



# Expert fosters fresh look at architecture

Kathleen Noonan

ITALIAN architect Carlo Ratti hops off his Vespa and, helmet in hand, wanders in to BlackStar, West End's coffee roastery, ordering English Breakfast tea.

Expect the unexpected with Professor Ratti, Queensland's first Innovator in Residence. He is not all he seems.

He is an architect known around the world for a building made of rapid-fire jets of water. He is a civil engineer fascinated with sociology – and a modern-day cartographer who maps not hills and valleys but the pulse of the city through mobile phones and internet use.

There is a small group of designers and architects around the world exploring new urban forms and changing how we plan cities. Ratti is one of them.

The Turin-born son of an engineer is a slim man but, in the scope of his ideas and creativity, he seems somehow larger. He likes to ask as many questions as he answers. In the first 15 minutes of this interview he asks about Queensland,

sugarcane, cattle, mining and dingoes, before we turn to why he's in town. He splits his time between his design practice in Turin and leading a creative team at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's SENSEable City lab.

In Brisbane, he has set up his latest project – a Living Laboratory at the State Library of Queensland – that the public can observe. It's a kind of "Big Brother" experiment, but with brains.

It brings together 15 of his team and southeast Queensland researchers, academics and other experts, working on their own projects but brainstorming in a shared space. It explores the value of physical proximity for creative thinking.

"Today – with Skype and teleconferencing and texting and email – we can easily work apart from each other. But do we miss out on anything? I think we miss that random encounter that could lead anywhere, that moment of serendipity. This question is especially relevant for Australia

and Queensland with (their) big distances," he said.

"The traditional work of the architect is changing as cities become a layer of soft technology infrastructure laid down on the hard infrastructure of the city. How people work and play should dictate how a city is planned. And that is changing.

"My architecture and design are not about bricks and buildings but about people.

"It's about moving towards a new architect."

A sliver of the Carlo Ratti touch will remain in Brisbane

## 'How people work and play should dictate how a city is planned'

Carlo Ratti

when he leaves at the end of the month in a sketch design for the top of a building near the State Library.

The interior is being renovated as a digital cultural centre and, above, he wants to create an open-air work environment that's conducive to work.

"It should have a nice canopy, good lighting so people can gather, have a coffee and work on laptops day or night," he said.

Ratti, 38, who has visited Brisbane several times, declines an invitation to appraise its good and bad development.

"I like the climate and the city's relationship to the river," he said.

"There are some very good local architects who are using the ingredients of traditional Queensland design of verandahs and spaces allowing ventilation without air-conditioners, in modern design.

"Big glass towers aren't really what you should build.

"What Brisbane could do better is look at growing its cycling culture.

"I'm surprised there aren't more cyclists."



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**FIT FOR PURPOSE:** Carlo Ratti says architects must change.

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