

The Arts West building

A contemporary *Kunst und Wunderkammer*

ARM Architecture

The new Arts West building on the Parkville campus of the University of Melbourne, which opened in May 2016, was designed by a collaboration between two architectural firms: Melbourne-based ARM Architecture, and the Australian–New Zealand company Architectus. The building replaced most of the former Economics and Commerce Building (architects Rae Featherstone and John Scarborough, 1961–71)¹ and its southern forecourt, and a new connection was made through to the Baillieu Library.

The exterior

As the new home for the Faculty of Arts, the building was conceived as a contemporary version of the 16th-century *Kunst und Wunderkammer*, a series of rooms displaying an encyclopaedic array of objects and artefacts that constituted the world of study and knowledge. However, at Arts West there is a striking element of inversion: images are also on the outside, and this animates and draws attention to the building. The result is a building wrapped in an illustrated tapestry—an embossed cloak that carries imprints of objects from the university’s cultural collections. It is tattooed, so to speak, with images of precious items that represent the act of study,

and embody the 165-year tradition of the University of Melbourne.

In choosing which collection items to represent in this way, we gave preference to depictions of the human form, in groups if possible, and ones that could withstand the transformation required for them to be engraved into the façade fins and still be recognisable. The five specific emblems are intended to represent an array of cultures, eras and viewpoints—together symbolising the wide cultural span of the university and the long history of its Faculty of Arts.

On the western façade is an image of Bertram Mackennal’s sculpture *Salome* (c. 1900).² The character Salome was a particular favourite in late 19th-century Paris, epitomising the *femme fatale* of the past, and this small bronze is one of several Salome sculptures made by the Melbourne-born Mackennal (1863–1931). We selected it to represent the particular cultural values that were the context for Australian art in the 19th century. It is also a reference to Melbourne’s cultural explosion in that period: Mackennal’s career included major local commissions, including the reliefs on the front of Melbourne’s Parliament House and the memorial to Sir William John Clarke in the Treasury Gardens, while his best-known international works include

the bust of Dame Nellie Melba in the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden, and London’s Parliamentary War Memorial.

On the northern façade of Arts West is a line of dancing figures and a sailing ship derived from the drawing *Corroboree* by the remarkable Indigenous artist Tommy McRae.³ McRae (also called Yackaduna, Warra-euea, and Tommy Barnes) was born in around 1836 near Wahgunyah, on the eve of the White settlement and Aboriginal dispossession of Victoria. He died in 1901. When young, he worked stock for settlers such as John Foord (in whose family papers at the University of Melbourne Archives the drawing now resides), and did seasonal work, as well as fishing and hunting for family and trading purposes. He also possessed a valuable artistic talent. Working from memory or oral tradition, McRae executed his ink silhouettes while lying propped up on one elbow, drawing from the foot of his subject matter upwards, often arranging the narrative in several tiers. An accomplished draughtsman, he invested his compositions with verve, drama and humour, often lampooning the upstart squattocracy. We included this image in Arts West to represent the continuing history of Indigenous Australia and the



Left: The Amykos Painter (southern Italy), Red-figure krater with pursuit scene, c. 420 BC, ceramic, 37.8 × 40.0 × 38.6 cm. 2009.0236, gift of David and Marion Adams 2009, Classics and Archaeology Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

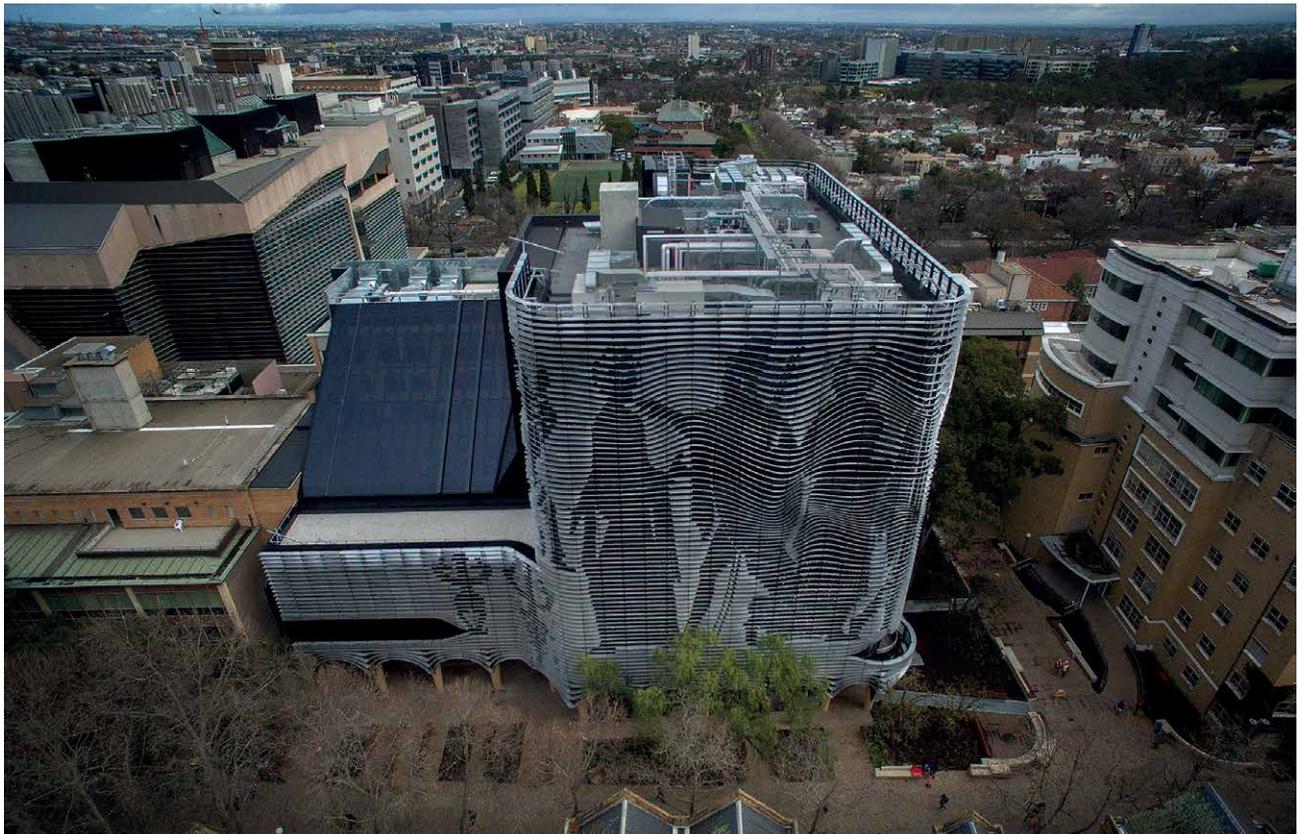
Below: Arts West: aerial view of the eastern façade. The main group of figures is from the red-figure krater, while the two smaller shapes are based on bronze finials from Luristan. Photograph by John Gollings.

repercussions of White settlement, the important place of Australian Indigenous cultures in the Faculty of Arts' teaching and research programs, and the university's support for reconciliation and respect for Indigenous cultures and knowledge.

On the building's north-eastern corner and eastern side (pictured

below) is an image derived from the decoration on a red-figured krater (large vase, pictured above) attributed to the Amykos Painter, depicting a pursuit and departure scene with four figures—which refers also to the quest for knowledge. The vase was excavated in Lucania, southern Italy, and has been dated to c. 420 BC.

Pursuit and departure scenes in Greek vase-painting evolved from mythical prototypes in works such as Homer's *Iliad*. We selected this one to represent the long tradition of classical studies in the history of Western universities—particularly at the University of Melbourne, where classics was a foundation discipline—



Arts West: interior of one of the lifts, featuring image derived from the archways in the Old Quadrangle. Photograph by John Gollings.



and, more broadly, the tradition of Greek thought underpinning Western culture. Furthermore, the vase's provenance is linked to the Faculty of Arts, as it was acquired by the late Professor Marion Adams (1932–1995, dean of arts 1988–93), and later donated to the university by her husband, David Adams.

The image on the eastern lower façade is created from two bronze finials from Luristan (a province of western Iran) in the first millennium BC, when Luristan was home to a rich tradition of bronze working.⁴ These finials are thought to represent a man wearing an elaborate headdress in the form of the Master of Animals, an image found elsewhere in Luristan art and common throughout the Middle East. They were selected to represent the role of Middle Eastern cultures in classical and contemporary academia.

Finally, the image on the upper southern façade is taken from figures depicted on an Indian village cloth.⁵ The original artwork is made from pieces of textile stitched together to make one large image. This reference to Indian art represents the traditions of Asian cultures and studies in the university's history.

The images on the Arts West façade were realised using ARM's new application of parametric three-

dimensional software. We separately created a virtual façade and virtual images of the objects, and then pressed them together. The façade also serves a practical purpose: the inner glass wall behind it provides weather protection and light, while the outer structure of horizontal metal fins shades the glass but still allows light in and views out. This is just one of the factors contributing to the building's five-star environmental accreditation.

The interior

There is an unspoken moralism underlying modern architecture, which prohibits the elaborated, the decorated and the diverse. The ideological conventions dictating what constitutes truly fine architectural design include simplicity and clarity of form, elimination of 'unnecessary' detail, the 'true' nature of a material being visible (rather than concealed or altered to represent something else), and a unified aesthetic to the whole. This philosophy dates back more than a century. In 1908 the influential Viennese architect and theoretician Adolf Loos, in a lecture titled 'Ornament and crime' (*Ornament und Verbrechen*), contended that 'The urge to ornament oneself and everything within reach is the ancestor of pictorial art. It is the baby

talk of painting ... the evolution of culture marches with the elimination of ornament from useful objects'. Ornamentation was characterised as degenerate; since then, most architecture became more reductive and undecorated. One result of this trend is that a building is thought of as a neutral container, machined to suit its practical function without the intrusion of narrative or imagery. And museum design is the last word in this type of neutrality, aiming at simplicity and austerity—a white cube that supposedly does not interfere with, comment on, or distract attention from, the artworks on display.

The Arts West project challenges the truth of Loos' philosophy and the architectural tradition that it presaged. The history of scholarship in the humanities, and now especially object-based learning, have allowed us to reveal these forbidden parts of the architect's art, creating something new and exciting. Arts West gave us an opportunity to pursue things we have been interested in for some time.

Our design ambition for Arts West was to break the machine-for-teaching convention, and make a series of places that would inspire and enrich the lives of those who use them. We wanted to design the new

Arts West: study area with richly woven jacquard weave curtains commissioned for the renewal of St James's Palace in London (originally constructed during the reign of Henry VIII in the 16th century), wallpaper inspired by the 17th-century maze at Hampton Court Palace, and flooring based on recently discovered 16th-century Italian hand-painted floor patterns. Photograph by John Gollings.

building as a place of display, and also as a display itself. The proposition of the building as *Wunderkammer* seemed to support this design idea.

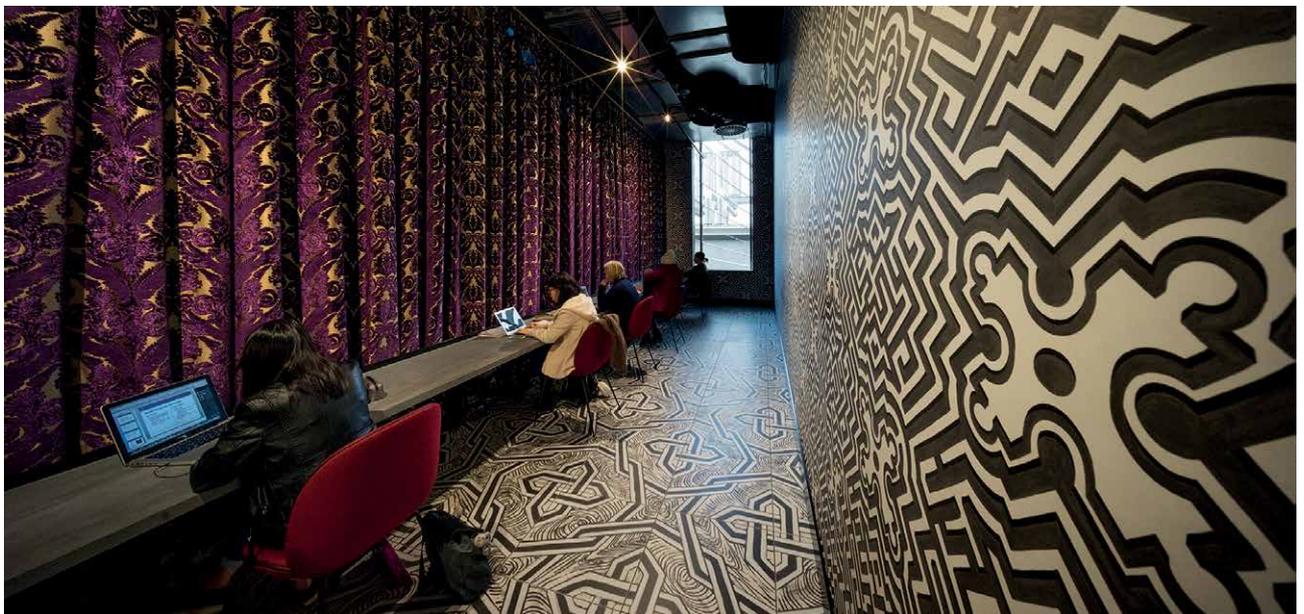
The result is a collection of spaces, each with a different theme expressed through vaguely familiar motifs, atmospheres, elaborations, fittings, colour, pattern and furniture. These are themed, with a Tartan Room (not McDougall but Vivienne Westwood), Chinoiserie Room, Athenaeum Library and Club, Ottoman Lane, and Venetian Booth. Even the lifts add to the richness: each is lined with a different supergraphic generated

from an architectural detail around the campus, such as James Gilbert's *Atlantes* sculptures at the entrance to the underground carpark.⁶ Students have voted these lifts the best selfie backdrops on campus.

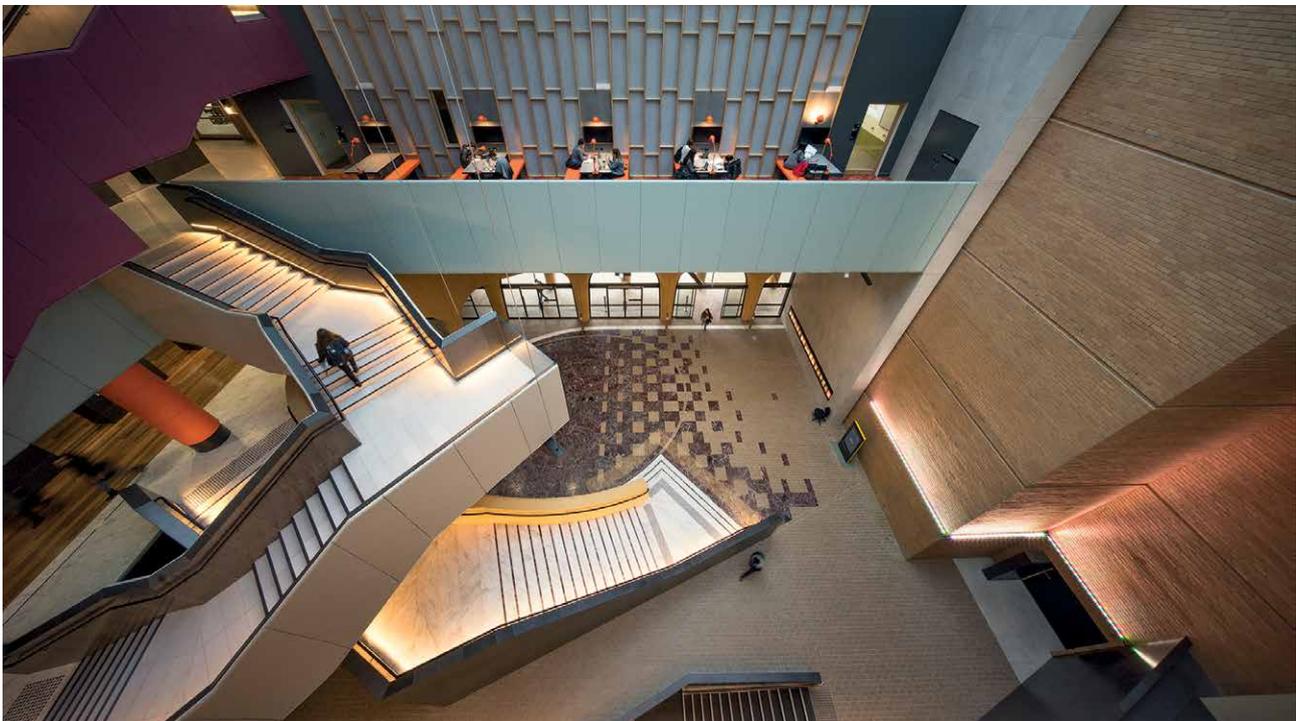
One enters Arts West through a colonnade that recalls the colonnades common to many universities, including the University of Melbourne's 19th-century quadrangle (known as the Old Quad building) the Raymond Priestley building (Rae Featherstone, 1967–70),⁷ and the parabolic arches of the Underground Carpark (1970–72).⁸ It also links the new building—

through the decorative 1960s modernism of Featherstone and Raymond Berg—to contemporary computerised shape-generation. At the centre of the building is the new entry 'Quad' (pictured p. 10) with a dramatic suspended staircase and glass roof. Here we have attempted to capture the nature of the Italian Renaissance courtyard, such as that of the Ca d'Oro in Venice.

Throughout the building are vitrines with displays of objects drawn from the university's 30 cultural collections. The first installation of displays (curated by Fiona Moore



Arts West: entrance court, viewed from above.
Photograph by John Gollings.



and designed by Janet Boschen of Boschen Design) included objects from the Classics and Archaeology Collection, the original Salome sculpture depicted in the façade, etchings and engravings from the Baillieu Library Print Collection, mid-20th century posters from the Gerard Herbst Poster Collection, historical documents and photographs from the University of Melbourne Archives, pulp novels from Baillieu Library Special Collections, and

numerous other object types. These displays will be changed regularly to support the subjects being taught each semester. There is also a dedicated gallery space at street level, opening in August 2017 with an exhibition titled *Arts of engagement*.

We are proud to say that Arts West has been recognised by a number of awards: it was the overall winner in the 10th annual Learning Environments Australasia Awards, and from the Australian Institute

of Architects Victorian Chapter it won the 2017 Architecture Award for Educational Architecture and the 2017 Colorbond Award for Steel Architecture. In Arts West, the combination of façade design, elaborate interior patterning, architectural references, and object displays has created not a machine for teaching, but a picturesque array that will be both inspiration and muse to the people who work, study and visit there.

Arts West, level 1: hallway display of political protest posters and badges from University of Melbourne Archives. Display curated by Fiona Moore and designed by Boschen Design. Photograph by Lee McRae.

- 1 Philip Goad and George Tibbits, *Architecture on campus: A guide to the University of Melbourne and its colleges*, Melbourne University Press, 2003, p. 71.
- 2 Bertram Mackennal, *Salome*, c. 1900, bronze, height 27.0 cm (excluding base). 1980.0010, gift of Dr Joseph Brown 1980, University of Melbourne Art Collection.
- 3 Tommy McRae, *Corroboree, or William Buckley and dancers from the Wathaurong people*, c. 1890, ink on paper, 20.5 × 25.5 cm. 1961.0008.000001, Foord Family Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 4 Artist unknown (Luristan), Finial, c. 850–650 BC, bronze, 16.5 × 6.9 × 2.0 cm; Artist unknown (Luristan), Finial, c. 700–600 BC, bronze, 12.8 × 6.2 × 1.8 cm. 2009.0322 and 2009.0323, gift of Peter Joseph, Marilyn Sharpe and Susan Rubenstein in honour of their parents Keith and Zara Joseph 2009, Classics and Archaeology Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection.
- 5 Artist unknown (India), Untitled (scenes from the *Bhagavad Gita* and the life of Krishna), late 20th century, ink and natural dyes on cotton. Purchased by the Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne.
- 6 James Gilbert, *Atlantes*, c. 1880, stone, 542.0 × 680.0 cm. 1932.0001, gift of the Colonial Bank 1932, University of Melbourne Art Collection. On the history of these sculptures, see Ray Marginson interviewed by Robyn Sloggett, 'Impecunious magpies, or how to adorn a university with little ready cash', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 7, December 2010, pp. 25–34.
- 7 Goad and Tibbits, *Architecture on campus*, p. 79.
- 8 Master planner Bryce Mortlock, structural engineers Loder & Bayley in association with Harris, Lange & Partners, landscape architects Rayment & Stones. (Goad and Tibbits, *Architecture on campus*, p. 88.)

