

Old moved in to spirit of new



Architecture

Catholic Theological College and Pastoral Formation Centre, architect Greg Burgess
Corner Eades Street and Victoria Parade, East Melbourne

Review **Norman Day**

GREG BURGESS'S buildings show sweeping curves, interlocked geometries, swirling shapes and complex forms, and he has built this highly idiosyncratic architecture throughout Australia for the past 25 years.

Much of it has been for Aboriginal communities, including his highly acclaimed centres at Halls Gap and Uluru. His designs appear to have a spiritual quality, even his dwellings are revered almost as shrines.

So it is appropriate that the Catholic Church in Melbourne employed him to design its new Theological College and Pastoral Formation Centre in East Melbourne.

The design posed a problem. It was to be a new section of architecture joined with a historic, older, bluestone building — the latter is a tough, no-nonsense neo-Gothic structure dating from the 1800s, when it operated as Parade College.

There can be several approaches to such an architectural problem: reproduce the existing style, which tends to degrade the original, or build a structure so remote from the existing as to appear not part of it, or create a partner building that is of its time and respectful of the original, so that together they enrich the site.

Burgess adopted the latter strategy and when he invents a building design in this manner, he does so with gloves off, so the contrast between the old stark, harsh bluestone block and the new fluid structure is conspicuous and somehow comforting.

A sweeping set of curved walls is propped over slender twisted concrete columns, elegant but also an adventurous structure, and the Burgess signature of collected small windows and roofs, like the edges of a beehive, float over the site carpark.

There are roofs within roofs, layers of walls and facets of

windows, sculptured, bent, twisted, contorted as if some weird maestro was playing a game of "spot-the-real-plan", or cleverly blurring traditional notions of what constitutes a building and what is exquisite form-making. These are the diversions Burgess plays, but very seriously, intent on investigating the upper limits of what is possible in building.

His new dreaming encloses the old building in an L-shape, leaving the original intact, with just a transparent suggestion where the two meet of glass and old verandahs. Otherwise they are two disparate works.

It is planned with levels of the old Victorian college at the same level as the new, so there is a synergy between the two; just a glass wall and some clever seating link both; lighting, especially at night, provides another gluing.

Throughout the building, Burgess has poked small windows, skylights, windows that appear to move as you walk towards them, and large glass windows framing views into the adjacent streets.

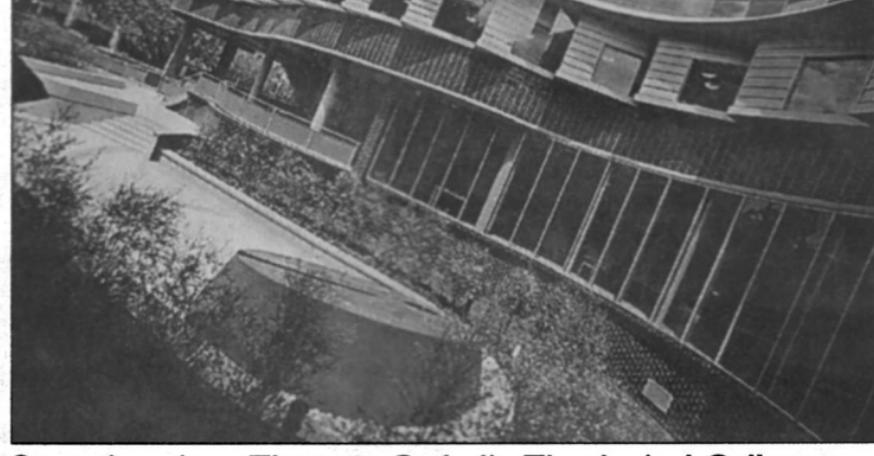
It is that architectural quality in particular that is refreshing with this project — an appropriation of raw structure for spiritual quality, maintaining what is valuable in the ordinary world and ennobling it.

Like most Burgess buildings, there is a strong sense of centring; the geometry is so persuasive that we are led almost automatically to a stairwell where a semi-circular stair rises.

These are obvious references, some gentle gestures, others plain and loud, in the tradition of mediaeval architecture, when explicit iconography sits side by side with abstract symbols and religious motives. These symbols echo throughout the building.

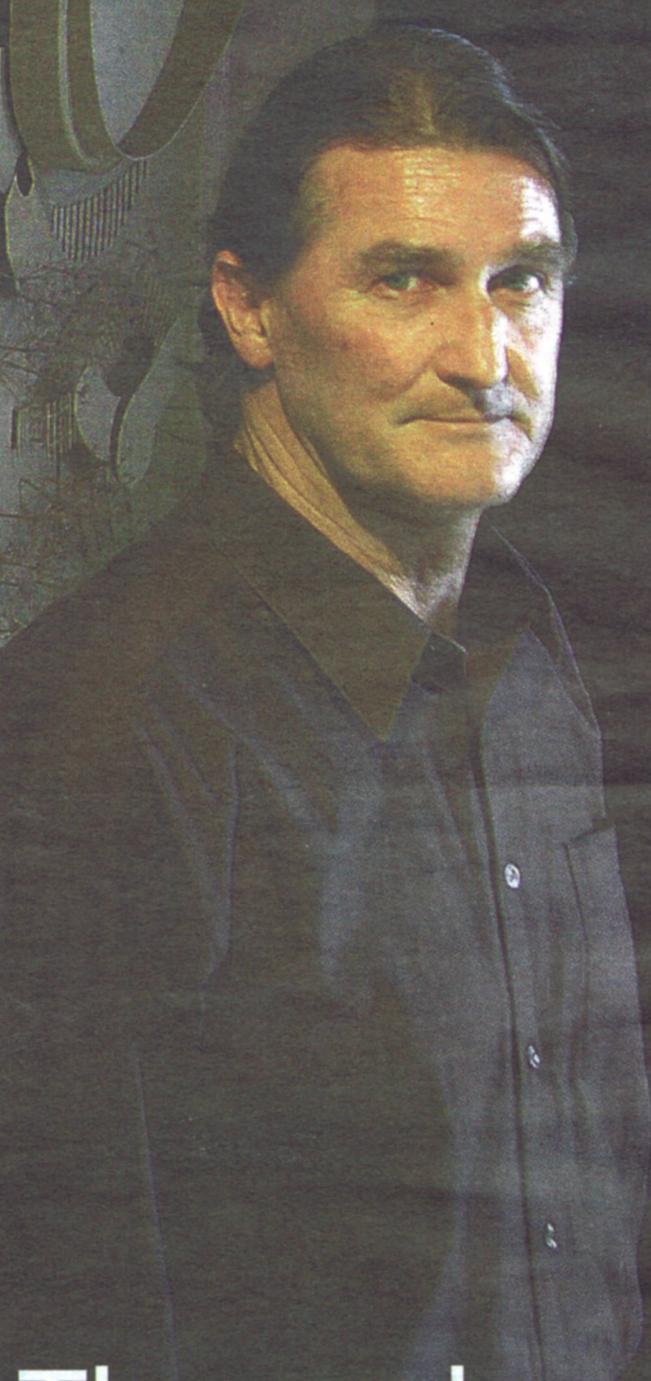
In a small outdoor garden courtyard, there is more deeply significant architecture. It is as if Burgess has entered the materials in this garden and transformed mere stone, steel, plants, water and pebbles to a higher level of meaning. His past experiences — revealing spiritual Aboriginal myths and traditions — is evident. In this sacred environment the church must be inspired.

● *Norman Day is an architect practising in Melbourne and Adjunct Professor of Architecture (RMIT).*



Sweeping view: The new Catholic Theological College.

domain



The soul man

Beverley Johanson on Gregory Burgess,
winner of architecture's highest accolade

COVER STORY BEVERLEY JOHANSON

Architecture's soul man

Gregory Burgess creates buildings with an extraordinary spiritual dimension.

FOR a man who works for the public and not other architects because the public "has different criteria and different eyes and ears", being judged by his peers and awarded Australian architecture's highest accolade was something of a shock.

"It came totally out of left field. I was completely unprepared for it. You work away for more than 30 years, as in my case, and one day something like this happens. It's very humbling in a way," says Gregory Burgess, who was yesterday awarded the Royal Australian Institute of Architects Gold Medal for 2004. It seems to be a choice applauded by architects, industry commentators, clients and the wider community.

Burgess has received more than 40 local and international awards for excellence and felt particularly honoured by another recent gong. Last month, the Brambuk Aboriginal Cultural Centre in Halls Gap won the people's choice award at the *Judging Architecture* exhibition held at Heide Museum of Modern Art. More than 2000 visitors to the exhibition voted.

His output over the years has been prolific, with wide-ranging private and public commissions – many of which are the type of buildings that particularly require heart and soul, such as schools, churches, community centres and a significant body of work for Aboriginal organisations.

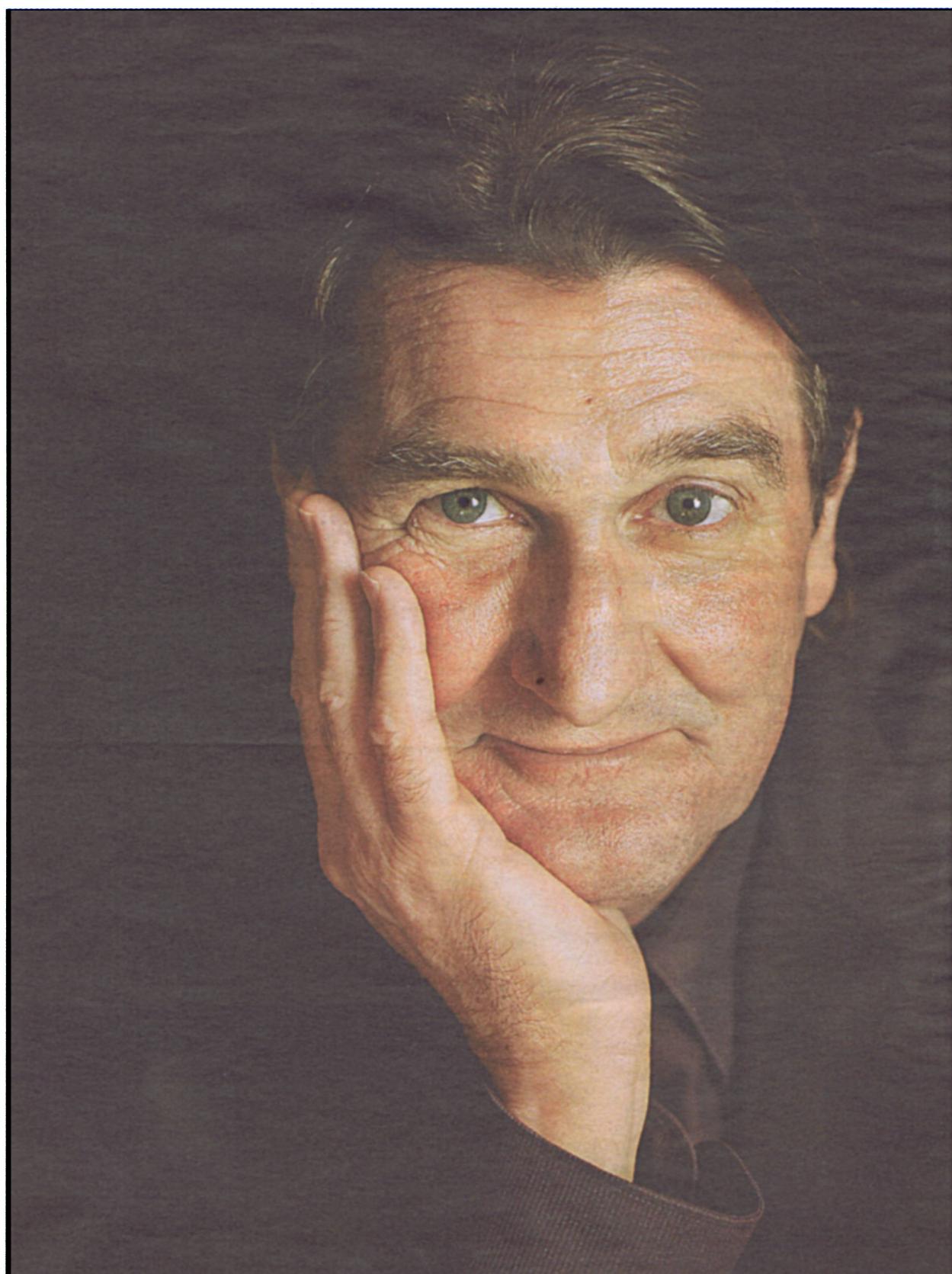
For a gently mannered and softly spoken man who does not seek the limelight, Burgess has made a big impact on architecture here and overseas. David Parken, national president of the RAIA, says in his gold medal citation that Burgess is an architect of deep cultural sensitivity and consummate skill.

The overriding characteristic of Burgess's work, and one mentioned by everybody who comments on it, is the spirituality he brings to projects. They also talk of the strong relationships he builds with clients, the holistic nature of his buildings and the fusion of his architecture with the landscape.

Peter Crone, a contemporary, says these traits were evident early on. He and Burgess, along with Norman Day and the practice of Edmond and Corrigan, held an exhibition of their work, *Four Melbourne Architects*, in 1979 which has become legendary for originality, breadth of vision and subsequent influence.

"Even then his work was totally individual. I suppose you could say the organic nature of it set it apart along with the spirituality he brought to it. He talked a lot about the feelings and sensitivities of the client," says Crone.

Crone saw the seriousness and the whimsy growing side by side in Burgess's work. "He was making wonderful use of timber and corrugated iron and seeing how he could bend things – treating space as plastic space. Then there would be the articulation of finely crafted elements that



would hang down from the skylights – lots of detail. It was quite whimsical and delightful.

"I think his work has developed exactly along these lines. I don't think he has moved too far either side."

"He is absolutely an individual. I don't know of anyone in the same bracket," says Crone. "He is an artist and a creator and the way he thinks and resolves things is exactly right for the profession of architecture."

For Burgess, there are no barriers between the inner life and the outer world. "I don't really see spirituality as a separate thing. I think we need to acknowledge the unseen forces at work in a project, whether it's earth energies, people's emotions or even the soul's higher aspirations. You can characterise it in different ways. In a society like Australia, the things we wish for are often sneered at. I think Australia's a country of great sceptics and cynics, on the whole, and people are often self-conscious

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about articulating their higher aspirations. I'm not afraid to work with those; it really drives me and it drives my interest in architecture and people."

Burgess was born in Newcastle in 1945 into a family that was Methodist but not deeply religious. "I acknowledge the spiritual dimension of life very strongly but I'm not formally religious."

He sees architecture as having wide-ranging influences. "Architecture is a social art and an environmental art, but can also be a healing art. That's not a new idea, but it's unusual in this day and age."

"If the world is fragmented and alienated, architecture should be nurturing it towards a dynamic balance and connectedness."

These holistic views have informed all areas of a rich life – one that even included a few games for the Hawthorn Football Club in the 1960s.

Around the time of the *Four Architects* exhibition, he married artist Pip Stokes and twins, Kasimir and Sophia were born. When it was time for them to attend school, he and Stokes and 12 other families started a small Steiner school in Richmond.

"I suppose there's a commitment there to what seemed to us to be a very holistic education for the kids – one that understood what it was to be a child but also understood what it was to be a fully developed and responsible human being. And one that acknowledged the spiritual dimension as well, rather than being just strongly secular, which seems to be all the go."

The twins are now 23. Sophia has followed her father into architecture and Kasimir finished post-graduate film-making last year.

Dr Conrad Hamann, associate professor at Monash University, who teaches, among other subjects, architectural history, is writing a book on Burgess and enjoying the project enormously. "It's rich and juicy territory to be working on," he says.

Hamann says that during his research, he was particularly struck by the attitude of Burgess's clients. "The loyalty and affection of his clients is starting in terms of the delight they have in working with him."

He believes that Burgess's ability to bring together the considerations of clients, context and surroundings is partly why the Aboriginal projects have been so successfully executed.

The Uluru-Kata Tjuta Aboriginal Cultural Centre, one of the most well-known of Burgess's works, probably illustrates best the dynamics that he brings to a project and the extent to which he is prepared to immerse himself.

Burgess spent a month with the Anangu people, drawing ideas in the sand and listening and watching as they explained their history and culture through stories, song and dance. In working on other indigenous projects, he has become similarly involved.

The sinuous, undulating buildings of the Uluru-Kata Tjuta Centre follow the contours of sand dunes and wrap around a central courtyard. The two parts of the building represent the two snakes from Anangu mythology. The centre, which is a meeting place for the Anangu people of the western desert and visitors to Uluru National Park, won the 1996 RAIA Tracy award for the best building in the Northern Territory. Peter Crone chaired the judging panel and says that the Anangu people were deeply satisfied with the centre. "They said that he interpreted exactly what they wanted to get across."

Last year Burgess took models of Brambuk and Uluru-Kata Tjuta to an exhibition at London's Victoria and Albert Museum called *Zoomorphic*, which showed buildings inspired by animals. "Not only is there an interest in Australia, but an interest in work that is strongly individual and responds to land, place and people in a highly specific way rather than just the international mainstream kind of work that you can see anywhere."

Burgess has, over the years, exhibited his work here, in Asia, the Middle East and Europe. He has designed several international travelling exhibitions from China, Japan and Europe, participated in government, community and industry forums, lectured at universities and conferences here and overseas and much of his work has been published internationally.

Gregory Burgess Pty Ltd Architects usually has about 20 projects on the go at once. The current list includes visitors centres at Lorne and Mansfield, several Koori projects, a new headquarters for the Australian Rainforest Conservation Society in Brisbane, community facilities at Castlemaine and Footscray, the conversion of Walter Burley Griffin's incinerator at Moonee Ponds into a community arts centre, discovery centres for the children's gardens at the Royal Botanic Garden, and the Victorian Space Science Education Centre attached to Strathmore High School.

In a career of more than three decades, Burgess' enthusiasm for projects has never waned. "Every single one is engaging," he says.



Box Hill Community Centre. PICTURE: IAN DAVIDSON

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Bright cobalt blue glazed bricks face the Victoria Street entrance and two large twisted columns supporting a great portico to Eades Street. A zinc-clad tower surmounted by a cross to the west of the entry signifies the centre's theological function.

The centrepiece of this building (its sacred heart) is a tall cylindrical space above a spiral stair. Lit from above through a



interior. The ends of these are clad with pastel coloured hand-painted tiles, except where small quirky windows let in warm west light. Fat column capitals, string courses and cornices are glazed terracotta pipes also hand painted, and many exterior surfaces are faced with broken ceramic tiles.

Brambuk Living Cultural Centre (1990)

With his collaborative design method, interest in the cultural dimensions of architecture and feeling for the Australian landscape, Burgess is an obvious choice for this work. At Brambuk he defined for a time an indigenous architectural style, characterised by curvilinear geometry, collaboration between the architect and zoomorphic shapes, "natural materials" and integration of local indigenous art. Widely published nationally and internationally, Brambuk has been acclaimed as an exemplar for cultural buildings anywhere. The design for Brambuk emerged from a long and close client, and Brambuk is a true reflection of the community's vision.

From afar, the building looks like a giant bird poised for flight with its polychrome corrugated steel wings. The heart of the interior is another vertical space, an axis mundi, which is sculpted around a huge stone fireplace and top-lit. Fire is central to traditional Aboriginal life and today still draws the community together. Roughly circular spaces for theatre, display, workshop, meeting, shop etc are organised around the fireplace in a loose symmetry. The curvilinear geometry extends outside the building into a central ceremonial ground flanked by gardens. Materials further connect the building with the mythic Aboriginal landscape – stone floors and plinth, and rough timber posts representing tree trunks.

Brambuk is an example of the power of expressionist architecture to excite the imagination. Because of its richness, it invites engagement from observer and occupant alike, stimulating multiple metaphorical readings.

Thomas Carr Centre, Victoria Parade (1999)

On the site of the former CBC Parade, the Thomas Carr Centre establishes a dialogue over time and across a contemplative courtyard with the remaining fragment of the old Gothic Revival bluestone building. Two storeys high (a third storey is undercroft parking), the new section accommodates three Catholic educational institutions and several Catholic organisations. Built to the boundaries on the south and west, the north and east walls are capped with a gentle undulating curved cornice. Underneath the cornice, the wall is crofted and faceted, like saw teeth in plan, setting up a compelling staccato rhythm.

Box Hill Community Centre (1990)

Employing more right-angled plan geometries than most Burgess buildings, the Box Hill Community Centre is on a corner facing busy Station Street with views of community gardens to the east. Its working areas – hall, workshops and studios – are organised around a linear sequence of public spaces: porch, entry, display and lounge.

Most Burgess buildings feature a central or major space, the building's heart, generally tall and elaborately top-lit. At Box Hill, appropriately, this is the display space

where the fruits of the community's creativity are presented. Most of the working areas open onto quiet, shady courtyards with curved seating walls faced with handmade tiles and other examples of the community's crafts. The front facade shows exuberantly curved roof forms – full, partial, upside-down – which allow light into the building's

1 The Thomas Carr Centre, Victoria Parade, a spiritual realm.
2 The Brambuk Living Cultural Centre, an exemplar for cultural buildings.

PICTURE: TREVOR MEIN



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interpretation of balcony lacework [horizontal steel bars curving down to meet columns]. In the approved manner, the facade height reduces at the south end to acknowledge its single-storey neighbour. At the rear, though, Burgess allowed his head and the building breaks up like a Cubist painting with stepping, sloping timber-clad walls, sloping metal roofs, more saw teeth windows and a deck.

The compact site dictates a predominantly right-angle geometry here and the sinuous line is absent. The heart is present, though, in the top-lit main stair providing access to the first and second floor apartments. This is a finely crafted stair with open treads of recycled timber terminating at the ground floor in a lobby crazy-paved with stone off-cuts. At a more intimate scale within the apartments, Burgess' penchant for lighting from above is evident with highlight windows and roof lights, bringing natural light deep into the building.

An obvious extension of Burgess' interest in natural systems and materials is into environmentally sustainable design. The Fitzroy apartments are very green: passive and active energy-conserving measures are used; rainwater is harvested for toilet flushing and gardens; and extensive use is made of recycled and low-toxicity materials.

Tony Styant Browne is a Melbourne architect, former teacher and critic. He has practised and taught architecture in the United States, Papua New Guinea, South-east Asia and Australia.

complex geometry of intersecting circles, it establishes a vertical axis between earth and sky. It is in this space that Burgess potentially brings us into the presence of a spiritual realm. In the major working space of the building, the Daniel Mannix Library, a centrally sinuously undulating ceiling band of the stacks contrasts with a perimeter band of individual study carrels defined by tiny triangles (saw teeth) with small windows onto the courtyard.

George Street housing (2003)

It's tough doing multiple dwelling projects in the inner suburbs and the effect of the entropic process of statutory planning is evident in the George Street facade of this project. It is a well-mannered contemporary take on the typical inner-Melbourne terrace house row with an idiosyncratic

interpretation of balcony lacework [horizontal steel bars curving down to meet columns]. In the approved manner, the facade height reduces at the south end to acknowledge its single-storey neighbour. At the rear, though, Burgess allowed his head and the building breaks up like a Cubist painting with stepping, sloping timber-clad walls, sloping metal roofs, more saw teeth windows and a deck.

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