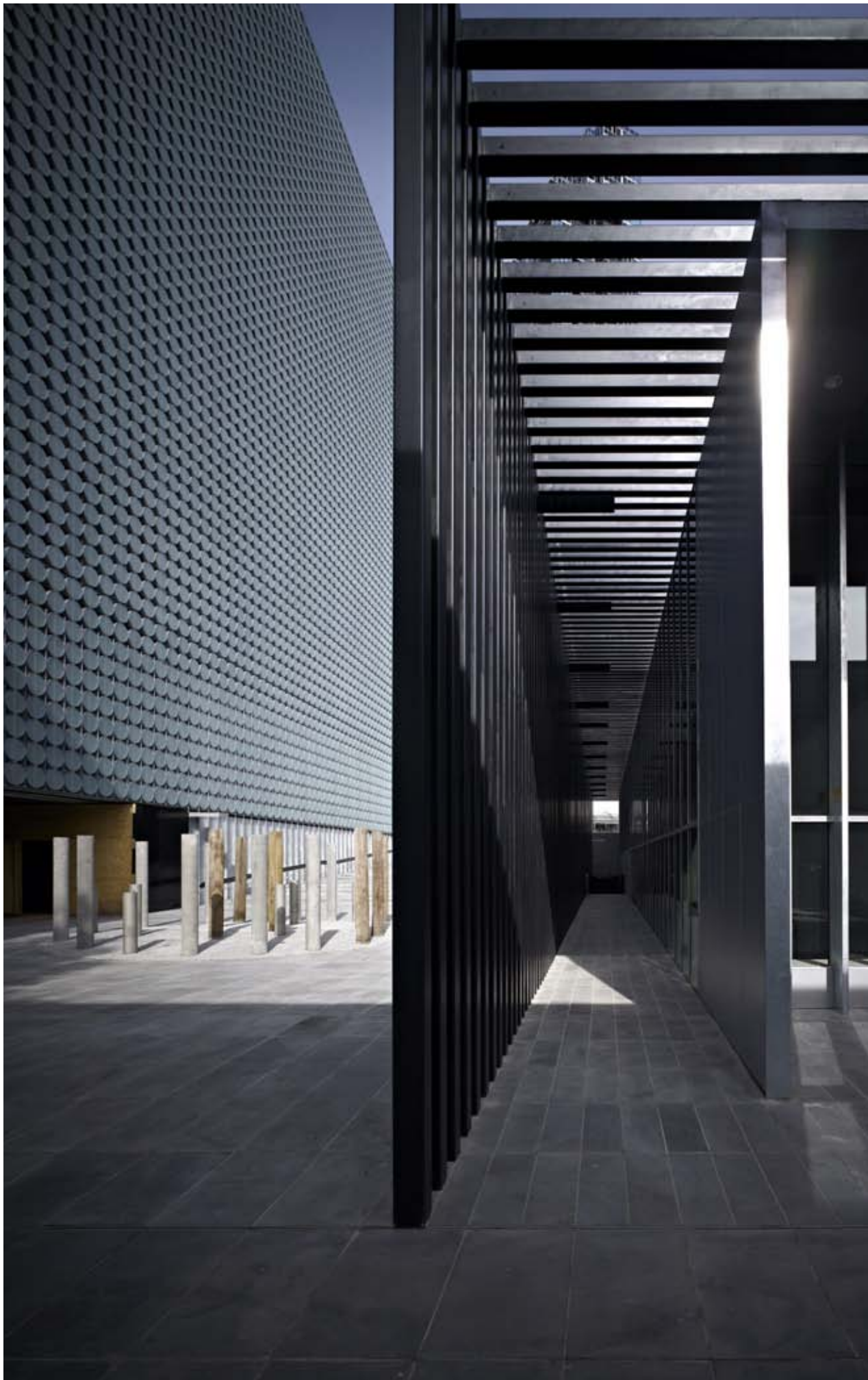
difficult to think of an archives building anywhere that is situated in so significant an urban space. Here in Melbourne it is on the city's central axis with a direct view down Swanston Street to the Shrine of Remembrance. Demonstrating the University's commitment to the city's design culture, the site sets up an exciting but also a daunting challenge to engage with its history as well as its urban responsibilities.

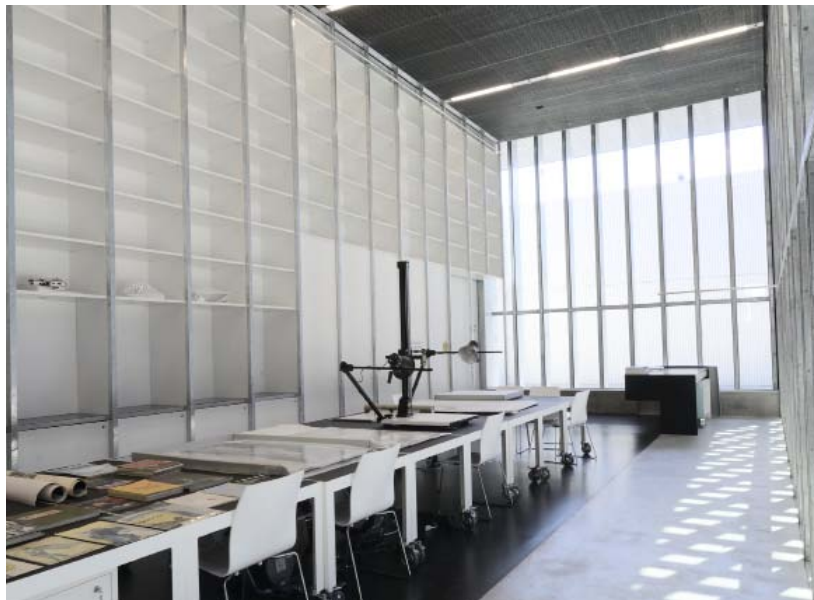
But we are also next to the Design Hub building, connected by an underground umbilical cord of passageways and shared spaces. This proximity speaks of the symbiotic relationship that it is anticipated will develop between the research that goes on in the Hub and the activities of the Archives. It only since our move to the Hub last September that the implications of what the two buildings can offer each other has begun to be revealed and it will take time to develop the potential of this engagement. However, there are some projects already underway that give a hint of the future.

Frederick Romberg: An architectural survey is a collaborative project¹ that brings together architecture, graphic design, film-making and history to investigate a collection of artefacts from Frederick Romberg's early life as an architecture student in Zurich and practitioner in Melbourne. The process of collaboration has revealed different ways of approaching the Romberg Collection which will come together to contribute to the collective effort. For each researcher the materiality of the collection has been an important factor and this appreciation of the artefact will be manifest in the final works. These will include a film which will be our inaugural exhibition in the digital gallery on Victoria Street, a publication, an exhibition display, a web presence and research publications. These artefacts will in turn be brought into the collection, constituting a sort of 'meta-archive' of Frederick Romberg.

The possibilities of using the collections in post-graduate studio teaching and research electives have begun to be discussed as staff from the Hub familiarise themselves with the facility

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RMIT Design Archives.
View of colonnade from Active Archive.
Sean Godsell Architects in association with Peddle Thorp.
Photographer: Georgina Matherson





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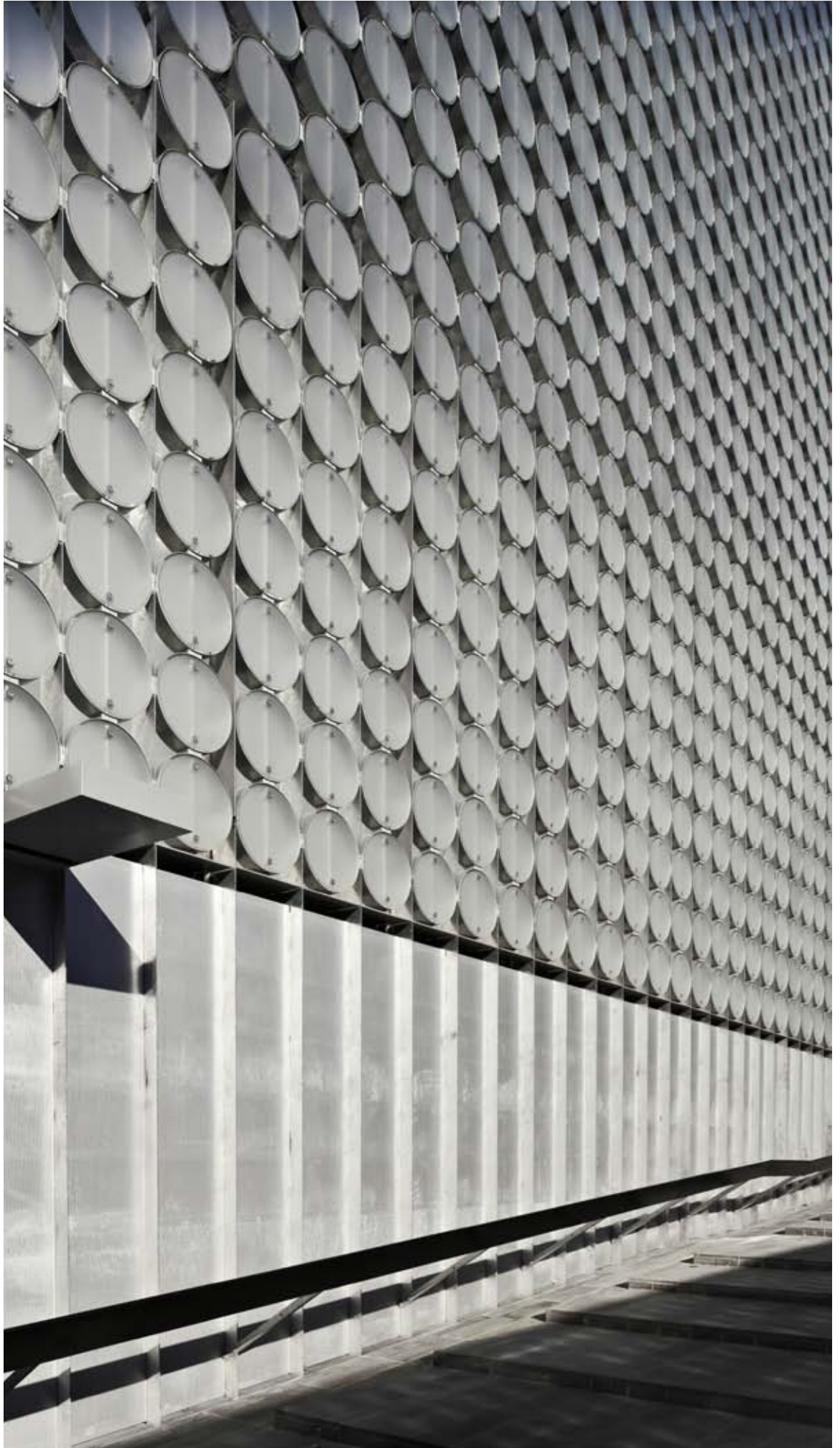
RMIT Design Archives
north elevation.
Sean Godsell Architects
in association with
Peddle Thorp.

Photographer:
Earl Carter

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RMIT Design Archives
Active Archive.
Sean Godsell Architects
in association with
Peddle Thorp.

Photographer:
Georgina Matherson





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 RMIT Design Hub
 west elevation.
 Sean Godsell Architects
 in association with
 Peddle Thorp
 Photographer:
 Earl Carter

This Page
 RMIT Design Hub.
 View east from the RMIT
 Design Archives.
 Sean Godsell Architects
 in association with
 Peddle Thorp
 Photographer:
 Earl Carter

- 1 The RMIT Design Archives: Disseminating Victoria's Design Heritage project *Frederick Romberg: An Architectural Survey* is supported through funding from the Australian Government's Your Community Heritage Program.

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 Project Manager:
 Kaye Ashton.

next door. 2013 will see the first of these engagements where the possibilities of investigating an architectural archive not simply to garner historical information, but to form the basis of design proposals, will be worked out.

Since its inception in 2007 the collections of the RMIT Design Archives have been regularly used for exhibition by internal and external curators. While providing material for exhibition will continue to be an important part of our public role, the new building affords us the chance to reconceptualise how we exhibit. The digital gallery in the window facing Victoria Street is the Archives main interaction with the city and the passer-by, and working out how best to use this facility will bring new curatorial expertise to our operations. At the same time the atrium, or 'active archive' has also inspired designers to think of

how it, too, could be an exhibition space. To test this proposition we are working with an external exhibition designer to devise ways to exhibit drawings using simple and short-term display systems that take account of the high light level in the space.

In sum, the move from our former office-type accommodation in RMIT's Building 15 to an exposed public building in the middle of the city has brought us not just the facilities to grow, collect and store collections properly, but something else, besides, that was not foreseen. The building itself is a challenge: how do we work with it to create a new sort of archive, one that is not about objects resting in boxes or on shelves, but being out in the open, stimulating the creation of new sorts of design knowledge.



RMIT Industrial Design

Gift of RMIT Industrial Design Program

Form studies by students of Gerhard Herbst in the Department of Industrial Design at RMIT, 1960s. Photographer: Georgina Matherson



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