

FORM

Circus Oz Moves House

BY DANIELLA CASAMENTO

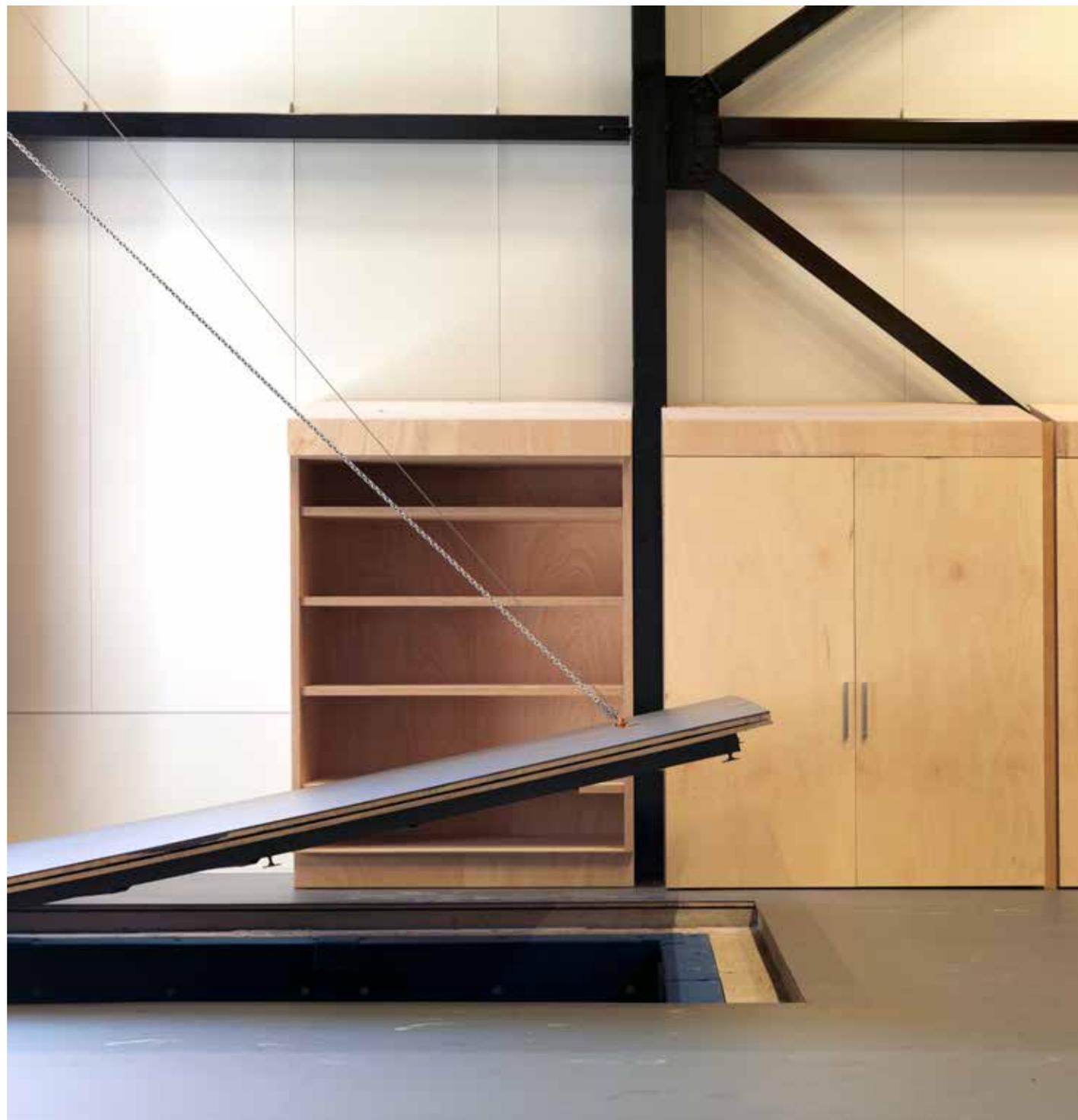
After 36 years, Circus Oz has set down permanent roots in a purpose-built facility on the site of the former Collingwood Technical School. Throughout the early days of January, a lifetime collection of props, costumes and lighting rigs began to fill shelves in purpose-designed and refurbished rooms while vintage posters papered previously empty walls in communal spaces. The satisfaction of all who have been involved in the project is palpable but as they look to the future, they also honour the past.

Inside the main entry on Perry Street, a red arch decorates a doorway to the Nanjing Bicycle Pagoda. The memorial room is named in honour of the Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe brought to Australia from China by Carrillo Gantner in 1982 and who helped to train Australian acrobats. The semi-basement room is used as bicycle parking and offers the first hint of the company's history. Black and white photographs of Chinese acrobats hang on semi-rendered brick walls alongside quotes written in Chinese calligraphy and translated into English. 'Miss 1 day training the acrobat knows. Miss 2 days training the coach knows. Miss 3 days training the audience knows.'

In 2011, the architectural team lead by Kai Chen, Director of heritage architects Lovell Chen, undertook a substantial site analysis for Arts Victoria, who owns the site. The red brick and render façades along the Perry Street frontage remain and much of the existing buildings were refurbished and adapted during the \$15 million redevelopment. Sections of the building at the centre of the site were demolished to allow for two large rehearsal rooms and new offices designed by Felipe Reynolds, set designer and interior designer for Circus Oz.

Anne-Marie Treweeke, Associate Director of Lovell Chen, says they worked closely with Circus Oz over a period of 10 years to understand their client's needs. This resulted in the aim to relocate to premises which would allow the company to create the shows and replicate performance conditions outside the circus tent.

Annie Davey, who joined Circus Oz as a performer more than 25 years ago, is now the building coordinator and says the main rehearsal room has an unobstructed height of 15m. "It's literally and figurative the heart of the circus," she says of the many windows which allow views into the room



from all aspects of the building. "We have the capacity to put two rows of seats around the perimeter, the full band, full rigging and everything, so suddenly we've got the capacity to rehearse the show as is before we move into the tent which we've never had before," she explains. "This is phenomenal for us."

The smaller rehearsal room has an unobstructed height of almost 12m and is also used for trapeze training. It boasts multiple rigging points, new crash mats and a panel in the floor which lifts up to reveal a tumbling pit full of foam. "The room will be used for ongoing classes where previously, classes had to work around rehearsals," Davey says.

A band room is accessible to both rehearsal spaces by two stacking doors. Sightlines to performing aerialists governed the height of

the doors which governed the height of the floor above. "It's all to do with having the right cues," Davey says "because sometimes the band might need to improvise."

An enclosed 'street' extends the full length of the building and replaces a laneway between Block C and Block D of the former school. Behind the refurbished brick walls and windows of Block C is an archive room, large workshop and prop storage adjacent to the loading bay. The opposite wall features marine ply boxes with coloured Perspex panels and a black painted steel open stairwell that leads to the Green Room and kitchen, which overlooks the street. Here, staff and performers delight in a wall of newspaper clippings and other memorabilia.

Environmentally sustainable design criteria resulted in the installation of movement-sensitive lighting, narrow slot

windows which sit above the sawtooth ceiling in the street and a passive cooling system with vents that open up at night to allow warm air to escape. The programmable timer can be overridden if needed and heating is through radiant panels. Considered design also sees the main toilet block shared with Circus Oz staff, performers and the public who will eventually come to see shows in the Melba Spiegeltent when it is relocated from Docklands to the adjacent onsite carpark. "Circus Oz is a very communal company and this suited their philosophy," Treweeke says of the building that already feels like home.

» **Circus Oz**
50 Perry Street Collingwood
circusoz.com