

Frank Gehry building redefines urban campus

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Canadian architect Frank Gehry unveils his latest structural entity

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The Chau Chak Wing building, University of Technology (UTS), Sydney

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- The atrium

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- The oval classroom
- Brittle, fractured glass surfaces create an unsettling language
- Non-hierarchical shapes bring people together
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What does the building a business school is housed in say about the thinking that goes on inside? Not so long ago, business schools were invariably dim corporate boxes, suggesting predictable efficiency. One example still towers above the University of Technology, Sydney. It is a grey, 1970s extrusion set in concrete, which the Australian school originally aimed to replicate seven times with blank spaces in between.

However, this plan was abandoned the same decade and instead, the campus has emerged as a rich architectural landscape woven into the fabric of a rapidly changing neighbourhood.

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At its heart sits a remarkable new building which seems to collapse any notions of corporate risk-adversity. In fact, the brick walls appear to be melting and folding, imbuing its structure with a sense of movement and possibility.



Unimpressed locals initially compared the Chau Chak Wing Building to a crumpled brown paper bag. But at its opening this month, it wowed the assembled politicians, press and public.

It is the design of Frank Gehry, architect of the Bilbao Guggenheim and the Walt Disney Hall in Los Angeles, once famously portrayed in US cartoon *The Simpsons* scrunching up a piece of paper and tossing it in the bin only to retrieve it as the model for his latest masterwork.

Mr Gehry is not new to education establishments. His Loyola Law School is an LA landmark, MIT's Stata Center, an inventive and garishly colourful urban intervention in Cambridge Massachusetts, and Case Western business school in Cleveland a curvaceously baroque design.

While the image of crumpling, folding and squashing might seem fatuous, a visit to his studio shows rows of paper and corrugated card models carefully tailored to their contexts and artfully suited to their uses. In Sydney, the context is the solid brick buildings of the 1890s alongside an inheritance of industrial architecture. The "Goods Line", for example, is a rehabilitated freight railway being brought back into use to connect more than 80,000 students, locals and visitors to the disparate quarters of a gentrifying Darling Harbour.

Gehry addresses it all with an undulating shell that conveys movement and reveals brittle, fractured glass surfaces. It weaves together local architectural archetypes to create an unsettling and uncertain language with which to express the ethos of a school that prides itself on disruption through design.

"I'm an architect," says Mr Gehry, "but I'm also a businessman — and open to the idea that business needs to be able to adapt and change. [At UTS] walls can be knocked out, things can be changed around, it's an open system. Nothing's fixed and I hope it gives the school a spirit of invention. It will be manipulated over time and will change. The idea that a building should be fixed in time and use is obsolete."

Most dramatic of all is the highly-polished stainless steel stair that creates an overtly operatic ascent from the ground floor lobby. Echoing the undulating waves of the façades, the stair rises in a complex series of twists, folds and creases, drawing the sun and reflections of the city back into the interior.

Adding to the sense of dynamic space is an oval classroom defined by an ellipse of loosely stacked timber blocks. The blocks are assembled Jenga-style, with gaps for glazing so they reflect views inside and outside. Mr Gehry describes these as 'non-hierarchical spaces' due to their shape.

"They bring people together," he explains, crediting the idea to Thomas Jefferson's designs for an oval table to counterbalance the traditional positioning of teachers rigidly facing students. The same ethos carries through the whole building. The offices are all a democratic 9 sq m and it is the cafés, hallways and terraces that take centre stage. "If you want to hold a meeting, you do it in a communal space," says dean of UTS Roy Green.

Compared with the complex, textile-like quality of the brick skin, which looks as if it had been woven rather than laid, the interior of the school does look a little sparse, almost unfinished. Partly this is the result of keeping costs down (which worked — it came in exactly on budget at A\$180m) but partly it is deliberate.

"It's what Frank calls a porous building, which encourages interaction inside and with the community outside. The outside [being] this emerging precinct of entrepreneurial start-ups," says Prof Green.

As we wind up the conversation one of the builders who worked on the fantastically complex walls comes in and asks Mr Gehry to sign a brick for him. He then rolls up his sleeve to reveal a tattoo of the special brick bonds all the way up his forearm. It is a moving moment. How many business schools, I wonder, find themselves tattooed on an arm?

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