

EXPO

*December 2014/January 2015*

Nº 79

WRITER  
*Nolan Giles*

PHOTOGRAPHER  
*Sean Fennessy*

DESIGNS  
*on the*  
FUTURE

*The Melbourne School of Design is rethinking how we approach the visual world around us as well as its own teaching space. Monocle visits the school's new building to learn why it is going back to the drawing board in order to inspire fresh design talent.*

# LOOK AND LEARN

—Melbourne

Helping design a building with the ambition to set a global benchmark for teaching excellence isn't quite enough for architect Nader Tehrani. He wants the new home of the Melbourne School of Design (MSD) to start a revolution.

"I would hope at least one revolution happens in this building," he says, referencing a 1979 demonstration that packed the halls of the Architecture and Urbanism College of the University of São Paulo with student protesters. "I would like to see things happen in this space that we could never have anticipated because, in a way, that's the moment when you know it's being put to good use."

Located at the University of Melbourne, just north of the city's business district, MSD is an AU\$129m (€90m) facility designed as part of a creative partnership between Tehrani's Boston-based firm Nadaaa and locals John Wardle Architects. The intent of the project is to create more than just another celebrated addition to Melbourne's sharp urban fabric. The building's mission is to inspire and nurture future generations of city shapers, who will have fully moved in by the beginning of the academic year in February. At the new facility (which has replaced a decaying 1960s structure) the studio walls are literally falling away to make room for progress.

"This is the key right here," says Professor Thomas Kvan, dean of the faculty of architecture, building and planning at the University of Melbourne, excitedly pointing to the revolving panels that open up the studio classrooms onto the building's spectacular atrium. "The symbolic pivoting of the doors on this level indicates the profound change we have made."

"It is about opening up for opportunities, for the development of ideas, for the development of the practice. We would like to see things emerge and this building really facilitates that."

These simple principles of open learning and open engagement were key deliberations in a bold brief set by Kvan and the team at University of Melbourne through an international competition. "Very simply, the competition brief came down to supporting the future of academic work, the future of the studio and creating a living building — a pedagogical building," says Kvan. "All of our expectations came down to these four phrases."

The transglobal partnership between John Wardle Architects and Nadaaa won the commission with a proposal for a quietly confident, five-level 15,772 sq m

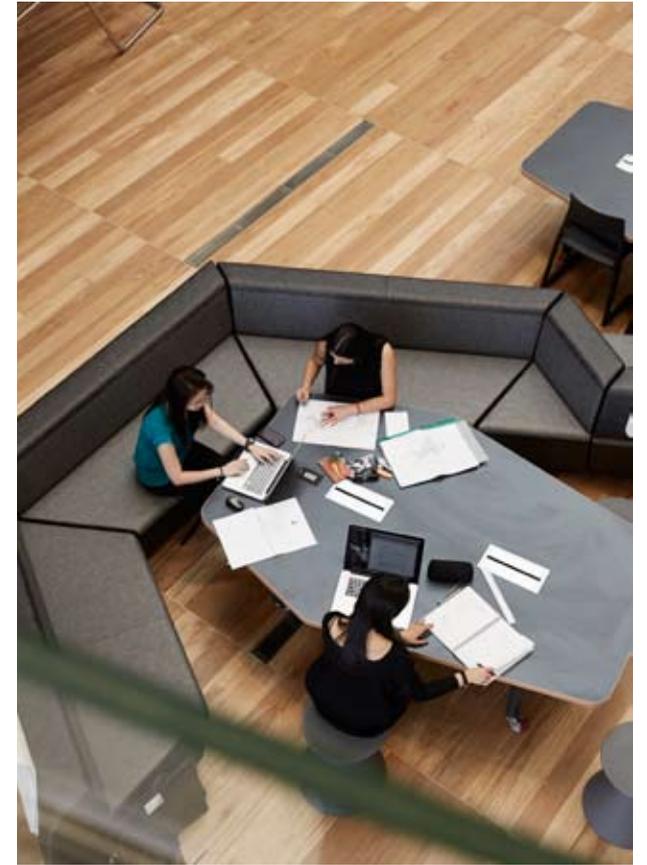




2



3



4

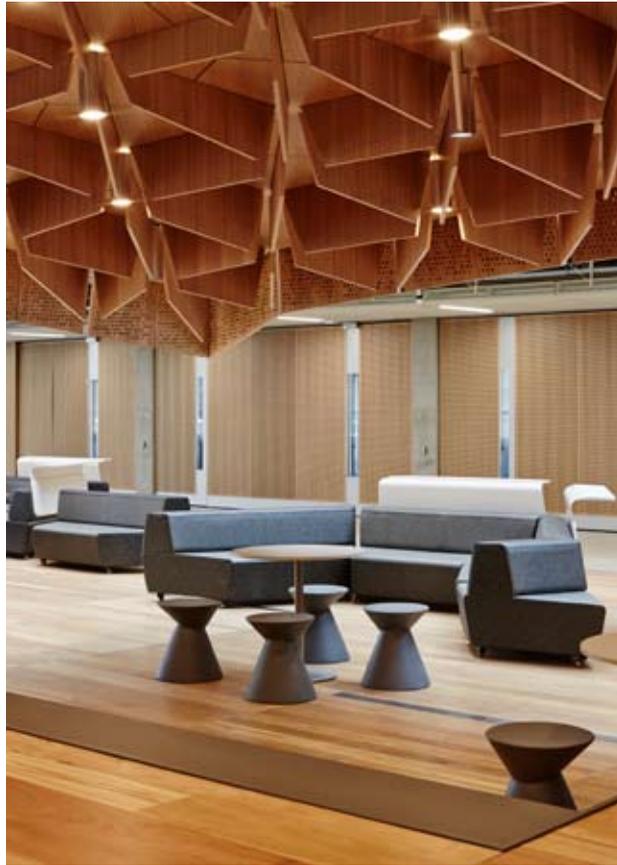


5



6





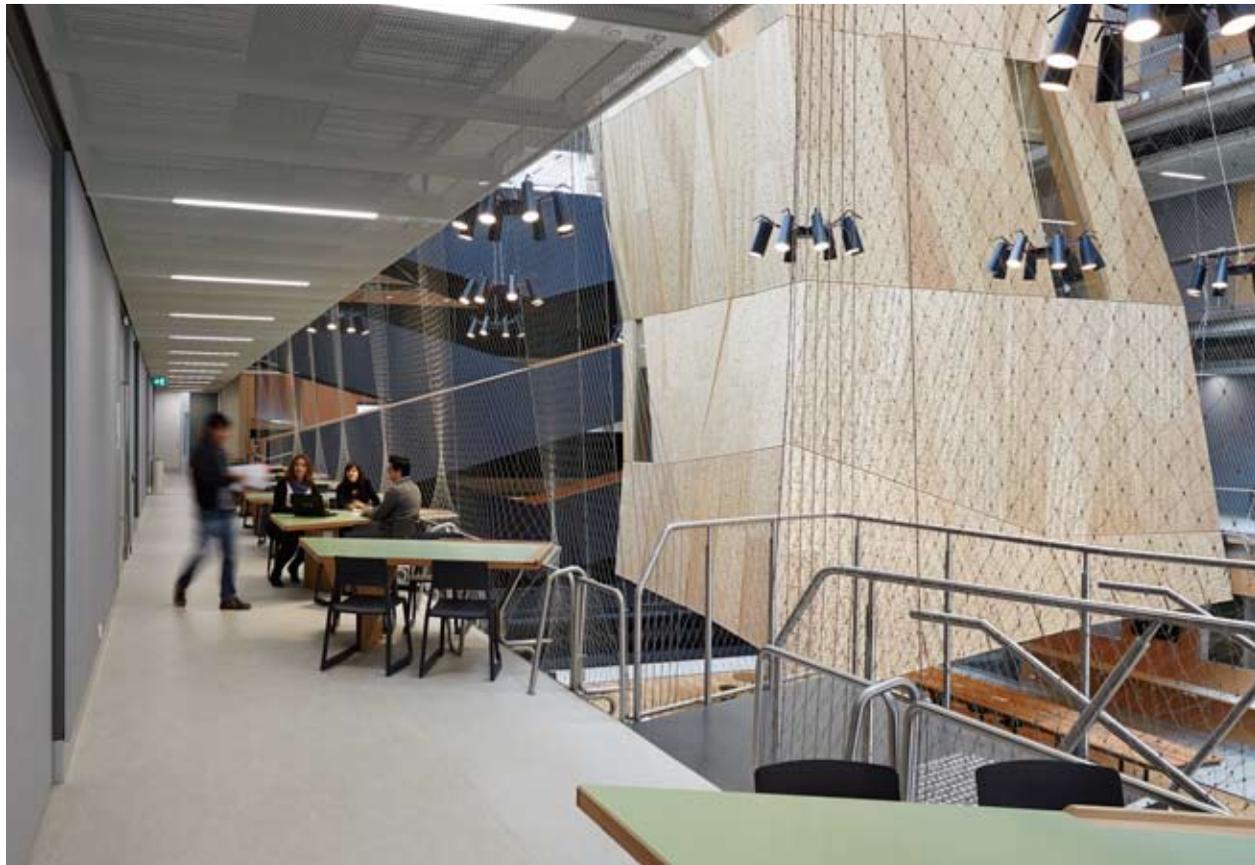
8



9



11



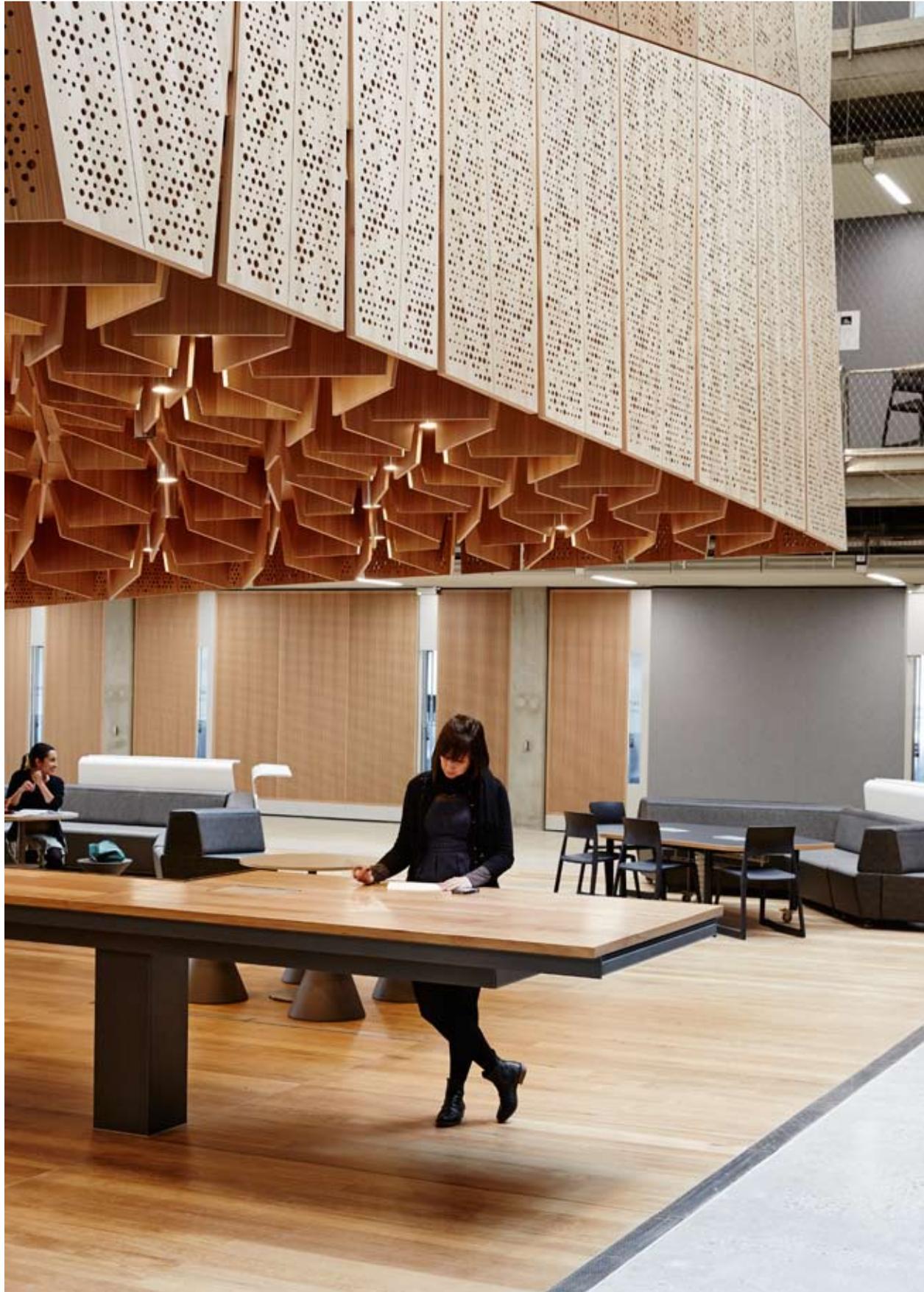
10



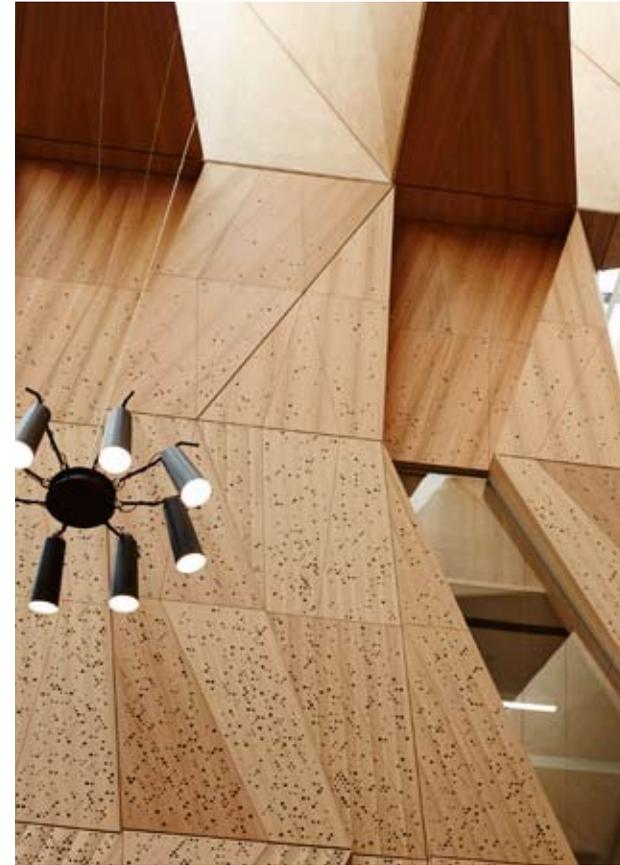
12



13



14



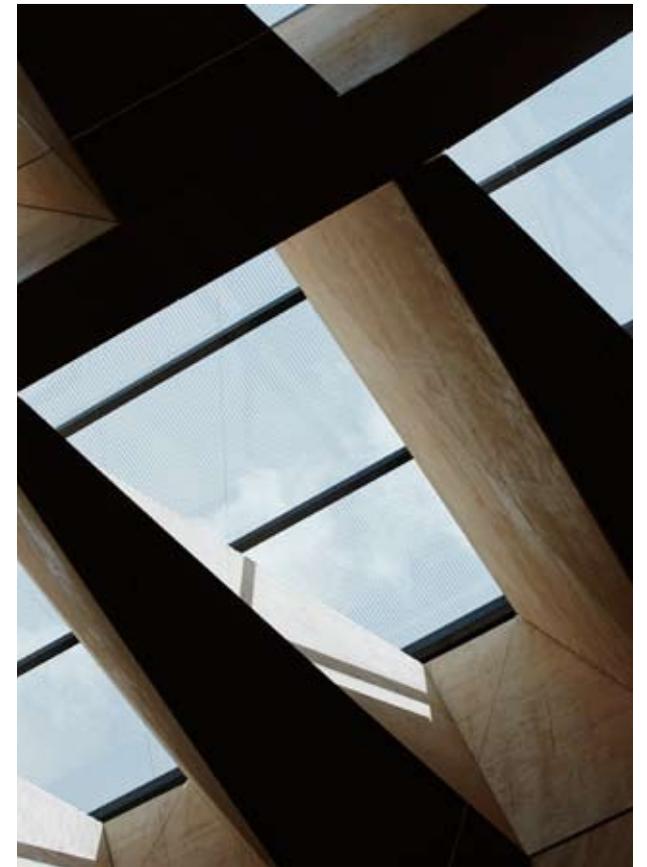
15



16



17



18



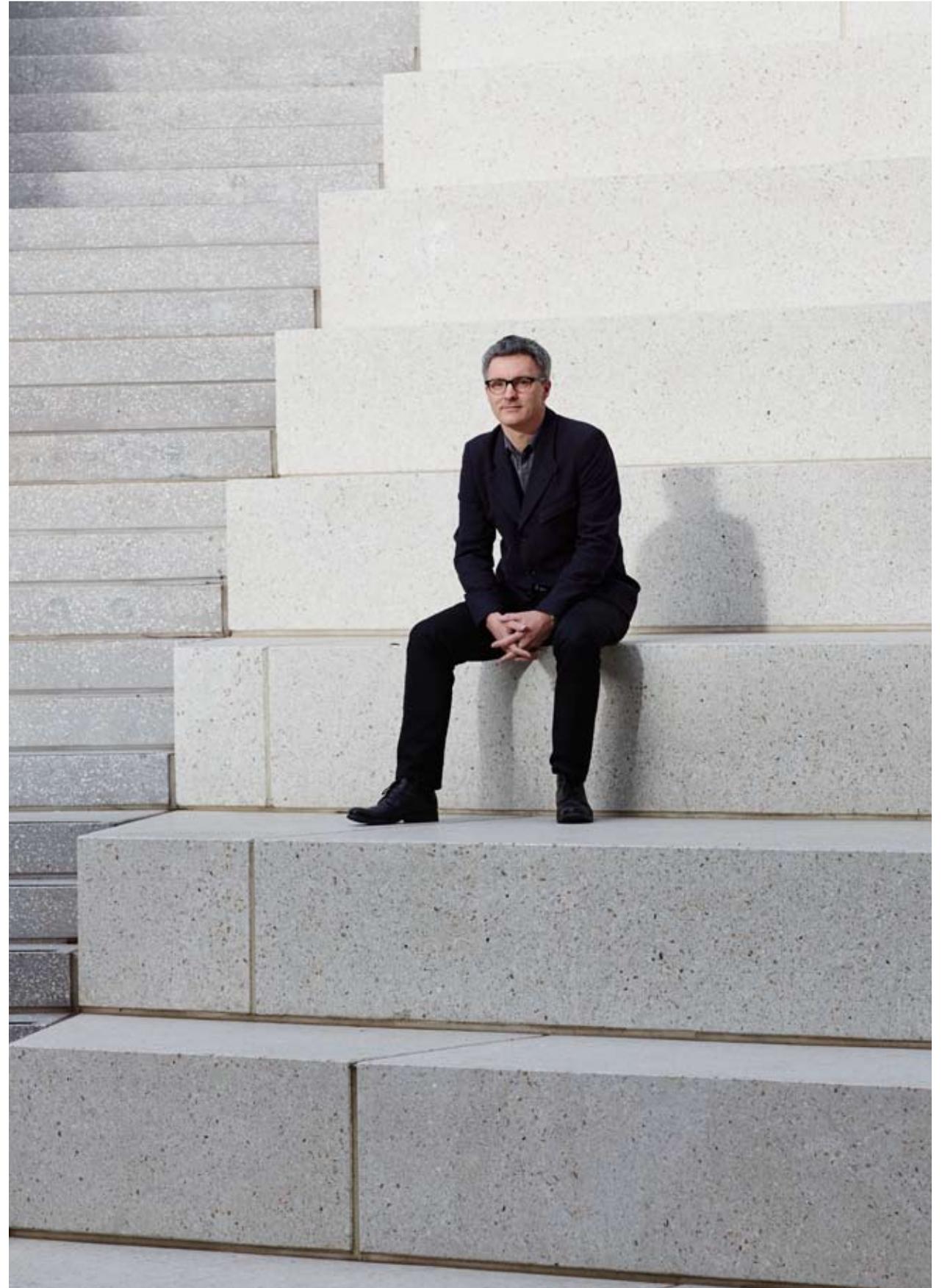
19



20



21



22



## List of plates

- |    |   |    |   |
|----|---|----|---|
| 01 | Students work across multiple floors in the main atrium of the MSD  | 11 | Main lecture theatre  |
| 02 | Timber coffering with dangling spider-pendant lights  | 12 | Professor Thomas Kvan, dean of the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning   |
| 03 | Student Sam Chesbrough  | 13 | 'Blue portal' looking into the main lecture theatre   |
| 04 | Designers spread out with their work on the atrium's moveable furniture   | 14 | MSD student working in the atrium under the suspended timber studios  |
| 05 | Revolving walls on the ground floor open up onto studios off the main atrium  | 15 | Intricate patterning on the MSD's suspended timber studios  |
| 06 | Professor Donald Bates, chair of architectural design at the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning                         | 16 | Professor Alan Pert, director of Melbourne School of Design   |
| 07 | The MSD's exterior staircase leads students into the main facility while encouraging engagement with the library below              | 17 | Seating in MSD's library, which has one of Australia's most extensive collections of architecture, design and urban planning literature |
| 08 | John Wardle Architects, in collaboration with Nadaaa, were responsible for the tasteful interior fittings                           | 18 | Ceiling detail in the atrium  |
| 09 | Student Lawson Heah   | 19 | Seating that is part of the University of Melbourne campus thoroughfare   |
| 10 | Second-level overlooking the atrium, with informal work areas running along the balconies where students can gather and collaborate | 20 | Limestone sculpture by R Jackson in the foyer of the basement lecture theatre   |
|    |   | 21 | Lovell Chen lounge  |
|    |   | 22 | Stefan Mee, principal architect at John Wardle Architects   |
|    |   | 23 | Student Olivia Gude   |

building, subtly revealing its intent from a fairly steely exterior that flows into the school's lively heart: the grand atrium. Here as many as 2,000 architecture, landscape architecture, construction, urban-planning, property and urban-design students and 200 staff bustle between studio spaces. They spread out across an open-plan workspace that is built around the notion of flexibility.

"If this building works out in the way that we want it to, it will be because of its ability to bring together and blend the best of a formal curriculum within an informal space, which is completely appropriated by the students," says Tehrani.

This feeling of creative freedom transcends the enclosed atrium. From a windowed ceiling, light filters in through a timber-beam coffering giving the space a warm, homely charm. The acoustics are equally well managed and energise the concrete, glass and timber interiors in a controlled but seemingly natural manner. While some of the architectural choices might be considered safe, others – such as the suspended wooden studio suite that precariously dangles three timber classrooms from the atrium ceiling – dare students to think unconventionally about their future profession.

"Buildings are well known as being grounded; you build a structure up but to suspend it upside down is something that we didn't know we could get away with," says Tehrani. "That's one of the more beautiful parts of the building. It interpolates you, it beckons you, it forces you to rethink gravity, it forces you to imagine how the structure works. It forces you to think, 'Is this really wood or is it something else?' It really is one of the provocative moments of the building."

This theme of "moments" underlines MSD's architectural make-up, which skips unnecessary flair in favour of producing a design puzzle for students to slowly solve. Ceiling-fitted pipe work is left exposed and some doors are made of glass to highlight the building's inner workings. Its multilevel atrium shuns

obtrusive balustrades for playful steel netting, allowing the natural ebb and flow of human movement between levels to appear uninterrupted from any vantage point. Design education is celebrated in the building's details from the well-defined wishbone support beams that characterise the library's bunker-style reading room to its topographically intricate floor plan. The structure's sleek, perforated zinc, glass and prefabricated concrete skin houses a site of calm complexity.

"With the idea of the building being a teaching tool we have tried to make students ask questions because we don't necessarily want them to understand it straight away," says Stefan Mee, a principal at John Wardle Architects. "We avoided the idea of creating a huge glass showroom. Instead it is about moments – giving clues as to what is happening. Hopefully this will create a questioning approach for the students so they are always thinking about things critically – and that will in turn inspire an inquiring mind."

The building's designers and MSD staff hope that the facility will influence a new generation of researchers, architects and urban planners. Students seem equally enthusiastic about using the world-class structure as a platform from which to begin shaping and improving urban environments. Some, such as architecture master's student Tom Eames, dropped subjects during their last semester to stay with MSD for another six months in the new building. Eames says that the way it approaches urbanism in a microcosm has already been conducive to his craft.

"I'm examining adaptability, micro-housing and small-footprint residences and it's been fascinating for me to watch how people are already adapting to and transforming this space," says Eames. "I think everyone at the moment feels privileged to be here at MSD and this goes back to the building being an educational tool in itself. It's the best possible case study you could imagine." — (M)