

Campus

Building Modern Australian Universities

ANDREW SANIGA AND ROBERT FREESTONE EDITORS



Front cover of *Campus: Building Modern Australian Universities*, featuring an image from Flinders University Archives (with permission from Andrew Saniga, 2024).



Worlds within worlds: explorations of Australian universities

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Campuses are fascinating landscape types. On the one hand, a university is in many ways a microcosm of the wider built environment, reflecting broader political agendas, concerns with environmental change, and cultural issues. This sense of the university as a microcosm is expressed spatially in campus design, holding a mirror up to the various forces and values that characterise culture at large, such as concerns for sustainability, heritage preservation and national identity. On the other hand, campuses can be conceptualised as what Michel Foucault (1986) termed 'heterotopias', literally 'other places'. While a heterotopia – like a cemetery or prison – can be seen as a microcosm or world within a world, it is also a juxtaposition with the world beyond.

Andrew Saniga and Robert Freestone's *Campus: Building Modern Australian Universities* traces the many dimensions of campuses as part of the built environment. Together with their co-authors, Saniga and Freestone explore the microcosmic aspects of campuses: how they are miniature cities or towns that echo the world beyond, including in their responses to the inevitable shifts in education policy and the wider political climate. The chapters reveal how universities are heterotopic too, as unique built environments where theories about education find their form. Campuses are also marketing tools, or what could be called logo landscapes, producing tangible expressions of an institution's values as a means of attracting funding and students. These landscapes of learning can be 'read' in terms of their manifestation of values and priorities. As Logan and colleagues (2023) note in the concluding chapter, the 'recent boom in university development and the wider context of estate management are impossible to understand if this cultural and communicative function of the campus is overlooked' (p 341).

Saniga and Freestone are well-known researchers in the areas of landscape and planning history, and their vision for this substantial tome on campuses extends their previous work, such as Saniga's (2012) *Making Landscape Architecture in Australia* and Freestone's (2010) *Urban Nation: Australia's Planning Heritage*. Weighing in at 430 pages, *Campus: Building Modern Australian Universities* contains 11 chapters around themes ranging from residential design for students to radicalism as a shaping force. It is well illustrated with maps, diagrams and photographs, and its format is inviting to read. Because of the scale and scope of the work, a more comprehensive index would be welcome. The existing index is mainly a list of names of people and locations, only including aspects such as 'radicalism' under a location. The odd subject like the Radburn Plan can be picked up in the index, but further threads and themes – such as indigeneity and COVID-19 – would be valuable additions.

From a non-Australian perspective, the detailed accounts of the universities in terms of their various sitings, histories and morphing that have shaped the different institutions can feel somewhat distant. However, the comprehensive coverage of the range of institutions encourages readers to reflect on campuses with which they are familiar. In my case, I found myself noting parallels and contrasts in relation to Lincoln University, Aotearoa New Zealand, where I teach. Our campus has an art collection that is sizeable – particularly for a small institution – and the discussion on Australian universities' collections revealed many points of comparison. For example, in discussing problems of

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maintenance and siting of one particular work, Hannah Lewi and Christien Garnaut commented that it was ‘testament to the ongoing need for commitment to and understanding of the unique problems of outdoor collections on campuses’ (p 294). More generally, as someone who is interested in design critique, and has been aware of campus design in Aotearoa New Zealand (including co-supervising a PhD student who studied the restorative benefits of campus design), I found myself often stopping to make notes. This is a book that will provide a valuable resource for wider thinking and teaching in landscape architecture, beyond the specificity of campus design and the Australian context.

The tracing of campus design in relation to wider models, such as Beaux Art and City Beautiful, offers valuable insights into the history of the built environment. In chapter 3, Freestone and co-author Nicola Pullan also investigate how the later twentieth century brought recognition of the need to draw in other influences. They note that in the 1960s, ideas about campus development in Australia were:

shaped by international sociological research promoting the ‘continuous teaching environment’, designing for growth and change while still preserving contact between all parts of an institution, and the use of ‘socio-diagrams’ to depict relationships between people and functions. (p 90)

This observation illustrates how university campuses are symbolic expressions of prevailing concepts about education, as much as ideas about urban design such as the model of the New Town of this era (p 91).

Andrew Saniga and Susan Holden’s exploration of campus design in the 1990s reveals the moves towards respecting the Indigenous culture and vegetation of a site, as at the University of Newcastle, and reclaiming Indigenous values on a site where they no longer existed, as at the University of Wollongong (p 159). With passive design and integrated water management, these campuses were part of the emerging zeitgeist characterised by agendas of sustainability, regionalism and indigeneity. Terms like ‘Bush Campus’ and ‘Bush Court’ speak a strongly Australian vernacular in relation to the design of universities. This growing emphasis on the local is also considered by Lewi and Garnaut (2023) in their chapter on campus art collections. They note that:

many of these public works are motivated by the desire for universities to become places for promoting shared thinking and learning with Indigenous cultures. Their realisation marks a departure from traditional twentieth-century subjects of campus art that often drew on western conceptions of academic knowledge, classicism, and abstraction. (p 304)

The readership for this book is potentially diverse, ranging from academics in the realm of design history, through to built environment professionals involved in planning and designing campuses. A number of themes are valuable prompts for designers to consider. The typologies identified, as in the forms of residential halls characterised as the quadrangle, the slab, the L-shape, the tower and the village, are very effective forms of critique. Typologies create useful libraries of ideas and concepts, and their characterisation through clear naming generates a usable language for the analysis of campus design. Similarly, Hannah Lewi and Andrew Saniga’s evocatively titled short case studies on radicalism and social spaces are nimbly handled, and create a memorable set of scenarios – unrest, dissatisfaction, under siege and occupied (pp 255–267). The book also reinforces how a campus as a mirror of the world beyond highlights the ways in which considerations of culture, gender and religion are important in design. A further important thread is the influence of transport on campus design.

Hanging over the book are questions about the disruptive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the concept of the university campus. The timeline of the research for the book began with its funding from May 2016. As a consequence, by the time the implications of COVID-19 were becoming realised, the research had been underway for four years. The book makes passing references to the pandemic’s consequences throughout, but there

remains considerable potential to explore these in future research. Universities have traditionally been so much about propinquity, nearness, interaction, a physical expression of the concept of a ‘community of scholars’. But the pandemic changed all of that. Our work and teaching practices during the pandemic rapidly elevated the digital version of the campus. This warp-speed technological transformation of teaching has had massive impacts on the idea of what a campus is, and the implications are still being explored. Wider technological change, including augmented reality and artificial intelligence, also has the potential to dramatically shift future conceptions of campus design.

The concluding chapter, ‘Transformation: conservation, sustainability, and new design’, highlights some of the diversity of challenges in considering the campus into the future. Logan and colleagues (2023) point out that while digital disruption questions the very idea of a campus, ‘At the same time, universities have invested enormous sums of money in new buildings and campus facilities’ (p 339). Arguably the physical campus remains an opportunity to highlight a point of difference, a unique selling proposition, that transcends the homogeneity of the digital world. The endurance of campus landscapes and buildings amidst the increasing digital realm presents continued opportunities for designers to be involved in shaping space in meaningful ways, including by making places that support wellbeing and enhance sustainability. *Campus: Building Modern Australian Universities* provides plenty of food for thought in reflecting on the past and contemplating the future, and is a reminder to all universities about how, as Christine Garnaut and Susan Holden (2023) put it in chapter 2:

the campus environment is a tangible place through which individual universities can express their engagement with society, by highlighting their historical foundations and institutional identity, and communicating the values and aspirations underpinning their contemporary role and purpose. (p 73)

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