What's the best way to build Australia's first greenfield university campus in more than 20 years? Great minds, great plans and great work; layered with architectural creativity, artistic innovation and environmental sustainability in a subtropical climate. That's how USC won more than 30 awards for the design and construction of its built environment. Far from slowing down as it reaches 20 years, construction is speeding up again, with $67 million in new projects fast-tracked in the past two years.

THERE THEY STOOD, two carpenters, on the edge of a grassy 100-hectare site marked out for Australia's newest university. It was a hot summer's day in the Christmas holidays of 1994-95 on the Sunshine Coast, but Pat Evans and Trevor Harch were sweating for a different reason. "It was a swamp!" they recalled two decades later of the low-lying, former sugar cane land at Sippy Downs then known by even these two locals as the middle of nowhere. Mr Evans and Mr Harch were family men and hard workers. "What a combination we were, a born-and-raised Irish Catholic and a Lutheran with German ancestry," smiled Mr Harch (the Lutheran). But they could not control the weather.

The owners of Evans Harch building company, founded on the Coast in 1977, had a lot at stake. The $10 million first stage of the planned university was then one of the biggest tenders they'd won, about equal in value to their construction of The Wharf Mooloolaba, a retail and tourism precinct.

"We were over the moon to have another job of that size," said Mr Harch. "It was for two buildings (for administration and academic studies) plus two lecture theatres. Before Christmas we'd been invited to the Maroochydore office for the opening of the tenders – that kind of thing doesn't happen these days, everything's secretive and the red tape is worse – and I didn't know (then Planning President) Paul Thomas very well. But he looked at the results, walked across the room and said, 'Trevor, congratulations, you've won the job.'"

The successful contractors were elated and determined. "It was a prestigious job, a university, and everyone around town was saying, 'Is this thing really going to work? Will it fire up?'"

Within weeks, drenching rains put the pair in the hot seat. "I worked on pricing and Pat worked on building and he's a guy who's very much subject to detail," said Mr Harch. So when the rain fell on their respective homes in the neighbouring suburbs of Buderim and Tanawha, the men went to check out the uni site. "Pat was down here in a flash, taking photos to show everyone who was on holidays," Mr Harch laughed. "We'd never seen so much water. And we had to build a building there?! (December 1994 still has one of the highest recorded rainfall days of any December since on the Sunshine Coast, according to the Bureau of Meteorology.)"

Is this thing really going to work? Will it fire up?

But they were on board with some of the best in the business; the resulting combination of local knowledge and global experience provided not only strong foundations for Australia's first greenfield university in more than 20 years, but also the flexibility to make changes according to growth, funding and other circumstances. Stormwater management, from the digging of swales (open drains) to the creation of a lake system, would become an outstanding element of its grounds maintenance and resilience. As Evans Harch, and later Evans Harch BADGE, went on to win tender after tender, constructing 15 of the 23 significant buildings on campus by 2016 and becoming the Coast's biggest building firm, USC continued striving to balance its built and natural environments to achieve sustainability – a feat that became a hallmark of its architecture, art and campus development. (See 'Sustainability')

These principles were enshrined in the first campus master plan, prepared in 1994-95 by Mitchell/Giurgola and Thorp (MG&T) Architects. Professor Paul Thomas recalled the company's appointment as site master planners and architects for stage one of the then Sunshine Coast University College.
Our primary goal was to prepare a master plan that was right for this place: this specific site, the environment and the social culture of the Sunshine Coast.

Romaldo Giurgola had been the chair of the school of architecture at Columbia University (New York City) in 1965 and had taught at Temple University (Philadelphia), so we jumped at university projects,” said Mr Guida. “While the green space retains a low-scale, garden-like environment, buildings can grow behind that.” Still the tallest building on campus, it was designed by Noel Robinson and DesignInc in tandem with the nearby single-storey art gallery and cafe. At the time housing a state-of-the-art wireless computer network and data centre, its main tenants remain Information Technology Services and USC International.

The library now sits opposite the Chancellery, built in 2006 as USC’s first capital works committee. “We were impressed,” Professor Thomas, who appreciated architecture, art and Jefferson’s ideals and inspected the University of Virginia on the recommendation of Hal Guida, admired the way that university was constructed to relate to its community of scholars. “USC, however, also wanted to open itself to the wider community, so we planned our primary spine – two rows of buildings facing a lawn in the middle – to open at both ends,” he said. “This retained the human dimension, where a person at a window in one building could recognise a person outside the opposite building across the lawn, as well as the environmental qualities of the area, allowing the movement of kangaroos, for example, down to a lake and the adjoining Modoolah River National Park.”

USC aimed to welcome students, staff and community members at the site’s north-west entrance, marked by one of its only stands of trees, and encourage them to enjoy future facilities all the way down the green to the lake planned for the south-east end. Building spines were planned laterally.

In 2016, the treed entrance remains (supplemented by profuse native plantings along the site), the building grid is two-thirds finished, the lake has been duplicated and the library has taken pride of place in the middle of the primary spine.

The library now sits opposite the Chancellery, built in 2006 as USC celebrated its 10th anniversary. The Chancellory was opened the following year by then Queensland Governor Quentin Bryce at a function to install John Dobson as the new chancellor, a position he still holds.

Meanwhile, the secondary spines now reach out on one side to a five-storey Health and Sports Centre (opened in 2008 by then Australian Treasurer Wayne Swan, a Sunshine Coast local) and on the opposite side to a semi-industrial building for practical studies in civil engineering and paramedic science (from concrete stress tests to mock car accidents). Alongside this building sits the latest jewel in USC’s architectural crown, the $37.2 million Engineering Learning Hub, constructed by Hutcheon Builders and officially opened in 2015 with 3D visualisation technology including the CAVE®️, the only facility of its type in the world to be used for teaching as well as research. (See ‘Innovation’).

In 2014, the master plan’s original design intent came of age one day in August when more than 8,000 people flocked to USC’s biggest day in August when more than 8,000 people flocked to USC’s biggest day in August when more than 8,000 people flocked to USC’s biggest
ever open day and new community event, called Imaginarium. Cutting-edge interactive displays and live entertainment across the campus inspired potential students and families from hundreds of kilometres away to connect with the University. “Architecture was an extremely important decision point in USC’s history,” Professor Thomas recalled. “From when I became planning president in March 1994. I had in my mind that we had to become a university, not a college or an outlying campus of QUT, and we had to look like a university.” Urged by state bureaucrats to inspect a small campus of a remote institution for ideas, he was underwhelmed. “It was all bricks and mortar and all the buildings were the same and I found it utterly boring. We needed buildings of monumental scale to signal that this was a university.”

But with the first students expected to walk on campus at the start of 1996, Professor Thomas was realistic enough to realise that lack of time and funding ruled out any sandstone edifices. Instead, the nod to tradition became big colonnades (pillars) on the first floor. “I found it utterly boring. We needed buildings of monumental scale to signal that this was a university.” Urged by state bureaucrats to inspect a small campus of a remote institution for ideas, he was underwhelmed. “It was all bricks and mortar and all the buildings were the same and I found it utterly boring. We needed buildings of monumental scale to signal that this was a university.”

It’s been terrific,” Mr Bradley said. “We did offer to support our kids anywhere but two chose USC degrees. And it’s interesting because a lot of their friends want to southern universities but then returned to finish their studies here.”

Back in the mid-1990s, Mark Bradley was astounded by the task at hand. “When I got here some earthworks had been done but there was no water, no sewerage, and regular blackouts,” he said. “I asked Ron Young (former Pro Vice-Chancellor, Finance and Facilities from Central Queensland University), ‘What do you expect us to do?’ Ron said, ‘Deliver stage one ready for teaching next year. Do whatever it takes.’ That not only meant the buildings (a three-storey and a two-storey), the lecture theatres (tiered seating for 500 in total), a structure for food preparation/dining and a works shed, it also meant any other urgent infrastructure. The 1994 annual report was blunt. “In view of the short timeframe available, the usual processes from design through to construction of the buildings for Stage 1 of the project were compressed, and overlapped in some instances, so that the buildings will be completed for occupation by the end of 1995. Planning was also commenced for Stage 2, which will be completed in 1997.” That’s exactly how Trevor Harch remembered it. “The pressure was on. It had to be open for the next year; no ifs, buts or maybes.”

The pressure was on. It had to be open for the next year; no ifs, buts or maybes. The longevity and consistency of some of USC’s contractors undoubtedly factored in its success. Facilities staff cite loyal companies like Hall Contracting and Shadforts Civil Contractors. In addition, many company bosses and business leaders have also become USC supporters, offering scholarships to students in their preferred fields. Cameron Hall, a civil engineer and managing director of Hall Contracting, is continuing the legacy of his grandparents Les and Mary Hall, who started the business in 1946. “I am a strong believer in tertiary education, and was amazed to see this wonderful university thriving on the Sunshine Coast when I returned from working overseas in 2005,” said Mr Hall, who gained his degree in Brisbane in the year USC opened. He is a current member of the Foundation Board and supports a scholarship for engineering students.

Mr Bradley recalled many discussions “on mobile phones the size of handbags” as the team tackled the big issues of water and electricity supplies. “We had to bring a water main here from seven kilometres away. That was a contentious issue (related to nearby development) and we had to contribute over $1 million. We had to take a sewage main one and a half kilometres to get into a gravity main. We were pumping sewage every day.”

Power was a double whammy, with the nearest substation 10 kilometres away in beachside Alexandra Headland and with rows of overhead, high-voltage power mains bisecting the grounds where buildings were due to rise. Ironically, these mains did not service the site.

“The number of power outages we used to have was ridiculous,” Mr Bradley recalled. “Every time we’d ring up and say, ‘What’s the problem?’ and they’d say a tree had fallen or a possum had got...
There was an excavator with big pincers that basically cut up the hammer throw and the discus! To drop the power lines or we couldn’t put up the throwing nets for...}

Mr Bradley described the day the offices and it was hard, really hard, but eventually the power was of them wanted to access that kind of money. and the cost of going around the grounds was prohibitive, and none of them wanted to access that kind of money.

“It took a few years of going to the media and into government offices and it was hard, really hard, but eventually the power was re-routed around the site,” Professor Thomas explained why USC was so determined: “It inhibited development, aesthetically it was a nightmare and there’s research about radiation.”

The issue went down to the wire. Mr Bradley described the day the power lines came down. “We got rid of them in 1999, in the countdown to the Sydney Olympics in 2000,” he said. “Pressures were mounting and we had a contract with the federal and state governments for the provision of pre-Olympic training at our athletics track. We had to drop the power lines or we couldn’t put up the throwing nets for the hammer throw and the discus.”

It only sounded amusing. The re-routing involved sizeable financial contributions from other stakeholders and affected nearby land sales, including resumptions. The changeover itself was very serious. “We had the alternative energy energised on the day and they cut the network over live, which I’d never seen happen,” Mr Bradley said. “There was an excavator with big pincers that basically cut up the lines in the air and dumped them!” If things had gone wrong with the main feeder, the entire region might have blacked out. The War of the World-style scene was duly photographed. Considering how the odds were stacked in the early years, the successful completion of each new building stage was testament to the dedication of the small core staff, their consultants and contractors, from quantity surveyors and hydraulic engineers to painters and labourers. The fact this campus development continued so boldly to 2016 also reflected the foresight of, and adherence to, the 1995 master plan catering for a maximum student population of 15,000 EFTSL (equivalent full-time student load) over 25 to 30 years. Regular updates of the plan enabled necessary changes to the order of buildings, for example, to match funding patterns, advances in technology, regional population growth or types of degrees introduced (which explains why the buildings on the campus map are not in alphabetical order just yet). But that original document remained in track as USC reached recent enrolment milestones alongside Phase III of the plan.

Hal Guida, now a life fellow of the Australian Institute of Architects (2009) and a partner at Guida Moseley Brown Architects, said he was pleased to see the puzzle piecing together after drawing the grid of buildings based on a simple premise, that 12 square metres per full-time student would be required in plant and facilities. “The

environmental consultants had advised there was a substantial part of the site we shouldn’t build on, so we allocated space for sport and recreation then balanced the (estimated) gross floor space in building groupings to create a good social environment on campus,” he said, making a 150-hectare master plan sound simple.

The growth of USC’s architectural laboratory was witnessed from inside and outside its colonnades by Mark Roehrs, the Brisbane-based education and science sector leader of global design practice HASSELL. “The Sunshine Coast has always been my family holiday destination and I worked on the Coast for the influenza crisis,” said Mr Roehrs, who has designed university projects across the country since the mid-1980s. Between 1996 and 2014 he was involved with four at USC: two science buildings, the Learning and Teaching Hub and USC Olympia. “(See ‘Voices for the next generation’ and ‘Innovation’)

Mr Roehrs said the attitude of people at the University impressed him from his first experience on campus when he led the design of the first science building for Daryll Jackson Architecture in association with Ken Dowarch Architects. It won the Australian Institute of Architects inaugural state sustainability award in 1998. “USC has a strong commitment to architects leading the design process and managing projects through all phases, resulting in excellent design and quality outcomes,” he said.

“What’s been rewarding is engaging directly with members of the community – from students and staff to the Vice-Chancellor – about their needs and aspirations, then seeing them occupy buildings in transformative ways. We’ve had the opportunity to really explore innovative learning and sustainable design ideas around subtropical architecture to express the character of the region.”

The basics of ESD (environmentally sustainable design) were outlined in the master plan and summarised in the 1995 annual report: “The design and orientation of the buildings has enabled the University College to make minimal use of air conditioning and lighting and, hence, make significant energy savings. “The buildings are situated on the site to take maximum advantage of the prevailing wind as well as the sun/shade pattern. The building colours (blues, golds, greens) have been blended in to blend in with the natural environment.”

Indoor-outdoor spaces – so popular in Sunshine Coast homes because of the warm, benign climate – have become integral to USC designs. A third of the area in the HASSELL-designed Learning and Teaching Hub is for informal student social learning, with sheltered atrium and deck spaces naturally ventilated through thermal chimneys and breezeways. When curious kangaroos hopped sloppily through the breezeway, right past students and a huge triple-hammerhead shark sculpture, Mr Roehrs felt his brief was met. The environment, art and architecture had merged, complementing each other.

The sculpture, called ‘Big Beizam’, was one of the latest additions to USC’s burgeoning art collection, largely focused on abstract, contemporary Australian works including indigenous paintings from the Western and Central Desert. The shark dance headdress of bamboo, wood and feathers made by reinounced Torres Strait Islander artist Ken Thaiday Senior, who attended the building opening, was donated by USC’s long-time art benefactor the Proost De Daye family. It also served as a welcome to the Birunga Centre, a study, cultural and social facility to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island student. (See ‘Helping make dreams happen!’)

Dawn Oelrich, who curated USC’s collection across the campus and ran its gallery from 2004 to late 2015, said HASSELL had done amazing work incorporating art into various buildings. “They were delightful to work with because they got it,” she said. “They knew that art could work really well in study spaces and they knew what art did and didn’t need in terms of space and light and temperature controls. The Learning and Teaching Hub is particularly beautiful – I tried to curate that building like an art gallery.” Many of the works shown were donated by Noosa architect John Mainwarung.

To see more art, architecture and environment aligning – this time vertically – students and staff needed only to look up when the second science building was designed by HASSELL and built by Evans Harth in 2011. That endangered local plant, the WallumAllocasuarina serrata, was used as the focus of a digi-glass installation up the four-storey stairwell. The panels of photographic images could be seen from inside and outside the stairwell, the reds and greens of the WallumRiver National Park wildflower catching the sunlight.

Artists Glen Manning and his wife Kathy Daly, a USC graduate, consulted USC’s Genealogy Research Group which was working with developers, conservators and government experts to save the plant via seed collection, translocation, replanting and further research. Opened in 2012 by then Governor of Queensland Ms Penelope Wensley, the building’s art was cited by Professor Greg Hill as symbolising the University’s sustainability and regional engagement goals. It was included in an exhibition by Glen and Kathy’s The Niche Art team at the USC Gallery in November 2014, when Dawn Oelrich praised the intersection between art, human interaction and the built and natural landscapes.
Ask anyone involved with the development of USC’s campus over 20 years to nominate an outstanding feature, and there is a spectrum of answers: the Olympic-standard, 50-metre heated pool adjacent to the sports stadium and athletics track; the state-of-the-art technology incorporated into the latest buildings for engineering, nursing science and creative industries studies; the new blue $10 million multi-level car park; the translocation of 15 hectares of heathland habitat to save it from a housing estate; the success of the lakes in making USC almost self-sufficient in all its water needs; and drinking water.

In addition to these big-ticket items, however, were the little touches that meant a lot to a lot of people who loved the University. Mark Bradley admired an original fig tree that was preserved next to the entrance sign, and the re-use of the curved tin roof of the first “tuckshop” shed into a shade structure above the barbecue by the lake. Trevor Harich loved the angles and twists of the library “even though builders normally like doing things that are square and straight”, and the flat roof of the Innovation Centre, also for its high difficulty factor. He still checks out the campus when he’s home at Buderim, but spends much of his retirement at his vineyard in the Barossa Valley in South Australia, nurturing his Brockenchack wines (named after his grandchildren).

Hal Guida, continuing to practise in Canberra, liked the smaller-arched windows of the first building, later replaced with floor-to-ceiling glass. “We knew we’d outgrow the library one day so we did that aggregation space by another 1,000sqm. People are pretty creative. We’ve always built space knowing that we’re going to have bigger projects, and I went to Brisbane and did the Queen Street Mall (1,946 students). Numbers almost quadrupled in two years. USC has always pushed its boundaries,” said Mark Bradley. “We’re not fulfilling mediocrity. We’re getting out of our comfort zone and bringing on new forms of research laboratories and teaching spaces. We’ve always built space knowing that we’re going to have to grow. We knew we’d outgrow the library one day so we did that high-level bridge from it straight into the ICT building to increase the collection space by another 1,000sqm. People are pretty creative around here.”

Mark Bradley

How an architect turned an artist’s eye on USC

“Didn’t John Mainwaring come good with the library?” says Professor Paul Thomas, looking at the students streaming in and out of its breezy Queensland verandah on the first floor, dappled by the sunlight through timber slats screening the northern side. A favourite setting for marketing and media photos since it opened in early 1997, the three-story building with the jagged roof angles has been more than picturesque and functional. It won six awards that year including the prestigious Sir Zelman Cowen Award for Public Buildings from the Royal Australian Institute of Architects.

“That was an award at a national ceremony and it was fantastic,” says Paul. “It gave the Sunshine Coast visibility nationally in architectural and travel magazines, for our coastal style.” The library is a delight for students, whether they’re reading in beanbags in natural light through towering walls of glass overlooking the campus lawn from the loft, or plugging in their laptops to take notes from more than 110,000 books on offer (or from the digital collections 57,000 texts and 142,000 ebooks). A 2007 photo of the library posted by a past student on the Flickr website was captioned “the funkiest building on the coast”.

Noosa architect, philanthropist and yachtsman John Mainwaring co-designed the building with Lawrence Nield, a professor of architecture in Sydney who master planned that city’s Olympics in 2000 and won the Australian Institute of Architects’ Gold Medal in 2012. The pair worked to a design brief with USC’s foundation librarian Heather Gordon and consultant David Jones from the State Library of New South Wales. It incorporated the then latest information technology facilities and the budget was $6.7 million. John recalls the amazing opportunity for his small practice that had only done domestic and commercial work:

“We tendered for the job with Lawrence Nield & Partners who had done uni work before and I was excited to get it. The library was a pretty innovative building, the first big building done in the Sunshine Coast subtropical style, and it became a highlight of my professional career. Lots of local practices involved in the University graduated to bigger projects, and I went to Brisbane and did the Queen Street Mall in 2000. (He was design director on the $25 million refurbishment of the capital city’s retail hub, winning a Civic Design Award.)

“The USC master plan put the library, as the intellectual brain of the campus, in the middle of the landscape spine and we had to acknowledge those spatial dynamics and make sure it responded well to the site and the climate. We rejected the tradition of internalised libraries and we didn’t want a heavy, ostentatious block. We wanted it to reflect the Coast’s casual, quiet personality and natural environment.

“The collage of materials was adventurous – a steel structure, reinforced concrete block, plywood and glass. It has a lovely translucent quality – right when all the lights are on. The free-flowing verandah created a grand entry to the library, and the roof was designed like the leaves of a folding book.

“This university put the Sunshine Coast on the map in terms of its cultural inertia. A lot of people were attracted to it as a lifestyle university, with access to beaches – an alternative to Brisbane or...
the Gold Coast. Like most of the professionals practising on the Sunshine Coast, it was not a ‘bush and tea’ university. People came up to me years later and said how much they loved working in the library. I recently heard Thomas Keneally (Australian novelist who wrote Schindler’s Ark) say education should be a birthright, not a paid privilege, and I really believe that. That, to me, is what the library stands for: it’s not a monument to the elite; it’s a workers’ building.”

John, semiretired from his firm JMA Architects, became an Honorary Doctor of USC in 2013 as he continued working to share his four-decade-plus of design experience. While moving between houses, he decided that USC should benefit from his lifelong passion for art collecting and donated hundreds of thousands of dollars of worth of paintings and prints to ensure they could remain on display to the public as a unified collection. Included were many abstract and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander works and significant artists such as Sally Gabori and Lawrence Dawes. A series of 18 prints from Arrernte Land (Minginrida) is one of the most culturally

When some of the collection was exhibited at the USC Gallery in 2014, curator Dawn Oelrich highlighted John’s accompanying donation of diaries describing how the art had influenced his architectural style. She said: “This historical context is extraordinarily valuable for USC as a teaching institution, for our design, education, public policy, town planning and engineering students but also for the broader community. The exhibition shows an art collection created by a person with a fine eye for art, aesthetic and design.”

John, who studied art before architecture, said it deeply influenced his philosophy: “I discovered I could learn about the landscape and the universe through Aboriginal art,” he recalled. “They understand the universe through Aboriginal art.” He moved to nearby Buderim in late 1999. She was surprised, then delighted, to be roped into a shift on the first day of work, by the gallery’s foundation director Dr Lisa Chandler (now Senior Lecturer in Art and Design) who was then juggling teaching and research duties with operating the gallery and curating exhibitions. Merle remembers one innovative exhibition where everything was at a child’s eye level. There was a big sand tray in the middle of the gallery and the kids loved raking it,” she said. Perhaps the idea came full circle 15 years later when the Imaginariuum festival included a giant sandpit and children’s art activity outside the current standalone gallery, built in 2004.

As noted in the 2004 annual report, the University and the community raised half a million dollars to construct the gallery, which attracted 7,295 people and 50 new volunteers in its first year. In 2015, more than 15,000 people enjoyed 11 exhibitions. The University of the Third Age, entrenched at USC for its two decades, also has strong gallery links. USA volunteer tutor, art historian and former architect Dennis Panchaud has given many public talks there, including one that sold out in 2013 as part of its Art and Architecture lecture series. For Dawn Oelrich, the curator’s role was a short-term, part-time contract that kept growing. The inaugural director of the Redcliffe Art Gallery, south of the Sunshine Coast, who collaborated more than 10 years of service at USC, nominates two other favourite artworks: a 2001 untitled painting by Thomas Tjapaltjarri, of concentric circles and lines giving an effect of rolling movement (donated by USC foundation donor of Business Professor Andy Hede); and a series of paintings by Gloria Petyarre called ‘Mountain Devil Dreaming’ (donated by John Mainwaring). “They are the tracks of a lizard on the sand and they make me laugh every time I see them,” she says.

Dawn, who has degrees specialising in arts administration and European art history, is meticulous in her work. She suddenly disappears out the back of the gallery and returns with a special ruler. The alignment of a photograph has caught her eye. She places the ruler on the wall and checks to see if it is plumb as she continues to move the artwork up to show student and staff work, as well as introduce local and touring exhibitions,” she says. An annual multimedia showcase of the results of three years of study by art and design students, including Best Portfolio awards, is now one of the most popular regular displays. “Meanwhile our permanent collection started getting some lovely donations from well-known artists and collectors including Philip Harding, a Noosa developer, who kindly lent the University about 30 big works over the years. We’ve since sought and acquired our own 2D and 3D work and the collection is now worth $3.7 million.”

Dawn recalls her first task was auditing the artworks in the eight buildings on campus at Sippy Downs. “Now when I audit, I do three campuses and 23 buildings. The University has grown so rapidly and enormously that we sometimes have to hold our breath. Renovations are always going on, whole departments are being moved … if an artwork stays in one place for a little while it makes me happy.” The task is made a little more difficult by the subjective nature of art. “We’ve got some provocative works that I couldn’t hang because people kept hiding them behind cupboards, despite their huge value,” she smiles, mentioning an Adam Cullen and a Clifton Pugh. “Dawn doesn’t really mind, even when people insist in calling the ‘Pulse’ sculpture ‘those red sticks’. She looks again. “At least they recognise it and know that’s where the gallery is.”

The pulse of a University – a curator’s perspective

“So, what’s your favourite piece?” It’s a revered question for long-time USC Gallery curator Dawn Oelrich. Until she retired in late 2015, Dawn was in charge of a collection of more than 600 artworks – from paintings and prints hung on academic office walls to mixed media installations across the campus. She said: “This historical context is extraordinarily valuable for USC artists such as Sally Gabori and Lawrence Dawes. A series of 18 prints from Arrernte Land (Minginrida) is one of the most culturally

From little things...

Professor Paul Thomas recalls: “I was delighted with the incorporation of our art collection on campus over time. My favourite piece is still ‘Sower asking spirit for seed’ (a basalt sculpture by Zimbabwean artist Nicholas Mukomerana acquired by USC in 1996). It was our first art piece and it was in my office until the day I left. It was just so symbolic to me; the hand and the seeds. I thought, ‘That is exactly what we are trying to do as a university’. The Chancellor was shocked by the $15,000 cost but it’s now worth a lot more.”

Development award no urban myth for USC

In 2013, the University was a joint winner of the Wildcard Award from the Urban Development Institute of Australia (Queensland). The award recognised USC’s significant contribution to the urban development industry and the community; its commitment to best-practice urban design and sustainable development, and its encouragement of creative and artistic flair in campus development. It found “USC has a distinct sense of place, which has been achieved through sensitivity to the needs of the regional ecosystem, as well as meeting the needs of campus staff, students and the wider community.”