practice—Sibling Architecture
project—Monash University Biomedical Discovery Institute
location—Clayton, Australia
text—Fiona Gruber
photography—Laure Joilet

Voyage of discovery

The latest project from Sibling has changed the face of the institutional interior forever. Fiona Gruber investigates Monash University's new Biomedical Discovery Institute to discover for herself just what's so different.

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Theres a joke that goes When your e talking to a scien tist, how do you tell if theyr e an extrovert Answer they stare at your shoes, not their own .

Its not that Monash Universitys new Biomedical Discovery Institute was visually introverted but it didnt exactly flash a wide smile or even make proper eye contact.

Its quite a standard building and the clients were concerned that you couldnt tell what this building was for at all, Sibling Architecture director Jane Caught says. Sibling, a Melbourne based practice, created in 2012 by eight friends, won the tender to refurbish the buildings expansive ground floor foyer.

The research hub was created to establish cross dis ciplinary and industry connections and called for an interactive space that showcased the ground breaking and world class research taking place on the universi tys Clayton campus. But its not easy conveying a world that develops in petrie dishes and clinical trials. The answer Turn the vestibule into a scaled up light filled high tech wunderkammer.

The idea was to transport the user of the space out of the every day, through a range of different scales into a microscopic world, Caught says.

The colour and textures of the outcome reflect the working methodology and artifacts of the researchers brightly coloured microscopic photography, crystallog raphy and chemical reactions.

Sibling has made a name for itself by exploring the way digital space influences physical space and Caught and co director Amelia Borg have employed holograms and interactive software to tell the Institutes story and history. Theyv e also created a vibrant and airy public space using moveable screens and seating configu rations with fabric designs designed on site that are based on computer algorithms. Its information rich and accessible, but, explains Caught, they were carefully not to dumb down.

We were trying a lot of different technologies and we also had to work out how to convey what happened here without being too basic for the scientists, Caught says.

The first thing that strikes the visitor as they enter through the sliding glass doors is a white feature wall based on Voronoi geometry the 15 metre wide, 2.7 me tre high frieze is a three dimensional asymmetrical tessellation of cellular shapes made from fibreglass, each of them unique and many of them containing giant portholes or oculi each is interactive and captures an

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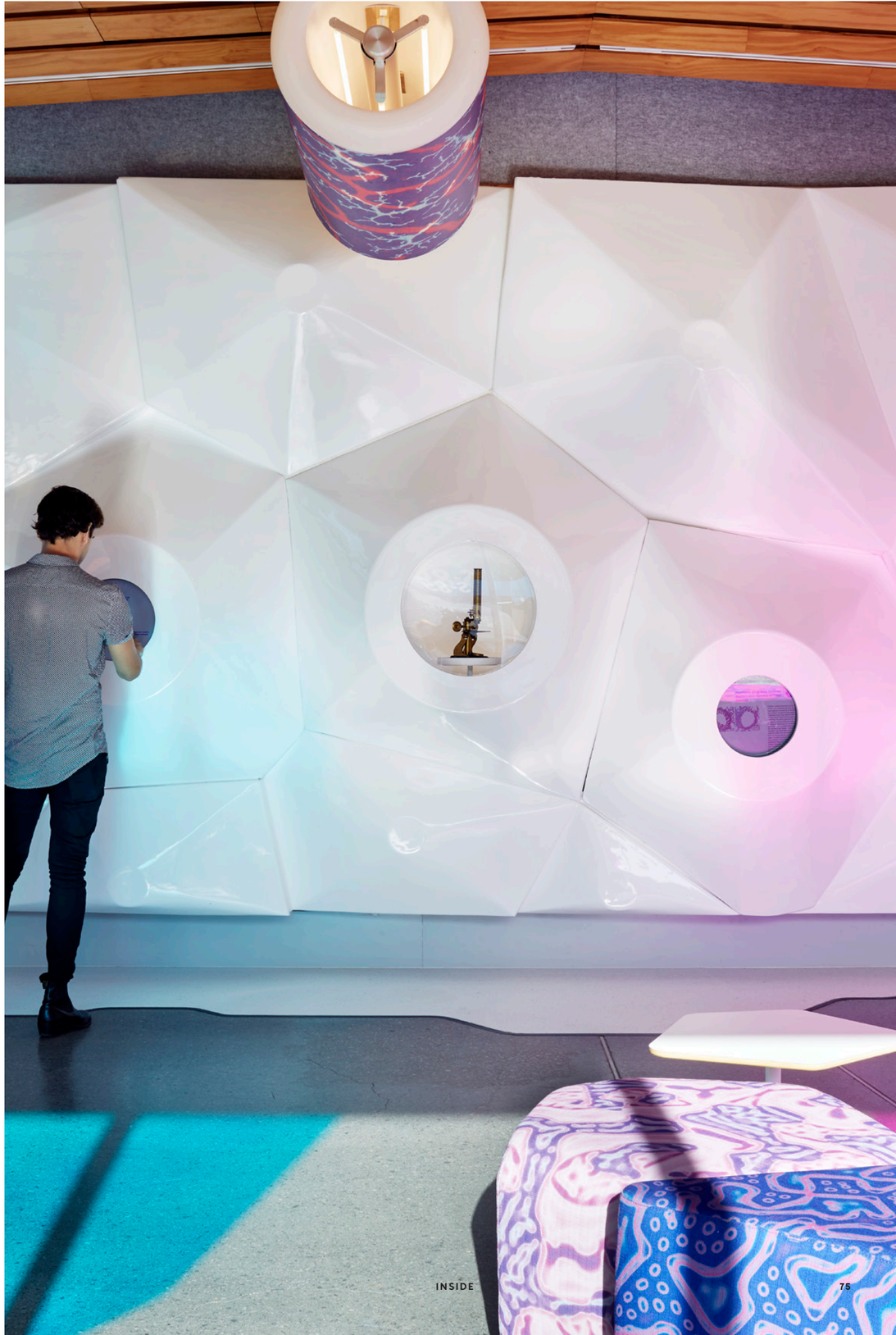

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aspect of BDIs research. This parametric modelling uses Grasshopper computer software.

Progressing through the 491 metre square space, an interactive wall gives a time line of research from Monashs foundation in the 1950s to the official opening of the BDI by the Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in November last year. And it is a very impressive series of firsts, from pioneering in vitro fertilisation in the 1970s and developing the worlds first successful anti flu drug in the 1980s to emerging advances in leukaemia treat ment and novel therapeutics for Alzheimers disease.

Sibling worked closely with Monash Communication and Design students to explore the user experience, to in tegrate the touch screens, 3D printed models, holograms and the interactive timeline which allows for content to be uploaded as research findings come on line.

As well as the wall fixed displays, stand alone plinth oculi and vitrines are dotted about, continuing the story and the world of wonder feel. One contains the brass cast of a kidney another a 3D printed protein molecule.

Another important element is the spill of light it streams into the space and the use of dichroic film patches on the floor to ceiling glass creates colourful lozenge shaped shadows, another mess with the scale moment as its a bit like socialising with blobs of protein.

Colour pops at you, from the drum shaped ceil ing mounted light fittings to the modular mobile seating, the moveable rippled screens and the cloth clad wall coverings. The upholstery fabric, in shades of green, purple and pink, relies on computer graphics mimicking natural patterning.

Its based on an algorithm which describe how chemicals react to each other , Caught says. It was dis covered in the 1950s but could only be visualised in the 1990s when computer graphics caught up.

The result is a public space that also feels domestic. Researchers mill about, holding impromptu meetings, flipping open their laptops at stand up desks, drinking coffee. Its humming.

The BDI project was initially a smaller project but Caught says the budget grew five times we were pro posing lots of things and in the end they decided they wanted to do everything. It sits alongside other projects Sibling has undertaken for Monash University the Over seas Student Lounge at its Caulfield campus, and, at Monashs Peninsula campus in Frankston, the School of Midwifery and the Students Union Caf . Each has added to the store of practical knowledge of the expectations and realities of university life.

Most Monash projects are used by such high vol umes of students that all our ideas are about users hav ing agency and being able to shape the space in ways that suit them, Caught says. The digital folding into the physical is really important.

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