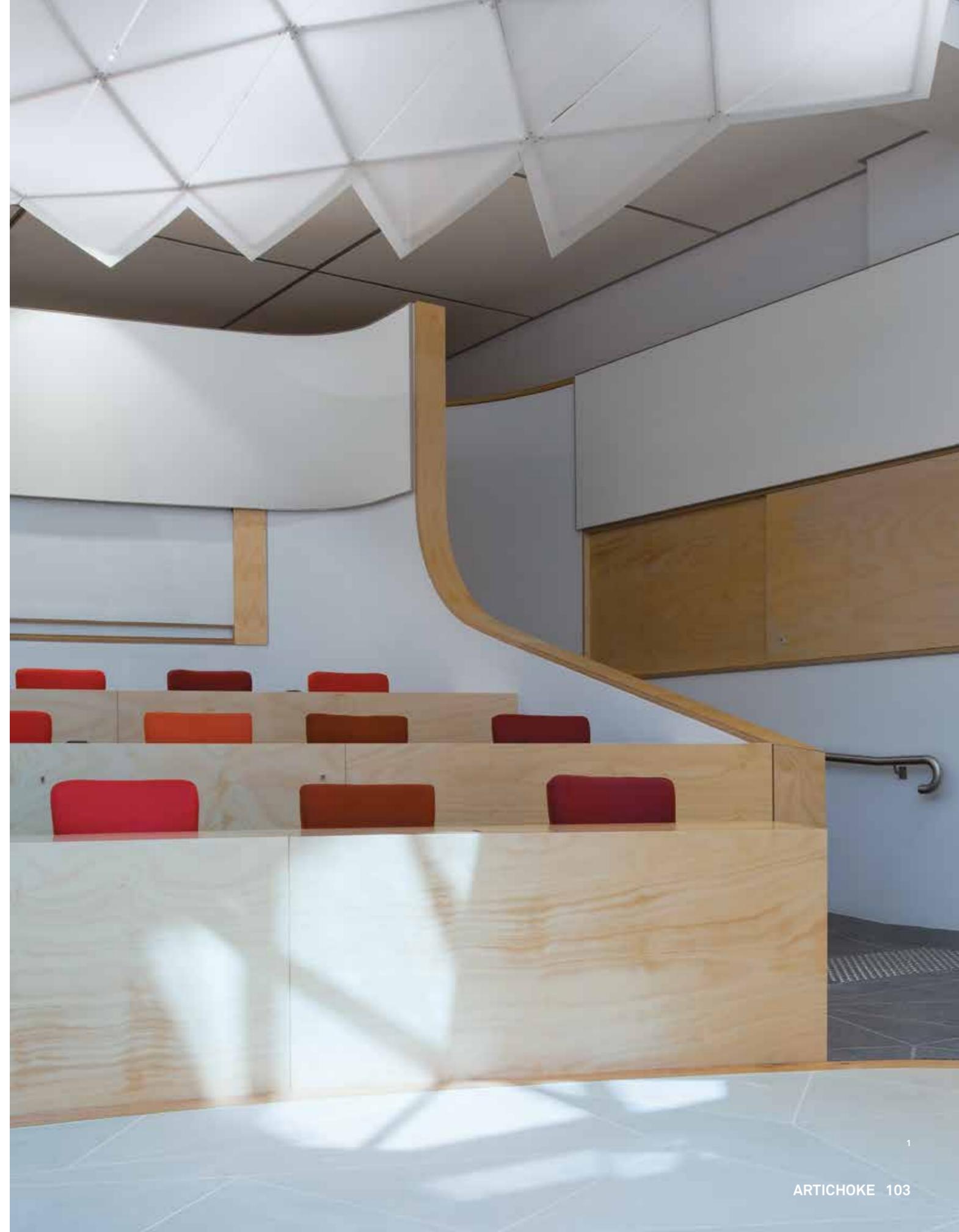


WILLIAM MACMAHON BALL THEATRE

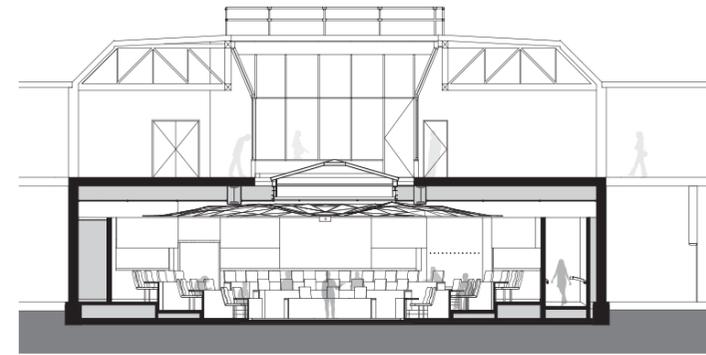
Designed by Architectus, this lecture theatre at the University of Melbourne encourages face-to-face interaction and aims to enhance the teaching and learning experience.

words PHILIP GOAD photography BRENDAN FINN





- 1_ THE DESIGN CHARACTER OF THE LECTURE THEATRE IS PARLIAMENTARY, YET RELAXED AND INFORMAL.
- 2_ THE LECTURE THEATRE HAS A HEMICYCLE PLAN, WHICH ALLOWS SEATING AND SIGHT LINES TO ENCOURAGE A HIGH LEVEL OF PHYSICAL INTERACTION AND VISUAL CONNECTION.
- 3_ PLANTATION PLYWOOD WAS USED FOR THE LECTURE THEATRE'S JOINERY.
- 4_ THE CEILING IS DEFINED BY TRIANGULATED PLANES OF TRANSLUCENT ACRYLIC SUSPENDED BELOW STRETCHED ACOUSTIC FABRIC.
- 5_ A LIFE-SIZED PHOTOGRAPH OF COATS HANGING ON A RACK GIVES THE SPACE A SENSE OF OCCUPATION.

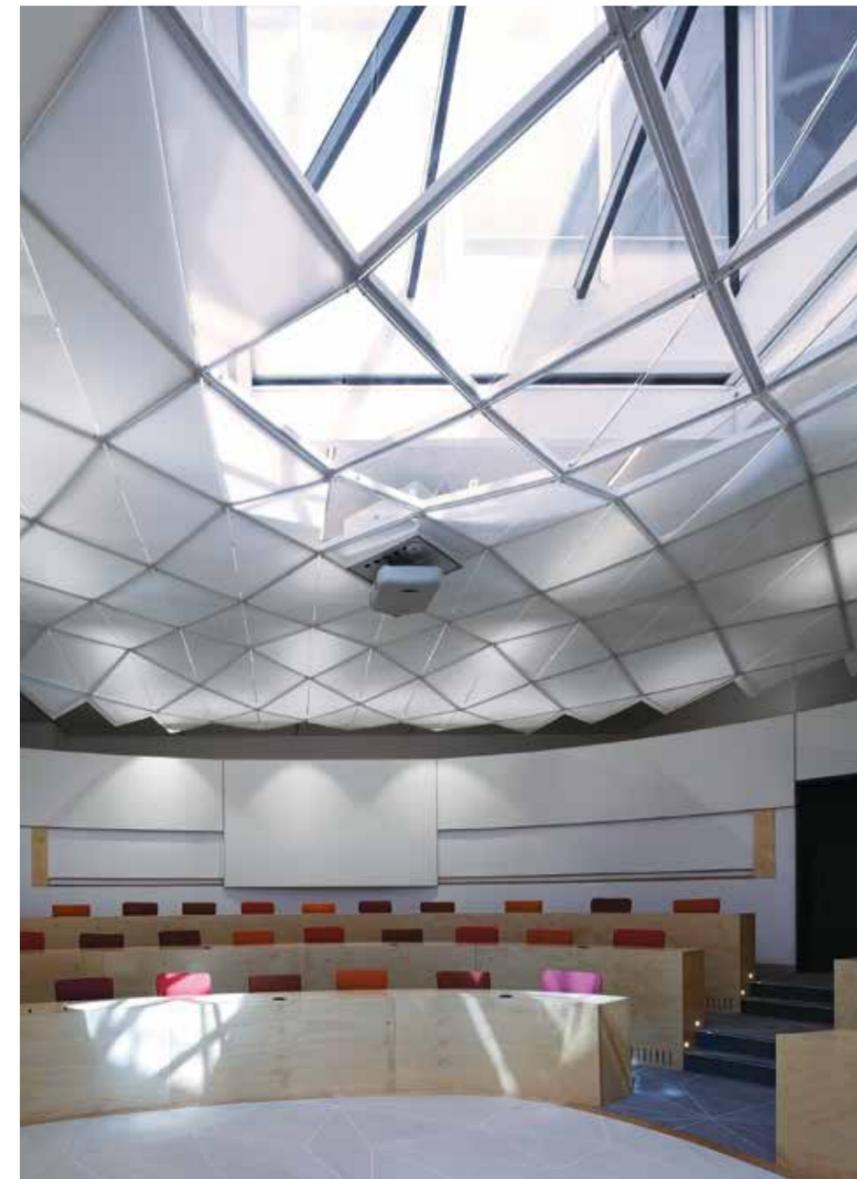


WILLIAM MACMAHON BALL THEATRE SECTION 1:250

0 1 2 m



3



4



5

In these days of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and smart teaching with increasingly smarter devices, it might seem a little odd to be spending time and energy designing a lecture theatre. After all, isn't the formal lecture a relic of an older idea of academic culture? And if this is the case, isn't then the lecture theatre a spatial type that we may soon do without? That was thought to be the case with the library, with the rise of digital text. But university libraries have experienced resurgence in use and popularity, primarily because they've been reinvented. No longer solely places of monastic quiet, the library has been reshaped as a collaborative learning environment that not only stores books but is also a place where students interact, talk, and use their laptops, phones, books and journals to engage with knowledge. The contemporary lecture theatre is undergoing a similar reinvention.

To mark the establishment of its new Melbourne School of Government, the Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne wanted a new, purpose-built space that not only signalled the clever teaching delivery offered by its programs but that was also a place that celebrated one of the university's great teachers and one of the nation's great public policy thinkers, Foundation Professor of Political

Science William Macmahon Ball (1901-1986). James Jones and his team at the Melbourne office of Architectus worked closely with the dean of the Faculty of Arts, Professor Mark Considine, to devise a special lecture theatre that is inserted deep within the existing shell of the early-twentieth-century sandstone Old Arts building. The original space had been a flat-floor theatre with a skylight. It had been an acoustic disaster. Architectus stripped it out, stepped the floor and retained the skylight but re-glazed it and refashioned it completely. The combination of light well, new glass roof and suspended, milky translucent ceiling cloud has produced a giant light box, essentially a one-hundred-and-eighty-square-metre light fitting. The dynamically shaped ceiling is also an acoustic attenuator. The idea is that, environmentally, one can produce near-daylight conditions with natural light, complete blackout or any variety of lighting conditions; employ low velocity airconditioning; and achieve near-perfect acoustic conditions for voice projection.

The new seventy-five-seat theatre, planned in the round, can be configured for almost any teaching scenario: a traditional lecture setting in the dark, a moot parliament in virtual daylight, a place to practice oratory, team teaching with multiple projection points, or a

project

William Macmahon
Ball Theatre
Old Arts Building 149
University of Melbourne
Parkville campus
1-100 Grattan Street
Parkville Vic 3010
13 63 52
unimelb.edu.au

design practice

Architectus
Level 7, 250 Victoria Parade
East Melbourne Vic 3002
+61 3 9429 5733
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project team

Ruth Wilson, James Jones,
Marina Carroll, Joanne
King, Petrina Moore, Len
Parker, Toby Woolley

time schedule

Design, documentation:
8 months
Construction: 7 months

builder

United Commercial Projects

engineer

AECOM

heritage consultant

Trethowan Architecture

building surveyor

McKenzie Group Consulting

structural engineer

John Horan & Associates

quantity surveyor

Slattery

audiovisual

CHW Consulting

products**walls and ceilings**

A30 Microacoustic fabric
from Barrisol with Autex
insulation. Steel frame with
perspex panels manufactured
by Wilhelmssen Manufacturing.

windows

Horizontal retractable blind
from Perfect Blinds.

flooring

Timber-framed tiering on
concrete slab. Carpets
from Rugs Carpet & Design.
Stringy bark timber trim by
A&A Cabinets. Sandstone in
'Mount White' from Gosford
Quarries.

lighting

Delta light, Global Track light
and Leminence LED light,
all from Inlite.

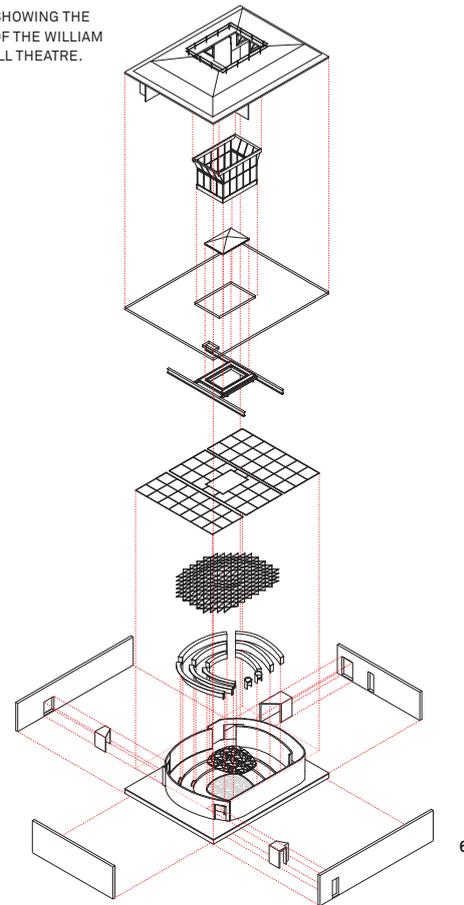
furniture

Hoop pine ply joinery by
A&A Cabinets. Häfele joinery
hardware. Stratos coat hooks
from Enware. Coat hook in
desks from Häfele. Chairs
from Textile Mania.

other

Colourback glass writing
surface in Dulux 'Lexicon
Quarter.' Digitally printed
vinyl wall graphic by
Fleetmark. Ideapaint
whiteboard surface from
Baresque. Clipping rail
by Hold Ups.

6_ A DIAGRAM SHOWING THE MANY LAYERS OF THE WILLIAM MACMAHON BALL THEATRE.



place of debate with two lecterns (one of which moves). It is, without doubt, theatrical. As you arrive, you go through an acoustic “lock.” Each of the three vestibules has its floor, walls and ceiling lined in a dark, dense-weave pile carpet. There’s a sense of immediate occupation with a life-size photograph of coats hanging on the wall (I was fooled!). If a guest lecturer or debating “team” wants to make a grand entry, there’s a full-height, curving screen wall (that also accommodates the access ramp) from which one can emerge “on stage.” At the theatre’s centre is a flat, sandstone-paved ovoid – not a bullring but a “parliamentary” floor. There’s a sense of informality that one could move around this space, holding forth. The theatre’s gently stepped form means that speakers will be at eye level with those seated, maximizing engagement at every turn. People animate this space and bring it to life.

At the same time, the theatre has two distinct divisions in terms of texture and technology. On the ground plane, traditional craft and natural materials are employed in furniture and finishes: beautifully jointed plantation plywood joinery, solid timber shrouds to each lectern where the timbers are joined with ebony tongues, and in the centre, the sandstone floor has been laid in irregular triangles and trapezoids. Above, it’s all high tech for lighting, ventilation and audiovisual projection, with artificial materials like

translucent acrylic (also cut into triangles and trapezoids), and a further ceiling above that of micro-perforated, stretched acoustic fabric laid out in a grid.

Jones describes the William Macmahon Ball Theatre as a “Geoffrey Robertson space;” Ken Hodgson from the university’s Property and Campus Services calls it “The United Nations Room.” For me, the exquisite quality of the theatre’s natural light made me feel as though I could be teaching outside, speaking not just to students of today but perhaps in an echo of Periclean Greece, standing on its sandstone centre, somewhere in the Athenian agora, rubbing shoulders with Plato and Socrates, and practising the “dialectical method,” still the essence of first-rate teaching by reasoned argument, still the essence of today’s political debate. “Mac Ball” would have probably agreed, but he would have scoffed at my nostalgia and instead urged his listeners to question my certainty, to experiment with the space’s multiple teaching points, and come to their own conclusions, urging them to become intellectually ambitious for ideas – not his nor mine but their own. **A**

Professor Philip Goad is Chair of Architecture at the University of Melbourne. He had no involvement with the William Macmahon Ball Theatre project.