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2015

# NARK

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ARCHITECTURE

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Why we need bad architecture

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in Lyon  
COOP HIMMELB(L)AU

'A foosball table is more  
creative than a 3D printer'  
MARC FORNES

Smashing holes  
in walls  
BRANDLHUBER



Text  
Marg Hearn

Photos  
Peter Bennetts

# Inviting Curiosity

The new Melbourne School of Design is meant to be a didactic instrument.

Framed as a courtyard, the east entrance to MSD continues the importance of outdoor spaces in plans for the university dating back to the 1970s.

# J

John Wardle Architects (Melbourne) and NADAAA (Boston) collaborated on a competition entry for the University of Melbourne's new Melbourne School of Design (MSD). After their proposal won the competition, they entered the next phase of the project with the university's Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, which served as both client and research partner.

The brief had asked for a 'living' building for studio and academic work in the interrelated disciplines of architecture, urban planning and design, landscape architecture, construction and property development. It was to be large enough to accommodate 2,000 students and 200 staff.

The 15,772-m<sup>2</sup> building, part of the Parkville Campus, fuses two sites that were previously occupied by the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning and the Old Commerce building. John Wardle and Stefan Mee of John Wardle Architects and Nader Tehrani of NADAAA discuss the project, which they believe prompts various readings.

**Did you find your 'remote' collaboration – one firm in Melbourne, the other in Boston – difficult?**

NADER TEHRANI: Because our discipline needs to translate socioeconomic ideas and sociological phenomena into form, space and material, our mentality is already remote, so physical remoteness doesn't matter. Our use of desktop software – from WebEx to Skype – enabled us to exchange pencils on the same drawing, unobstructed by distance. Drawings become the key instrument, the sacred ground for generative thinking. It's the 'empowerment of the other' that's most relevant to the discussion. This idea was something we transferred to the building.

**What factors influenced the building form?**

STEFAN MEE: Many new university buildings focus on how the university might project itself beyond the campus. MSD does that too, but its central, in-the-round location led us to explore the building's impact on the interior of the campus, as well as its potential for rejuvenating the site. Ours is a very contextual response. Each edge and façade system has a different urban condition – avenue, public square, courtyard, forecourt – requiring a unique and inventive response. In many ways we saw the interior of the building, particularly the large open plan hall, as an outdoor court, a nod to the way the university has been master-planned since the 1970s, organized around larger and smaller court-type spaces. The form responds to the pushing in and out of surrounding urban spaces, framing new courtyard spaces to the east and north. The more formal frontage to the west [including a historical Joseph Reed-designed façade – once part of the Bank of New South Wales in central Melbourne – transplanted to the university grounds when the bank expanded and the original building was destroyed] addresses the interior of the university, while the south façade amplifies the qualities of the landscape through the way the library, with its undulating façade, works at the lower level.

**What do the different types of formal and informal learning environments and their arrangement convey?**

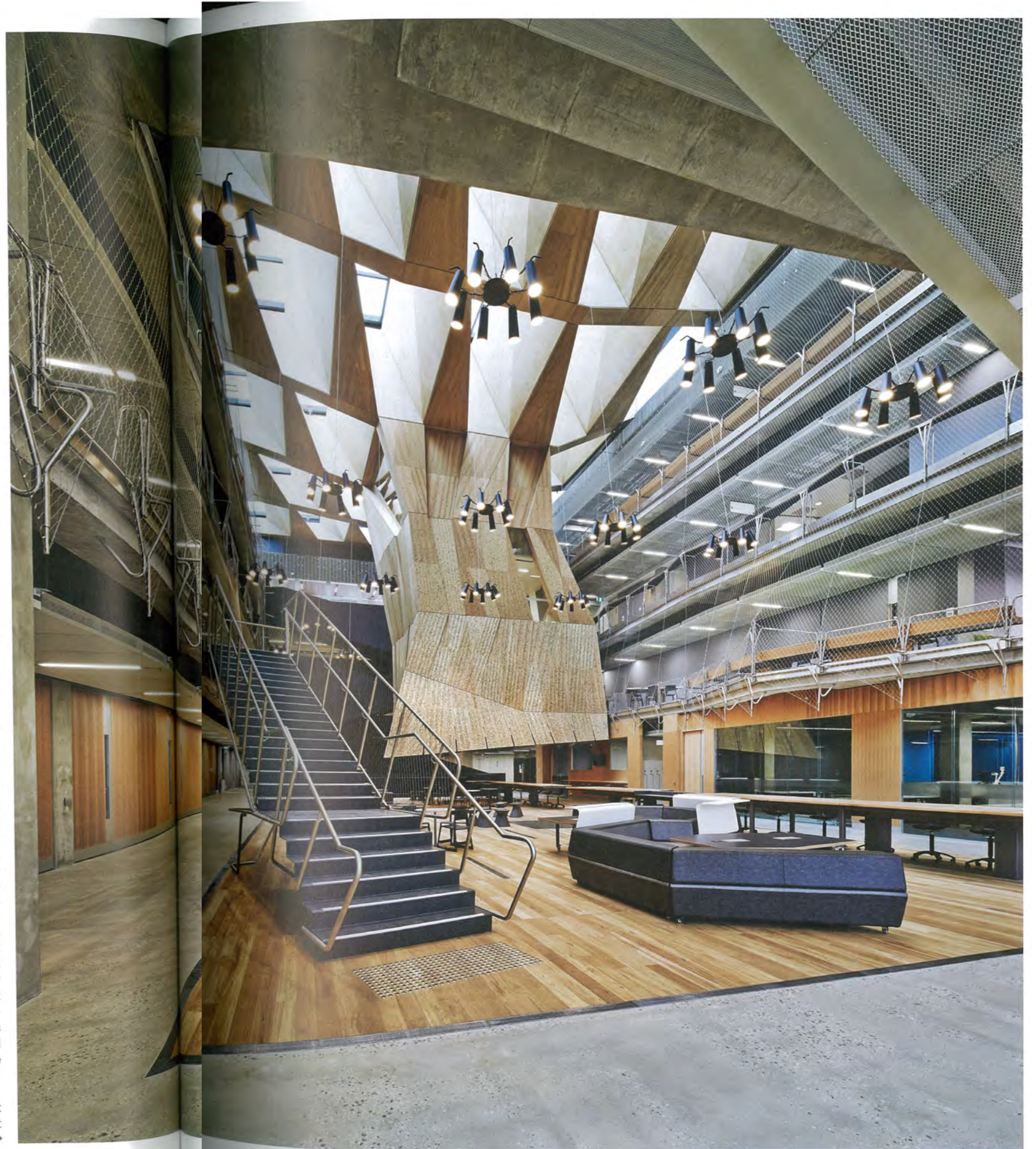
JOHN WARDLE: This is a building designed for the specifics of the Melbourne model and the MSD course profile. It had to be adaptable to the school's tight script and highly prescribed academic programming and to have a degree of flexibility in order to respond to the challenges of new modes of learning. Consequently, we were intent on not creating a neutral chamber. In examining buildings that have endured long lives, we appreciate qualities that are purposeful and prescribed. To achieve the kind of space needed here, we applied a sense of unevenness to the composition. We aimed for highly adaptive spaces – think rapid fire, quick turnaround – suitable for different functions throughout an academic week or an annual calendar. We tried to ensure durability within an evolving educational model.

TEHRANI: We see the future of education – influenced by the economy and the internet – as a scenario in which you no longer have to adhere to a physical desk to do successful work. By not providing the building with dedicated design studios, we transformed the culture of MSD in extraordinary ways. We created alternative workspaces in the form of built-in hot desks, conference tables, work counters and ad hoc seating, thus offering a great many students 24/7 spaces to call their own, where they can lay out their work. These were carved out of the net-to-gross ratio, using what would be traditional corridor space in other buildings. Flexible panels, doors and screens open into exhibition spaces, studios, ad hoc classrooms and pin-up spaces as a way of radicalizing the potential of net space to become double dipped.

**Can a pedagogical building be too contrived?**

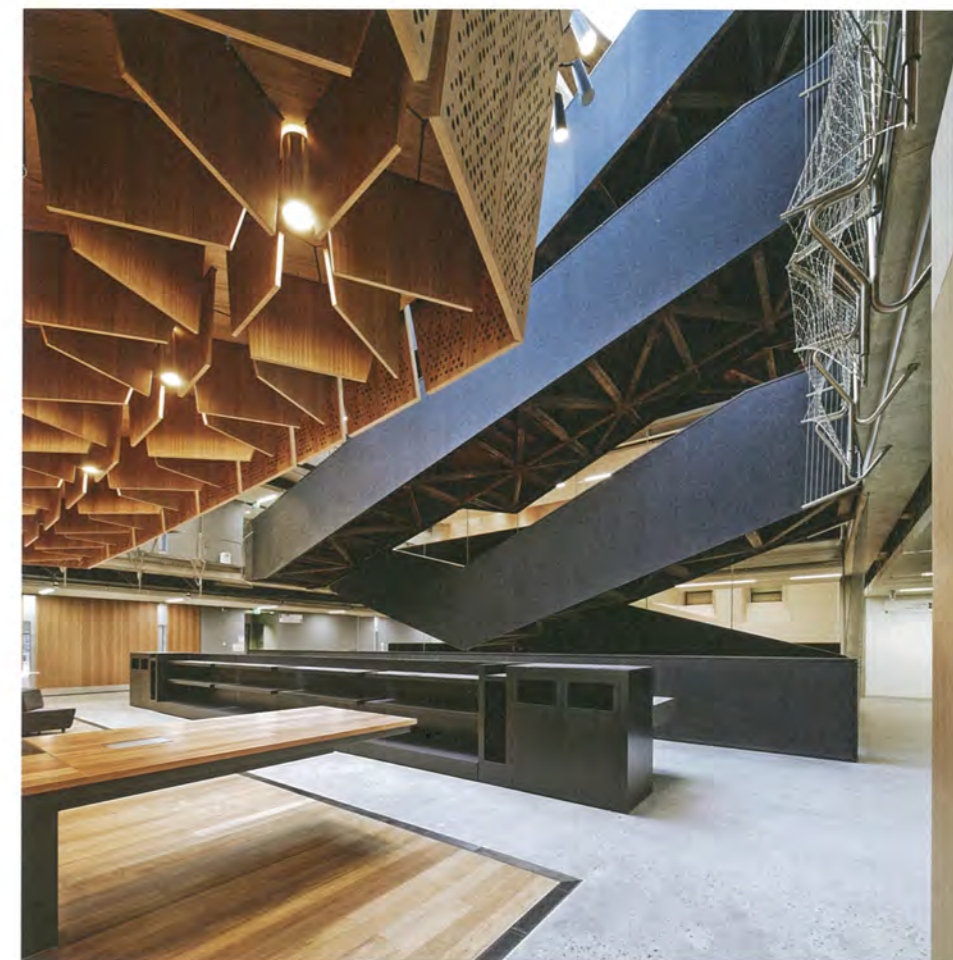
MEE: Because of the way we designed MSD, you don't necessarily understand the building entirely on the first encounter. Each visit reveals more. We tried to create a →

→ The first-floor design hall is reminiscent of an outdoor urban space.





← The architects envisage the dynamic environment as a catalyst for creativity and inventive design research.



## ‘STUDENTS NEEDN’T ASSUME THAT THINGS HAVE TO BE A CERTAIN WAY’

← series of interconnected moments that students stumble across. The suspended studio in the atrium is one of those moments, where functions are blurred. A ceiling becomes a studio space, a light filter and a lesson in scale, acoustics and different uses of timbers. Students needn’t assume that things have to be a certain way.

WARDLE: I don’t think the building proclaims its pedagogical lessons in an overt form. The real lessons are to be learned in its intrinsic detail. It’s more about our hopes of inviting enough curiosity to have users examine the detail. The way we’ve translated the brief’s pedagogical aspirations encourages various readings, some more pronounced than others.

**MSD has earned a 6 Star Green Star Design rating for sustainability from the Green Building Council of Australia. What did you do to attain such high marks?**

MEE: One research exercise led to the design of a large-scale timber structure in the atrium roof, which replaced the need for steel and concrete there. We tested how far we could push the design within current building regulations.

WARDLE: We minimized waste during the construction process by having a great many building elements prefabricated off-site. Our documentation was exact, as was the way we worked with our scripting. We produced data that went straight into a cutting machine at a fabricator’s workshop, a method that yielded the most efficient means of cutting and construction.

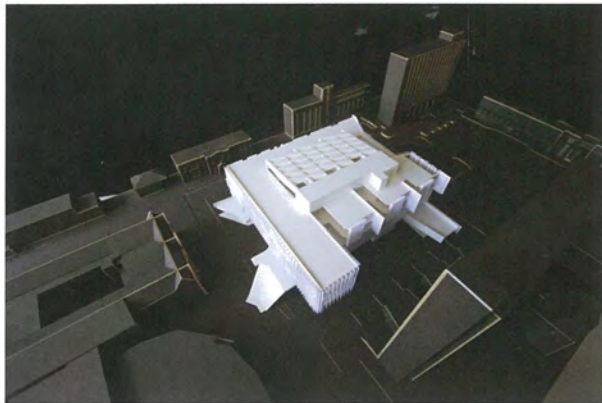
TEHRANI: The building’s sustainability also lies in the unexpected alignment of different phenomena. One example is the way the LVL beams at the top of the central space not only offer a structural solution but also combine with a naturally renewable resource to perform an extraordinary structural feat that contributes to the day-lighting of the space. The result is the most iconic programmatic element of the building – the finishing touch.

**In years to come, what might MSD express about today’s attitudes to design education?**

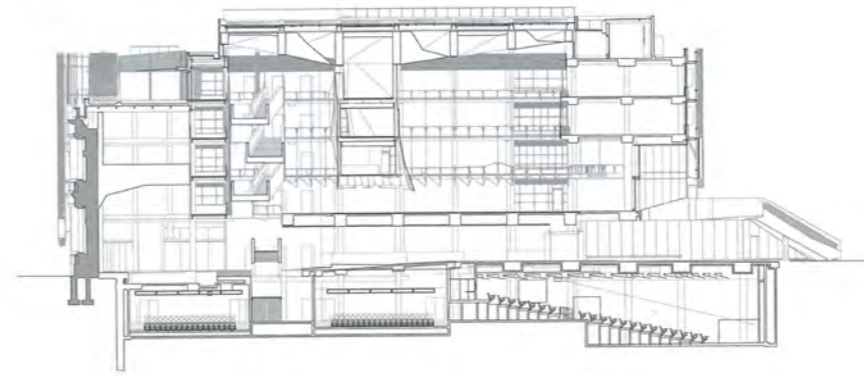
TEHRANI: I would love the building to be referred to as a smart piece of infrastructure for learning that didn’t overplay its hand – that didn’t claim to be the definitive answer. The building is highly finished in the interior, and as you go out, the skin of the onion becomes rougher, increasingly raw and more exposed. It’s a school of design that provides a framework for student intervention, not the final story. It’s for the students to complete, as they pin up their designs and make models that transform the building through appropriation.

WARDLE: The massive investment in this building is an extraordinary leap of faith for a university. It signifies the value that the institution places on the teaching of design and its worth in a competitive educational environment.

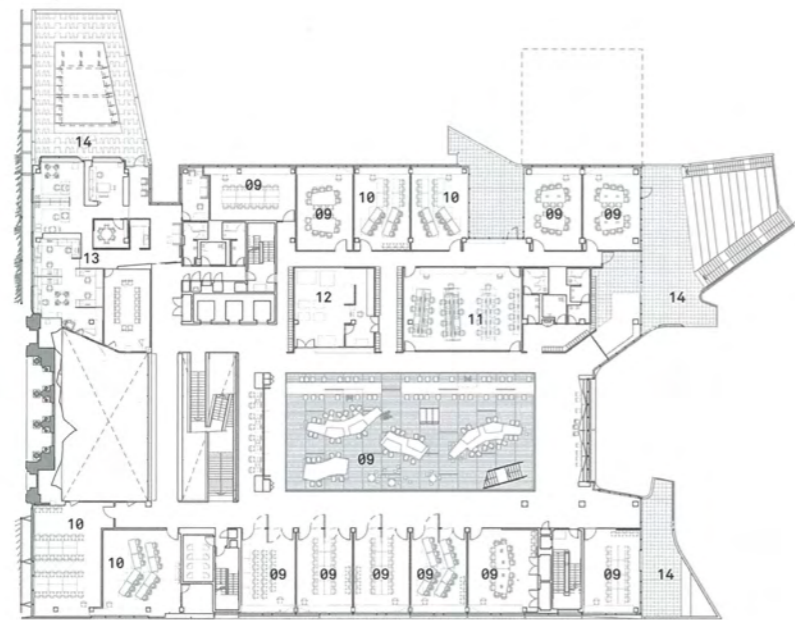
johnwardlearchitects.com  
nadaaa.com



## Long Section



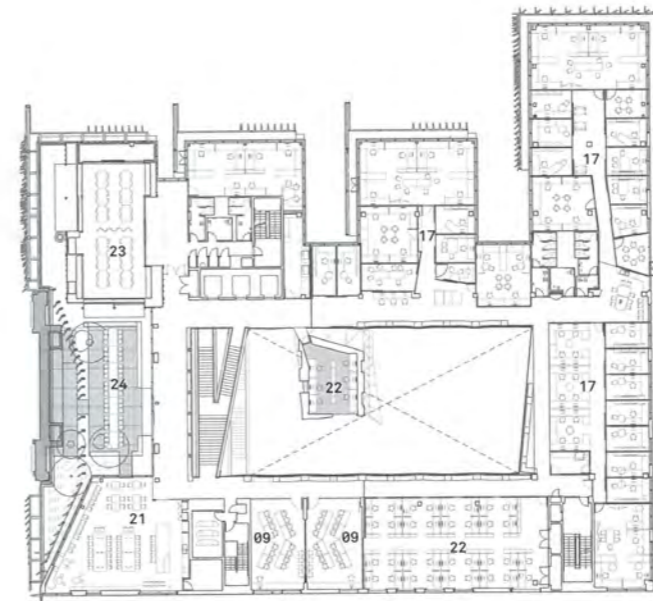
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↑ On the south façade, a fan of windows lifts the gaze of the passer-by to studio level and draws an abundance of light into the library.

↖ Its connection to the network of surrounding buildings and courtyards makes the new Melbourne School of Design an urban gesture that reinforces the workings of the campus.

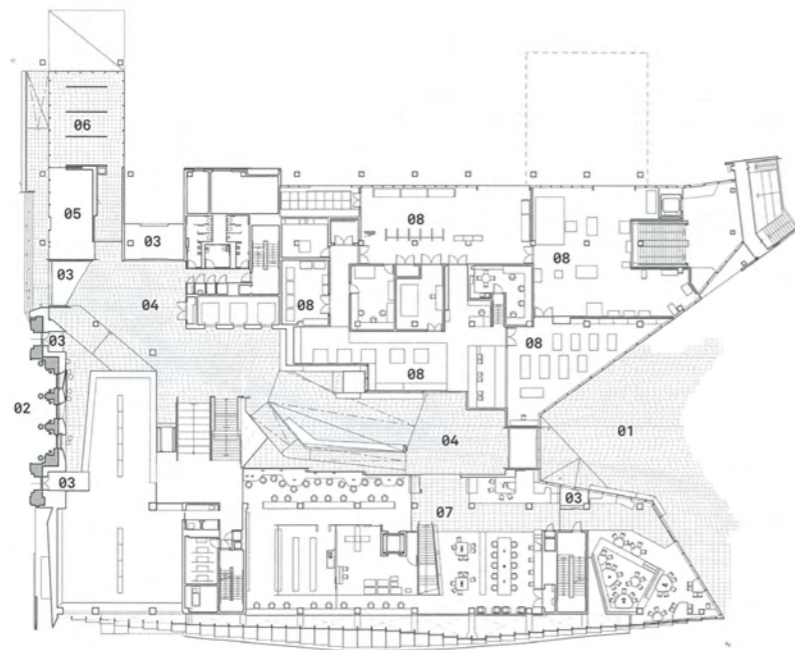
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‘IT’S A SCHOOL OF DESIGN THAT PROVIDES A FRAMEWORK FOR STUDENT INTERVENTION’

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- 01 Entry courtyard
- 02 Heritage façade
- 03 Entry airlock
- 04 Foyer
- 05 Café
- 06 Exhibition space
- 07 Library
- 08 Workshop
- 09 Design studio
- 10 CAD studio
- 11 CAD lab
- 12 Print room
- 13 Staff offices
- 14 Terrace
- 15 Suspended studio
- 16 Informal workspace
- 17 Workspace
- 18 Kitchenette
- 19 IT workspace
- 20 Project space
- 21 Staff lounge
- 22 Graduate research
- 23 Japanese room
- 24 Japanese terrace



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