

INFLECTION

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Inflection

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ARCHITECTURE & PEDAGOGY

JOHN WARDLE AND STEFAN MEE + NADER TEHRANI

*Interviewed by Jonathan Russell and William Cassell
with photographs by William Cassell*

As a discipline, architecture carries with it a pervasive ideology of determinism. The belief that we are shaped by our physical environment, and therefore that a building can powerfully influence its users is an article of faith amongst architects. In this context, the design and construction of a school of architecture is a rare and valuable prize; a pedagogical multiplier in which future architects literally take lessons from the walls around them. By the same token, it is difficult to imagine a more intimidating assignment – every space and every detail will be scrutinised and critiqued by students, academics, and practitioners trained to accept nothing less than perfection in their built environment.

In 2014, the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning steps into this field with a new home designed by Melbourne-based John Wardle Architects and Boston's NADAAA. The unique transnational collaboration between these firms is mirrored in the structure of this interview; *Inflection* spoke with NADAAA principal Nader Tehrani and, separately, with John Wardle and Stefan Mee, principals of John Wardle Architects. Their views on pedagogy, practice and collaboration are presented in parallel, mirroring their related but distinct perspectives on this project.

– JR & WC

Given the unusual working relationship of your firms, we're interested in your thoughts on collaboration across vast distances. Has this mode of practice had a profound effect on the way you think about your work?

John Wardle:

One thing we hope we've brought to the project with this collaboration is a professional process that may be more prevalent in the future. We are two intensely local firms that perform a global collaboration – both firms believe in sourcing understanding of a particular commission from its locality, its social histories, its materiality and its specific skills. The span of association is definitely global, the reach and access to ideas have spanned the planet but the concentration of our gaze has been toward a very local condition.

Stefan Mee:

The unusual thing about this collaboration was that it was knitted together on all design decisions all the way through documentation right through to the end of the project. I think it means that the building is quite rigorous, in that we were always critiquing each other's ideas, developing each other's ideas and adding to them. In a way it's like what we were trying to promote in the building, which is this idea of open dialogue, many voices, conversations – this was mirrored in the design process as well – and that's an interesting aspect of our collaboration.

Nader Tehrani:

This has been a true collaboration from beginning to end, and John's generosity to provide us with a platform has been central to our ability to operate on his home turf with such comfort. I did know John Wardle's work, and what was somewhat alarming to me is that I didn't know the whole body of work, but as I looked at it, I realised there was so much affinity between our two works – certain intellectual operations, certain material plays, certain techniques – it was alarming how similar we were. But I simply didn't know: how did they get there? Did they get there from the same point of view, different points of view? I simply didn't know. But the proximity in thinking made it well worth a different collaboration than what we usually have. As you may know, many collaborations are constructed as hand-offs: that certain people design, certain people deliver. Our ability to maintain this parallel marriage throughout has certainly produced some redundancies, but it's also produced a great feedback loop, a great discourse and a kind of vibration between the two firms – in that sense it's been quite productive.

Discussions surrounding the new Architecture, Building and Planning Building have often centred on its role in transforming the Faculty as a whole. What changes in architectural education does this building aim to facilitate?

JW: I think it follows the script that was set by Dean Tom Kvan and others that created the brief for the competition, that allowed Tom to put built form around some of the academic changes that were proposed for the next generation of this faculty. This new building provides open territories to actively promote cross-fertilisation, both in the teaching programs and in the behaviour of students.

SM: In a way it's also about the arrangement of program through the building, so for example the idea that on the ground floor, having a workshop adjacent to a library suggests that the two are not mutually exclusive. By changing those adjacencies, you can create different potential connections and ways of thinking about architecture and what it might mean.

JW: This is a building for a very large population, that requires extremely prescriptive scheduling of academic use of every space. We have been able to assist this by creating spaces that are highly adaptive – both rapid fire, quick turn around between different functions in an academic week or annual calendar, and adaptive over time, to ensure durability for an evolving educational model.

NT: The notion of the design studio was an important one; Melbourne University for a long time has had a very strong research mission, but it has not necessarily been parallel with a commitment to the design studio. Originally when we started the commission, the desire was for a committed space where students would get dedicated studio space. As we went through the number crunching period it was clear that it would be implausible to get dedicated space. So the building as you see it designed and delivered in great part is the beneficiary of this glitch in the program – it's both its victim and its beneficiary. The organisation, design and plan of the interstitial spaces of the building are hot desks essentially – and by that I mean that the net to gross relationship that a building is designed around, inserting in what we call corridors or circulation space and floor space, all of these have been amplified to give collaborative desk areas, working counters, seating areas, lounges, pin-up areas, crit spaces that are aimed at being owned by the students in an ad-hoc and informal way, such that the students have ownership over their space. The areas that have dedicated furnishings are there precisely so that they serve as kind of infrastructure for students to work, and working, as we know, happens in many ways – it happens through introversion, individual reflection, it happens through small collaborations. But also it's a recognition that the design studio is no longer classically conceived around 'my desk, my parallel rule, my drawer': we design in the fab lab, we design in the library, we design in collaborative contexts – so, the way in which the library or the fab lab are situated on the ground level, exposed to the campus, drawing in faculty and students from other disciplines, is part of the larger mission of the academic environment that is foreseen there – that design thinking, as a process, is not only allocated within an added square footage, but it's disseminated and communicated to a broader campus.

The western end of the building is formally fascinating. In particular, the juxtaposition on the exterior is quite striking: the new building literally envelops the old Joseph Reed facade. Whereas, in the interior, there seems to be a conversation occurring between these disparate elements.

JW: The first thing is the decision that we made at the competition stage to retain the facade. With this decision made, we investigated the orchestration of program internally to register with the spatial and detail characteristics of the facade. By locating the large exhibition chamber there, we could promote the idea of looking in through a veil of history, through a formally composed arrangement of fenestration. This set in train the development of performative relationships between internal volumes and external facade to recalibrate the performance of Joseph Reed's facade and create a new active internal facade that would be both counterpoint and companion to it.

SM: The fenestration allows particular views in and there's an element of surprise that you look through that veil of apertures and you can see quite a long way in, so there's a directional quality to it from the concrete lawn into the interior of the building and vice-versa. That's what translates into the pressure that pulls that internal facade, kind of stretching out towards the interior of the building - there's a strong axial relationship.

NT: The building as it was being used did not in any particular way respect the windows or height of the floors that abutted against them and so forth, so part of our mission was to activate the elevation - its doors, its entryways - bring it back to life. But part of it was to recognise that this facade, in its location, is an absolute artifice. It is not real - it needs new I-beams to buttress it up there, it needs a new facade on the inside to identify its constructed relationship to the existing facade, giving form to it, giving shape to the relationship between the I-beam and the existing arches - loosely speaking I'll say in a shrink-wrapped way.

You've referred to the building itself as a pedagogical tool. When students move in next year, they will be learning not just in the building but from the building. What elements, or what properties of the new building should we be taking lessons from?

JW: Architects frequently do their best work by being acute observers of things – we're taught to observe sites and regions and environmental conditions at the outset of our research into any particular project. The building actually provides students with a set of circumstances that evoke curiosity and we hope sustains interest, as many readings promote an engaging dialogue.

SM: As part of the design process, we explored how details might be pulled apart so you can start to understand the various functions of a facade. For example, when you think about the idea of shading, glare and so on which, these days, can be controlled and compressed into a single glass pane – that's a different approach to pulling those different functions apart and layering that across a facade into screens and glazing and so on, and starting to understand what those different parts do, how you need all those different parts to create a successful building. The other thing worth noting is the fact that the materials we expose and use in the building are generally fairly raw – we're trying to express what you can do with things like concrete and timber and plywood rather than covering all that up with another highly finished surface. So there's something to be observed from that level of exposure of the basics of building.

NT: The understanding that there are fundamental differences between North and South versus East and West, fundamental differences about how a building meets the ground or constructs the ground, notions of tectonic differences between concrete, metal, glass and wood – these were for us not benign differences, they were opportunistic moments to develop what Tom Kvan would call a pedagogical building, where the building as a physical manifestation is an index of its didactic mission. These materials work not merely to build the building, but as exemplary conditions of that kind of building.

In the design for this new building, was there an interest in better aligning architectural education with the way architecture is practised? Or does the process work backwards – is it about creating changes in pedagogy which can filter out of the university into practice?

JW: I think architects have generally been innovators in the way they've set up their own working environment. In the same way a working studio environment suggests a mode of practice that promotes a greater coalition of ideas, of people voicing many opinions with a more equal representation of ideas than in many other office cultures. If you translate this into an academic environment, you imagine the studio as the place where the students are empowered with a greater ability to express themselves and at the same time are encouraged to observe others and collaborate more broadly – a place of many voices, not the traditional teaching and learning model that focuses on the educator.

NT: If you analyse the ways in which practice has evolved in the last 20 years that I've been transitioning from a student to a practitioner, you will note that practice as we knew it has been obsolete at least two or three times since the early 90s. For that reason, I think education should precisely not be focused on technique. Now is a time to focus on critical discourse, and a reflection on not the 'what' but the 'why' of architecture. Remember that the design field is one of the only pedagogies whose main vocation and classroom context is not top down education – it is a round table which is focused on drawings, and where criticism and debate are an essential part, to flatten the hierarchies between students and professors.



We want to touch on the term 'inflection'. It seems that architects, whether they're talking or teaching or building, are trying to push the discipline in one way or another: leading by example to activate a point of inflection. How are you trying to influence architecture's direction?

JW: Our fascination with intensity, and narrative, and aspects of making – we think these are inexorably linked to just about everything that we do as a practice. None of these are static things – when we consider the act of making we appreciate that we're in a rapidly changing environment of material manufacture, and that we must really partake in new forms of material research and fabrication. We often talk about inspiring others to do their best work, whether it be a bricklayer doing something extraordinary and out of the conventional realm of bricklaying or a steel fabricator or joiner engaging with exacting form of prefabrication – these become some of the great rewards of building.

NT: Part of our contribution to that legacy of architectural pedagogy had to do with the way in which material logics, material behaviour and processes of its aggregation become an intellectual instrument for the advancement of the discipline and the production of new forms of knowledge. In other words, we thought that it was our responsibility to theorise materiality and to bring new agency to the practice of architecture through its means and methods – to re-own it. So material agency has been one of those key areas of inflection.