Sustainable architecture in Australia is often conflated with a lyrical bush tradition that attempts to mimic natural processes in building design. This approach does render some sublime moments, but, in the process, largely turns its back on the city and its historical corollary, technology. For much of the world it has come to embody what architecture in Australia does well. The architect Paul Morgan, however, assumes a radically different position. Conscious of resisting the romanticism of this pastoral tradition, Morgan prefers to explore more analytic territory, embracing technology to explore a new dialogue with nature. It is in this spirit that the architect’s recent projects demonstrate a critical approach to site, technology, language, and culture. Together they are evidence of an uncanny capacity to appear at once alien and autonomous, yet adapted to a place and time.

Cape Schanck House is his most richly layered completed work to date. Other projects currently under construction promise to build on the strengths of this project, but this compact weekender, an hour’s drive south of Melbourne, is pivotal. It is a house that has been designed and engineered using local wind analysis to optimize the building’s form and orientation, and collects rainwater within a sensuously bulbous water tank for passive climate control. It is a finely tuned environmental home, owing nothing to the rhetorical expression of “sustainability” and rather a lot to the aesthetics of a 1960s science fiction movie. This investigative design process also owes a debt to the fertile vision of Buckminster Fuller and the plastic futurism of John Lautner. Whereas this weekender type is often associated with the routine formulas of indoor-outdoor planning (the beach as extended living room), Cape Schanck House quotes Fuller’s architecture as-life-support: sheltering and protecting here, opening in a controlled fashion there.

An even more autonomous object exists in the form of the sound studios for the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology’s (RMIT) Spatial Information Architecture Laboratory. Given the task of designing a highly specialized acoustic environment, Morgan was asked to create a solution for a research zone of perfect dead silence, while harnessing the cinematic language of science and technology to create a compressed synthesis of cultural meaning. This and other examples of his recent machine aesthetic allow for fresh synthesis, responsive to native conditions yet plugged into an aesthetic as universal as the one that was once commonly imagined for the future. // Andrew Mackenzie
Building Barn, Box Hill, Victoria, Australia, 2005–6. The simple steel-framed structure, built within a limited budget, houses a vocational education program for carpentry and plumbing apprentices. The design of the building envelope responds to wind effect, solar movement, site topography, and climate.
Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) Spatial Information Architecture Laboratory Sound Studies, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, 2003–4. Inspired by Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film, 2001: A Space Odyssey, this sound research laboratory for the RMIT's School of Architecture and Design includes a one-of-a-kind soundproof studio pod, made from a floating concrete "seismic" slab and a double-skinned skin.
Victoria University Lecture Theatre, Hoppers Crossing, Victoria, Australia, 1997-2000. This 220-seat lecture theatre, designed in collaboration with Michael McKenna, is placed within a university campus located just outside Melbourne. Set in the flat and windswept western plains, the theatre is a "flying wing" that recalls Konstantin Melnikov's seminal Rusakov Workers' Club in Moscow, from 1927. The theatre's envelope was generated three-dimensionally, folded, and then sheathed in banded, linear zinc panels.