FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE, BUILDING AND PLANNING, UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

JOHN WARDLE ARCHITECTS AND NADAAA

The new Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning (FABP), a joint venture between John Wardle Architects and NADAAA, displays an unfamiliar familiarity to the university within the former building. The entry is via a landscape-like ground floor, leading down into lecture theatres or up into a large atrium lined with studio spaces. However, unlike the old faculty, there is greater legibility of the activity beyond these "public" areas. Workshops on the ground floor open onto a north-facing courtyard; a series of exhibition spaces hug the western entrance; a faculty library opens up to a landscape rear on the southern edge; and the studio spaces lining the atrium offer views in and beyond to the established terraces of the heritage campus. It is this legibility of program, infrastructure and methods of construction that is at the heart of the Wardle/NADAAA design, a concept that will enable the building to act as a teaching tool for its students and as a mean of communication with visitors to the faculty.

This legibility also makes visible the position of this building within the lineage of the collaboration's work, within the pedigrees of architecture schools locally, internationally and historically and, within a lineage of architectural technology and ideology. The indicator in this case is also the most visually dominant and, arguably, the most innovative element within the new building. Above the voluminous atrium spans a deep, timber-slabbed ceiling from which a large form is thrust below, stopping only a few metres above the floor. Currently under construction, this plywood-clad extrusion acts as a catalyst for diversity within the atrium...
enabling spaces of intervention, via a completely internalised working studio inside, and refuge beneath, within the otherwise exposed space.

The suspended studio is formed from the coffered ceiling to create the enclosed space, which, together with the need to alter the form to assist the distribution of sound within the atrium, has resulted in a paneling system comprised of totally unique components, some of which are also perforated to enable acoustical softening. Although the studio and battened veeam timber (LVL) beams and coffering are all clad in plywood, a more refined plywood finish was chosen for the studio panels and the underside of the beams.

Similar forms appear in NAMM’s previous explorations, perhaps most notably in two of their director projects, Upper Work (2001) and Rita Osterma/Raimann (2009), where an undulating surface is used as a suspended ceiling structure. Dynamic ceilings also appear in Wanaka’s recent works, from stepped profile ceilings within the Urban Workshop on Lambs St.; Melbourne (2007), an exploration of the ceiling form for light distribution in the lobby of 625 Bourke Street, Melbourne (2012) and, more recently, it is prepared in the podium of 150 Queen Street, Brisbane, punctured with a protruding workspace.

In these earlier explorations, it appears that both firms have aimed to make the ceiling a dynamic element for both aesthetic and functional reasons. This is not surprising as historically, in the past, where the ceiling is supposed to disguise the structure and services beneath, or reflect the style and members as a feature, an approach common in the Gothic period. However, the FAB3 marks a conceptual shift, questioning whether a ceiling can be more than just a ceiling, with the proposition that the element itself could become a habitable volume.

This idea is also explored on the top floor of the old commerce facade building integrated into the new design – the former Bank of NSW facade. Here, the vertical surface is pulled back into the building, creating a small vertical space high above the full-height volumes of a formal eaves brick space. The thinning of the wall with the spandrel jointing surfaces also hides the steel structure supporting the old facade, while emphasizing the thickness of the past-brick, past-timber facade that is up to three metres deep at some extents.

These explorations are evidence of the unique joint venture between the offices, an arrangement with genuine creative and enhanced outcomes as a result of the collaborative process. Based in Melbourne and Brisbane respectively, their "3i-design" studio sharing operation has also enabled the project to run several months ahead of schedule, with completion expected in October 2014. This will allow substantial letting time for staff and students and, hopefully for the leadership, plenty of opportunity to explain the 3iC’s academic year.