The Automotive Centre of Excellence (ACE) represents the first stage of a dedicated training and showcase facility for Victorian automotive trades and manufacturing by Kangan Batman TAFE. Stage One ACE consists of approximately 2500 square metres of high-bay workshop space and a similar one for specialist workrooms, classrooms and office accommodation.

As the only fully publicly-funded project in Melbourne’s Docklands, the project required a specific response. Funded by the state as an industrial TAFE facility, it was required to create its own identity within the ‘glamour land’ of Docklands. The project references and absorbs a range of sources from automotive culture, and its relationship with the city – kerb signs, tyre treads, the adjacent Charles Grimes overpass, the sheen of car showrooms and the emblematic pitched roof of the pre-existing dock sheds. The interiors are intended to evoke something of the automotive predilection for contrasting the technological and mechanical with the finished and the smooth.

The primary automotive workshops have a façade system built out of industrial shed technologies, transformed into a weave-like pattern of mullions and supporting structure. These workshops have significant areas of glazing, to allow the space of the city and passing motorists to view into the activities within the workshops. These workshops are ventilated through a series of continuous horizontal louvres.

Offices and classroom spaces face north and are also naturally ventilated via a permeable deep black façade. These spaces are also heated and cooled by a unique BATISO active thermal mass system. In concert with other environmental sustainable design features including radiant night cooling and water harvesting, ACE Stage One has achieved a five-star Green Star rating for design.

Conceived of as a small civic space, the main foyer space with its monumental staircase, acts as the key circulation pathway through the building while also acting as a thermal chimney for the administration and teaching areas. From this space visitors experience a ‘transition’ from traditional technical college materiality: raw blockwork, exposed steel and concrete to contemporary applications of carbon fibre and glass projection technology.
What should the contemporary civic building look like? There are no set rules, and with no systems to tell us what architectural language they should employ. These projects offer an opportunity to innovate a new system. Unshackled from the 19th century, last century’s modern architects dismissed decoration, rules and typology, only to install a new dogma of consistency, repetition and abstraction. The post-modernists’ rejection of this sought to draw from historical forms to try and extract meaning from the memory of the pre-modern. Lyons’ work has often been linked to Robert Venturi’s potent notion of the ‘decorated shed’ – faþ decoration in the middlewes of the facade. This fast and furious new project is one of a series that has moved toward form and surface as the key strategies. Lyons’ 2001 Victoria University Plumbing School in Melbourne’s western suburb of Sunshine is a true de¿ned shed, but like this project also recreates the factory floor for ‘hands-on’ workshop-based learning.

How then does this building successfully become more prominent, or more civic, than the other numerous large buildings at the Docklands? Partly the siting strategy, giving the building prominence, but this only helps if the building’s language is strong. A project like this draws from a combina- tion of program and context to inform its language of form, surface and type. The allure of cars – detailing, spray painting, panel beating are to be taught in this building; and the project picks up on colours and patterns of car culture. Nearby sheds provide contextual cues, with their horizontal extrusion and opacity. The activities of the centre are highly visual to the passer-by, while the street, while also forming a hyper-graphic gateway, helps protect the interior to the southern elevation.

The building is both shed-like and not: an expressed steel facade, which forms part of the primary structure and not just applique. The half angled – in this way the diamond-like pattern is ingrained into the glass wall system back to the main structure. As well as optimising the steel used in this wall, these spokes flying across the void suggest a dynamic and efficient structure, something Formula One. Similar moves can be identified in the post-modernists’ use of Ferrari red and British racing green, in areas of walling and joinery. For the most part, however, raw concrete block is extensively used internally, with steel and the occasional strips of glass. Here the primary structure is of vertical steel columns; the northern half of the building uses a large glazed wall, facing east to illuminate the tall stairwell space – this wraps on the northern elevation where dense urban fabric of the surrounding Docklands is visible from much of the workshops interiors.

The incur-sion-like facade to the southern elevation helps protect the interior from the heavily traf¿cked street, while also forming a hyper-graphic gateway for motorway visitors entering the highway and arriving at the Docklands. A frieze-like horizontal rebate, or ‘go-faster’ stripe, acts to picking up on colours and patterns of car culture. Nearby sheds provide contextual cues, with their horizontal extrusion and opacity. The activities of the centre are highly visual to the passer-by, while the street, while also forming a hyper-graphic gateway, helps protect the interior to the southern elevation.

The building is expressed as a play of transparency and opacity. The surfaces of the centre are highly visible to the passer-by while the dense urban fabric of the surrounding Docklands is visible from much of the workshops interiors.

The building’s dramatic presence at night is compounded by a full height glass wall revealing a monumental staircase and foyer space. The northern half of the building uses a large glazed wall, facing east to illuminate the tall stairwell space – this wraps on the northern elevation where dense urban fabric of the surrounding Docklands is visible from much of the workshops interiors.

The chevron-like facade to the southern elevation helps protect the interior from the heavily traf¿cked street, while also forming a hyper-graphic gateway for motorway visitors entering the highway and arriving at the Docklands.

Stage three

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principal architects Lyons project team Carey Lyon, Adrian Stanic, Stefano Sculzo, Darren Snowden, Michael Markham, Joseph Reyes, John Powell, Edward Berry, Alan Gibbons, Jessica Jen project manager Carson Group consultants: engineer ULA (Building Services), ULE (ESD), Robert Bird Group (Structural and Civil) quantity surveyor Wilde and Woollard builder Hansen Yunken landscape architect Rush/Wright Associates paint booth advisers Lowbake BS PLP acoustic WMG traffic engineering Ratio façade Connell Wagner size 4500sqm time to complete 13 months council VicUrban client DET, Kangan Batman TAFE design software used ACAD materials: walls concrete block, Designer Block (Boral) wall linings rubber, Astral (Activa) cladding metal deck, Spandek (BlueScope Steel) compressed cement sheet, Exotex (James Hardie) composite aluminium panel, Symonite (Symonite) roof metal deck, Spandek (BlueScope Steel) paint external painting to Exotex, Grandskin (Wattyl) windows aluminum windows, St Kilda and Flushline (Capral) glazed atrium glazing, Comfortone Plus (Pilkington) hardware Lockwood signage Signcraft heating/cooling systems BATISO, chilled beams interior materials: projection glazing I-Glass (ADT) acoustic panels AcousticPro (Chesser Industries) paint handrail stain, Detol TS (Sikkens) lighting/light fittings Zumbtobel, Versalux, Inlite, Pierlite flooring rubber, Cosmo (Activa) surfaces laminate (Laminex) joinery carbon fibre (Topstage) furniture workstations (Schiavello) audiovisual fittings/equipment projectors (DRM Audio) fittings and fixtures Caroma, Enware