

LAY OF THE LAND

With an oxidised steel shell wrapping around a series of community gathering spaces, Richard Kirk Architects has marked the importance of place while re-asserting the poetry of cast-off materials.

Words **Margie Fraser** Photography **Paul Bradshaw;**
Richard Kirk; Scott Burrows

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ARCHITECT Richard Kirk Architects
PROJECT Fitzgibbon Community Centre
LOCATION Fitzgibbon, Queensland



When the Queensland State Government began planning the outer Brisbane suburb of Fitzgibbon, a community centre was envisaged as its focal point. Low-cost housing has since followed, with shops and other infrastructure still in utero. Richard Kirk Architects (RKA) was briefed to design the centre well before any of these buildings existed, which is indicative of the importance placed on developing a strong sense of community.

Part of the building's role was to be a gateway to the bushland trails that begin and end at the rear of the site. In the delicate and benevolent social manipulation that is entailed in this kind of planning, promoting the use of existing walking tracks was key to the vision of the client, the Urban Land Development Authority (ULDA).

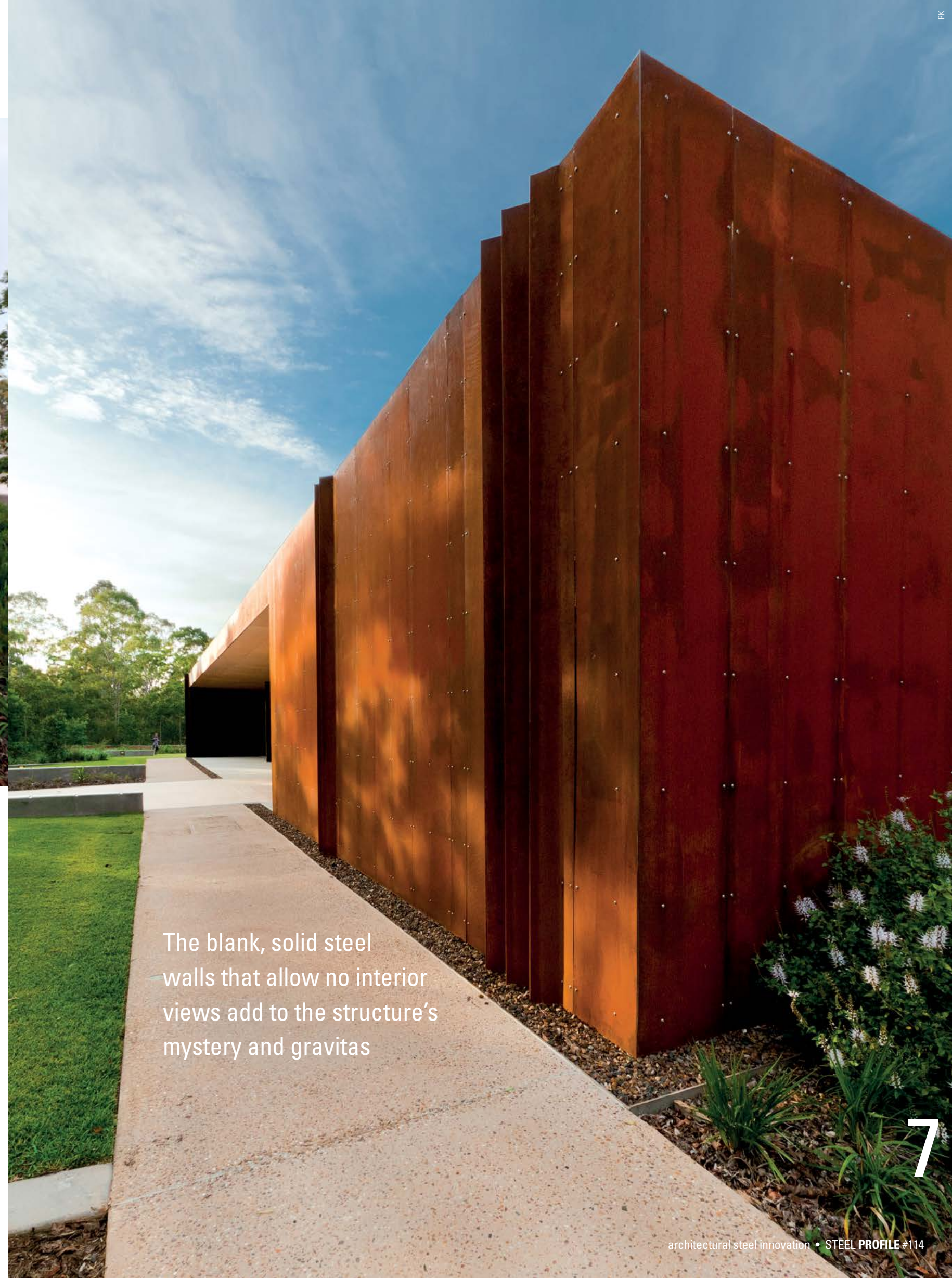
"It was all about experiencing the landscape," says RKA owner and principal Richard Kirk, of the ULDA brief. "The bush was valued highly and it was hoped to encourage more use of it by local families."

The site, a swampy patch of redundant farmland, had become a dumping ground for old fridges and cars. A couple of rusted car hulks, one piled on top of the other, gave Kirk his inspiration for the building, and its extreme sense of materiality. "I think of the building as a bit of land art, or a sculpture in the landscape – it has a very abstract quality. We used the weathering steel as a reference to the discarded objects that you find in these parts."

The building has a monumental quality that contrasts strongly with the articulated and multi-storey structures of the surrounding suburb. Its isolation on the edge of the town, with a backdrop canvas of bushland, heightens the object-in-the-landscape effect.

The blank, solid steel walls that allow no interior views add to the structure's mystery and gravitas. The one major view through (rather than into) the building is made via the large portal in the core of the 60-metre-wide elevation, acting as both guide and frame into the bush behind. The covered

RIGHT: Rusted car hulks gave Kirk his inspiration for the building and its extreme sense of materiality



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The major view through the building is made via the portal in the core of the 60-metre-wide elevation

portal space appears as a shell or remnant of what might have been part of the solid structure, and is used for communal gatherings.

The portal divides the simple plan, with a hall to the east and offices and community services to the west. A cafe, yet to be occupied, sits between the two and opens to the undercover courtyard. Holes are punched into the hoop ply-lined canopy for extra light and the odd glimpse of stars at night. The signage along the portal's fascia is stencilled into the rusted metal, reminiscent of a bit of ardent handiwork from a high school metalwork class.

The cladding made from BlueScope XLERPLATE® weathering steel acts as a rain screen and, notes Kirk, will require zero maintenance. "The last thing we wanted to do was use materials found in the houses," says Kirk. "This is a public building, and must clearly be so. It needed to have a strong sense of identity – to make a strong statement."

The oxidised armour of XLERPLATE® weathering steel "did everything for us," he says. "It can play all these different roles." As a light metallic skin that shades the internal thermal mass of the building, heat can escape from the gap behind the epidermis. Where the strips forming the outer colonnade were folded and twisted, the material gains strength.

The folding of the XLERPLATE® steel members, achieved through the use of a brake press, is an economical solution that delivers a strong language and much evocative power in its repeating linear pattern. The folds in the steel register the weather (reddening during rainy seasons) and also the sunlight as it hits the surfaces.

Light and shade have a key role to play in the building's expression, which takes primacy on the relatively small site. The folded blades, for all their strength and ruggedness, act as a protective veil to the building. Inside, ply-lined walls and timber floors are fleshier components of the materials palette.

"We had created folded metal before, in the ABC building at South Bank," says Kirk. "But that was aluminium. With its three-millimetre thickness and the fact that the folded panels are rigid, this required the most fundamental metalworking."

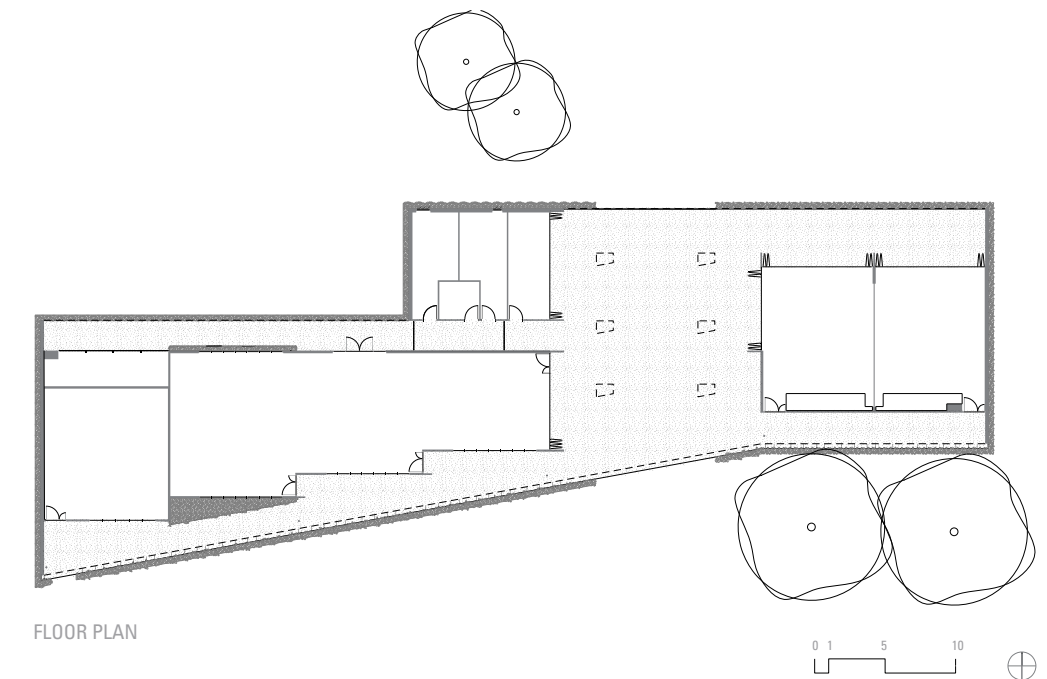
The clear linearity of the building, enhanced by its modest height, gives it a presence in the landscape. While it kinks back to accommodate a couple of remnant gum trees – "There's nothing pretty about them," says Kirk, "but they are very much part of the locale" – it is the solidity and simplicity of the form that lends weight to the image.

"A community hall can't be over-programmed," says Kirk. "The spaces are simple, functional and versatile. The building is an empty vessel for all the activities that might take place inside."

The LYSAGHT LONGLINE 305® profile made from ZINCALUME® steel is pitched to the street on the south, and wide fascias conceal the guttering. The LONGLINE 305® profile was chosen for its ability to span wide areas and associated waterproofing quality. 🚧

PANEL SAYS

A bold example of public infrastructure marking the transition from landscape to development, this community centre for a new suburb on Brisbane's northern fringe is a terrific exercise in place-making. The structure is anchored in its bushland setting and is well-suited to its sub-tropical climate through the use of large overhangs, the breezeway which provides a generous open covered public entry space, and operable glazing behind the rainscreen. We particularly like the detailed rhythm of the facade with its twisted blades that strategically animate the otherwise blank walls, and the weathering steel that references the unsanctioned corroding cars that were once abandoned on the site. While it presents as a simple structure, this project is underpinned by a degree of complexity and demonstrates a strong sense of clarity around its key architectural ideas – suitability, rationality and economy.





Storm water management was important on the low-lying site that had required filling. The building is constructed on a raft slab, and there is a two to three-metre fall across the site. Water running down the bladed colonnade lands in a perimeter drain filled with oxide ballast. The design allows for residual rust to be camouflaged in the pebbles, but to date there has been no run-off.

The marriage of form and material is RKA's high moment in the piece. The overall simplicity of the form and the honest expression of the weathering steel make its own language.

"Weathering steel is an evocative material and an important product, particularly in Australia," says Kirk. "In states like Arizona in the US, using this product without coating is good. You don't ever have to treat it again."

Black stained plywood is used on walls and soffits so the building recedes behind the steel cladding, leaving the Uluru-esque form to enjoy its own rhythm and poetry.

In a suburb that was conceived as a benchmark for low-cost housing and sustainability, the use of XLERPLATE® weathering steel is apt. RKA's commission came as a result of earlier work with the ULDA and an understanding of what they were trying to achieve in Fitzgibbon. The ULDA (now transitioning to the Department of State Development, Infrastructure and Planning under the LNP State Government, with some functions going to Brisbane City Council) advocated for affordable and sustainable housing with smaller lot sizes, and RKA was involved in a design charrette that explored new housing typologies on small lots.

ULDA completed the masterplan and subdivision work and built some demonstration projects for the private sector to follow. A healthy relationship between architect and client developed in the process, resulting in RKA's commission on the town's centrepiece community hall.

With partial funding from the Federal Government, the project had a relatively low budget. Importantly, the client, according to Kirk, is happy, and "got more than they expected". **SP**

ABOVE: Folding the members made from XLERPLATE® steel is an economical solution that delivers a strong language in its repeating linear pattern. Water running down the bladed colonnade lands in a perimeter drain filled with oxide ballast, allowing for residual oxidation to be camouflaged in the pebbles



ELEVATION

PROJECT Fitzgibbon Community Centre **CLIENT** Urban Land Development Authority **ARCHITECT** Richard Kirk Architects **PROJECT TEAM** Yee Jien, Luke Hayward **STRUCTURAL & CIVIL ENGINEER** Cardno **BUILDER** Grindley Construction **SHOP DRAWING CONTRACTOR** Lowline **STEEL FABRICATOR** Lowline (cladding); Kyst Engineering (structure) **CLADDING CONTRACTOR** Lowline **LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS** PLACE Design Group **PRINCIPAL STEEL COMPONENTS** Cladding: BlueScope XLERPLATE® weathering steel; Roofing: LYSAGHT LONGLINE® 305® profile made from ZINCALUME® steel **PROJECT TIMEFRAME** Design and documentation commencing march 2010. Construction to completion March 2011 to October 2012 **AWARDS** 2012 Australian Steel Institute Queensland State Steel Awards - Steel Clad Structures Building Design **BUILDING SIZE** 600m² **TOTAL PROJECT COST** \$3.25 million



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