

Beam me up, UC

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Helsinki's colourful Futuro *Photo: John Greenwood*

I've never set foot in a spaceship before (who has?!), so it's with a sense of trepidation that I approach the metallic, domed structure that recently "landed" at the University of Canberra campus. As I get closer, the full moon reflects off the dome's outer shell with dazzling effect, while a band of black and yellow "Do not enter" tape flaps waywardly in the breeze. But for the tan bark garden bed and surrounding gum trees, you'd be excused for thinking it was a scene from some B-grade sci-fi set in Nevada's UFO hot spot, Area 51.

Eventually I conjure up enough courage to duck under a cracked window, complete with burn marks (perhaps from a crash landing?), scurry up through the airline-hatch-like entrance and into its inner sanctum.

It's like entering another world – literally. Inside it feels much bigger than it looks on the outside – similar to Doctor Who's time travelling machine, the Tardis. The ceiling is painted with a mural of rockets, planets and other celestial objects and the curved walls are punctuated by oval-shaped windows at precise intervals. As I creep over to one to peer outside, a tapping sound startles me. It comes from behind.

In need of some TLC – University of Canberra's Futuro *Photo: Tim the Yowie Man*

I turn around, half expecting to come face-to-face with a probe-wielding ET or at least a student prankster in alien mask. Thankfully it's neither, rather it's John Greenwood, senior lecturer at the Faculty of Arts and Design at University of Canberra, with whom I'd arranged to meet. I just wasn't expecting him to creep up on me like that.

"Well, what do you think?" John says. "It's in need of a little TLC, but we're so lucky to have it here in Canberra."

While many simply refer to it as the "UC spaceship", its formal name is a futuro. And John, clad in a T-shirt sporting an image of one and carrying a photo of a renovated futuro he recently visited in Helsinki, is clearly a fan.

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John begins to rattle off the dimensions and design features of the prefabricated buildings which were the brainchild of Finnish architect Matti Suuronen in the late 1960s. "All futuros are four-metres high by eight metres in diameter and are composed of polyester plastic and fibreglass," he says.

"Believe it or not they were initially designed as a ski cabin that would be quick to heat and easy to construct in rough terrain as they can readily be transported to remote locations by helicopter in one piece or dismantled into 16 pieces."

But with the heightened interest in space travel in the late '60s, "many people bought them as homes, and they've also been used as everything from unique cafes to brothels," explains John. Mmm, I bet they used the marketing line – "for an experience out of this world!"

Due to the onset of the oil crisis in the 1970s and rising material costs, only 96 futuros were ever manufactured and "this is one of the best known survivors in Australia," John explains. "It's one of only about three in the public domain in the world."

The futuro's surprisingly spacious interior isn't the only similarity with the Tardis. Just as the Time Lord has been reincarnated a number of times (I've lost count – is it nine?), so too has Canberra's futuro and although there's no evidence of it ever being used as a brothel (yet!), UC student Erika Ceeney has put together a potted history since it first landed in Canberra 40 years ago.

Erika's research reveals that the futuro (initially baby poo yellow in colour) was delivered to Canberra in 1972 (probably from a manufacturer in New Zealand) where it was displayed at the Building Materials Exhibition Centre in Maryborough Street, Fyshwick. Apparently it had a very modern fit-out with a bedroom, curved kitchenette, curved seating and a small bathroom. "The purpose was probably to test its viability in the Australian market," Ceeney speculates. "Presumably due to a lack of interest, even though a licence to produce futuros was purchased by an Australian company, none were ever produced in Australia."

According to Erika's speculative trail, it then flew off to a private farm in Sutton before touching down at the Macquarie Slide Swimming Centre (by which stage it had apparently been painted red). But just like Doctor Who regularly encounters missing time,

An 'alien' outside the University of Canberra's Futuro
Photo: Anonymous



so too, it seems, does Canberra's futuro. "No one seems to know for certain where it was between 1991 and 1997 when it landed at the Canberra Space Dome (Planetarium) and Observatory in Dickson. "There are reports it was parked at a southside shopping centre for a year or two, but I'm yet to receive any photographic evidence," Erika says.

What is known for certain is that it featured at the Planetarium as an audio visual centre (painted silver by now) until the centre closed in 2008. A fire in 2010 destroyed much of the Planetarium, but the futuro escaped with minor burn damage and was later donated to the University of Canberra where a committee is yet to decide its fate.



John Greenwood inside the University of Canberra's Futuro Photo: Tim the Yowie Man

"I'd like to see it restored and the inside of it used as a space that students from UC could use creatively," Erika says. "Hopefully the uni will source some funding to get something like that happening."

I don't know about you, but I reckon it would turn a few heads if the futuro mysteriously appeared one night in the middle of Lake George. Look at the attention a herd of zebra sculptures on the lake bed created a few years back. Imagine what a brightly coloured, glowing spaceship would do.

FACT FILE

UC Futuro: Located on campus at University of Canberra near Zierholz Brewery.

Can you help? Have you got any old photos of the Canberra futuro – especially pre-1997? Perhaps you've got memories of it at the Macquarie Slide and Swimming Centre (did it have water flowing through it?), or elsewhere in Canberra? Please let me know.

Did you know? In the early 1970s, a futuro took pride of place in Darwin – that was until Cyclone Tracy "launched" it into oblivion in 1974.

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