

Big notes at Monash Uni's small sound shell

This clever little sound space is designed to come together like a jigsaw puzzle, writes **Stephen Crafti**.

Some of the smallest buildings can have the most impact. This is certainly the case with the "sound shell" at Monash University. Designed by Workshop Architecture, this pint-size structure can literally attract thousands of people every time it's used. "You could say that it's a large cultural addition to the landscape," says architect James Staughton, co-director of Workshop Architecture (workshoparch.com.au).

Located on the "lemon-scented lawn" on Monash University's Clayton campus (named after the established lemon-scented gum trees), the manicured lawn was underused by students. And with limited opportunities for bands, quartets and even poetry recitals to occur outdoors, in a protected environment, the idea of a sound shell took "legs". "A small change in the landscape can provide a significant cultural shift," Staughton says, who worked closely on the acoustics with composer and musician Paul Grabowsky, who is also vice-chancellor at the university's School of Music-Conservatorium.

One of the starting points in Workshop Architecture's design for the sound shell was the image of

a magnet (in Staughton's mind) placed in a field of iron filings. "I can clearly see the effect of these filings, creating almost a centrifuge around the magnet, with the effect reverberating to the outer limits of a space". Like a magnet that can shift to a different place, the brief to Workshop Architecture was to create a shell that could be easily demountable, put on to the back of a truck and moved to another part of the campus.

To achieve this, the sound shell comprises a series of segments that all come together like a jigsaw puzzle rather than several large components. "Our initial designs started by looking at some of the larger sound shells in Melbourne, including the Sidney Myer Music Bowl (on a considerably larger scale). But we also looked at historic sound shells, the Victorian-style podiums you see in botanical gardens," Staughton says.

The Monash shell is made of steel and entirely clad in spotted gum. Its roof, angled towards the south to shield northern sun on performers' backs, provides a striking angular form in the landscape. "We saw this shell like a piece of sculpture. But unlike sculpture, it has to be functional,"



Staughton says. The back of the sound shell, for example, features an angular-shaped cupboard where the electrical equipment is kept. There's also space for a couple of guitars. And when the weather turns, translucent plastic curtains protect the stage.

One of the less obvious designs with the sound shell is the myriad of paths that surround the structure. The gentle gradient allows

wheelchair access as well as unimpeded views from the audience. "These pathways have been created like a spiral around the stage. They strengthen the connection to the audience," Staughton says.

Unlike many buildings that appear uniform, the Monash sound shell takes on various guises depending on the performance. If a rock band uses it, the lemon-scented lawn is filled with hun-

dreds of students. And should a quartet be performing, rows of seats are carefully arranged among the gum trees. "We started our design by using a point cloud 3D scan of the precinct. It was important to be mindful of these great trees, with their impressive branches," Staughton says, who delights in seeing these branches animated when the flashes of light emanate from the stage.

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