

UTS tree of knowledge comes to life

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Business academics at the University of Technology, Sydney, will have to down-size their personal libraries and stop storing overflow from home at work when they move into their 9 square metre offices in the new \$150 million faculty building designed by Frank Gehry.

They will also be encouraged to use pedal power to get to work. There will be 177 bike racks in the basement of the 11-storey building in Ultimo and about 20 car parking spots, along with lockers and showers.

But there will be some sweeteners. The final design plans, shown to *The Australian Financial Review*, reveal state of the art teaching and learning spaces, including oval-shaped classrooms, and tiered lecture theatres with seating that swivels so students can turn to work in groups.



The latest technology is also incorporated into the design, including a potential video conference or telepresence room, “communication and interaction walls” that could take out a whole side of a room and incorporate interactive whiteboards, and ubiquitous wireless connectivity.

Common areas – stylishly designed with reconfigurable furniture and to be flooded with natural light – aim to encourage interaction and lure academics out of their closets as much as possible.

The building – to be named after Chinese business leader Chau Chak Wing, who donated \$20 million to the building and \$5 million to scholarships – will be completed by the end of 2013.

The design was inspired by Gehry’s metaphor of a tree of knowledge, which he has brought to life through a trunk of central and public spaces from which interconnected disciplinary areas and research groups branch off as the building gets higher.

All the areas will be connected vertically and horizontally by crevasses of light flowing from the roof and glass walls.

Discipline groups will also be housed across several floors to facilitate vertical connections. The interconnected design reflects the business school’s aspiration to achieve internal collaboration across discipline areas in order to achieve an integrated view of business.

It is envisaged that the inter-connectedness will eventually feed into teaching and curricula.

UTS business dean Roy Green says traditionally business schools are successful at achieving horizontal connections: “But it’s much more difficult to get vertical ones and we’re using stairwells and these light crevasses to make all discipline and research groups interact and we’re reinforcing that by maximising the use of collaborative spaces.

“We’ve made the case in the university, which is now policy, that we don’t persist with this age-old idea in academia of hierarchical sizes for offices . . . so to maximise both flexibility of the space and in keeping with this concept of interaction we are ensuring everyone has a standard-sized office, but everyone also has access to both formal and informal spaces for interaction.”

The building has been configured to keep large volumes of traffic to the lower floors. On the ground floor there is a 240-seat lecture auditorium, which will also be used as a public event space, as well as the main cafeteria.

An oval-shaped teaching room will challenge the traditional teaching pedagogy that students learn from a teacher at the front of the classroom by encouraging students to learn from, and engage with, each other.

A computer laboratory could be used as a trading room where students practise financial trading simulations. A laboratory will also be housed on the ground floor where staff and students will work on innovation-related projects.

A sculptural stairwell in keeping with the building’s crumpled-looking facade – created by an undulating layer of bricks – will lead to the next level, which will open onto the Ultimo pedestrian network – a walkway that will link up to Central Station and possibly Darling Harbour. A satellite coffee shop will spill out onto the pedestrian area and encourage the public into the building, which is in keeping with the school’s aim to become more interconnected externally.

“That exemplifies Gehry’s aspiration for a porous building – porous externally and internally – in a sense that we interact with the community around us,” Green says. “And that fits with the overall UTS concept of the campus development plan of joining up creativity, innovation and technology across the campus both internally and with the external community and the emerging creative industries around this area.”

Also on this floor will be a 120-person lecture theatre with two rows of seating to each tier that swivel to facilitate group work.

Many of the formal teaching rooms and informal learning spaces will be located on the fourth floor.

In line with current pedagogical thinking around collaborative learning and the need for learning spaces that are conducive to that, there will be large informal learning areas for students and comfortable furniture designed for lounging in between lectures on the fourth floor.

There will be coffee-making and microwave hotspots, break-out rooms for when study beckons, and spaces to switch on a laptop and work individually: in fact just about anything (apart from beds) that makes the building “sticky” so students don’t want to leave.

All teaching spaces will have flexible furniture that can be reconfigured to suit different needs.

Proposed technology includes a “communication and interaction wall” for each learning space, which provides surfaces to write on, post ideas and project multiple images simultaneously. An interactive whiteboard is also incorporated into the wall.

The learning spaces will be wirelessly enabled to encourage students to engage using mobile technologies, when needed, either in small groups or in a full-class mode.

Several floors will be dedicated to staff and postgraduate students.

Designed to encourage collaboration, they will include interconnected common zones for disciplinary groups that will make the most of wide, corner window spaces traditionally lost to individual offices.

Academic staff will have offices, but the emphasis is on collaborative rather than isolated spaces. Open-plan office space will be used predominantly by administrative staff, post-doctoral students, and research assistants.

“We did put out to staff the possibility of everything being open plan, but the reaction and experience in other universities is that it just doesn’t work in academia, which is a fact we have to live with even though philosophically it would be nice,” Green says.

“So it is a bit of a compromise. We are going to have offices but in a very different and very radical reformulation of the way academic spaces look. So people won’t be using their offices to collect things from home, or as meeting rooms as happens now in most universities . . . although if you look at the way Gehry does offices in other universities, generally they have high ceilings, lots of light and wonderful window spaces, very nice use of shelving and they’re very pleasant to be in.”

The building’s piece de resistance is possibly the eighth floor, which is devoted to executive education. There will be a number of larger rooms for public short courses and courses for corporate clients, as well as smaller more intimate break-out rooms.

The teaching areas will spill out onto large, outdoor terraced areas. It is hoped the suite will attract businesses looking for executive retreat facilities. The deans’ unit will take out the top floor, which puts Green right at the top of the symbolic tree of knowledge.

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