

LEARNING SPACES FIT FOR A SAINT

DEVELOPING OUR CITY \ An inner-city school invests in stylish 21st-century learning, writes LIZ McLACHLAN

St Aloysius College in North Melbourne, one of Melbourne's oldest girls' schools, recently opened a new year-seven centre to provide a 21st-century learning space for students.

Principal Mary Farah says it is important for the school to continue to develop its learning environment to support the forward-thinking vision the school has had since its foundation in 1887 by the Sisters of Mercy: to educate young women to go out into the world as confident initiators of change and improvement.

"Three things were important in developing our new centre – that the space was designed to help our students become better learners, that it would suit modern teaching practices which incorporate a lot of collaborative learning and that it would include the technology required to support contemporary teaching and learning," says Farah.

The college's Curran Street campus is conveniently close to the city and the trams, trains and buses its 500-plus students use as transport from locations as spread out as Williamstown, Richmond and Essendon.

However, like its historic suburb, the school is a living record of Melbourne's progress and includes a range of 19th- and 20th-century buildings.

The recently completed year-seven centre was developed within one of the school's existing buildings from a period of expansion in the 1960s.

Architects Clarke Hopkins Clarke worked hand-in-hand with builders JBM Commercial to meet the school's \$400,000 budget and tight schedule.

Project architect Ezio Costa from Clarke Hopkins Clarke says the school now has an attractive and contemporary light-filled centre, with a series of flexible learning and study spaces to support the latest teaching and learning practices.

"We were working with an existing 1960s building and the space was dull and uninspiring, lacked natural light and contained finishes from another era," he says.

"The ceilings were very high, so heating and cooling were challenging and expensive and the acoustics were poor.

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A vision for the future: (main) the recently completed year-seven centre by Clarke Hopkins Clarke architects; (above left) St Aloysius principal Mary Farah with pupils; (below left) a learning and study space. (SUPPLIED)



“All of these things you would expect from a building designed and built in the 1960s, when there was a very different approach to delivering education.”

The external wall of the main corridor faces north and had full-height steel-framed windows. Without any provision for shading the unprotected glazing, the area roasted during Melbourne’s long hot summers.

CHC replaced the window wall with aluminium-framed windows incorporating new solar comfort glazing to great effect.

The area’s exposure to the summer heat has dropped dramatically as a result.

Where once a narrow corridor ran alongside high-windowed classrooms, with a tiny computer lab and workrooms, there’s now a light and open circulation zone with study bays and windows.

This zone flows through three-metre-wide sliding panels into three light and airy teaching/learning spaces designed to support the latest principles with mobile and flexible furniture and large, interactive screens.

There’s an opening wall between the two larger learning spaces so the school can create a large gathering space for the whole of the year level, or to hold combined classes.

The ceiling has been lowered and acoustic and thermal insulation installed to improve acoustic quality and make the space more comfortable, with the added benefit of reduced energy bills.

Whole-wall whiteboards provide another learning canvas within the spaces.

As in many schools, the computer lab has been replaced by personal devices, with students and teachers using iPads supported by the school’s Wi-Fi system.

A neutral palette of whites deepens into tones of grey for the wide sliding panels, carpets and acoustic pinnable fabric wall panels.

CHC introduced vibrant accents of mauve, lime and mandarin in striping through the carpets, accents picked out through the pinboard walls and lockers. The

spaces are fully air-conditioned and lighting has been converted to efficient LED fittings.

“We tried to break down the institutional look and feel by using colour and fittings that are uplifting for the students,” Costa says.

“We have softened the appearance of the circulation space by replacing commercial light fittings with a series of designer pendants and centrally located a feature cluster of three varied shaped pendants.

It makes the space feel special and inviting for the students.”

The new centre is the start of a broader program to update school facilities and Farah says she and her staff are working towards providing each year level with their own area.

They’re hoping to work on development of a new drama room and music and performing arts wing for the school over the next 12 months.

St Aloysius has a strong reputation with outstanding results and a large range of VCE subjects.

Farah says that, with it being a smaller school, the staff get to know all of its students well and provide personalised learning within a caring environment.

The St Aloysius campus includes science laboratories, specialist classrooms for media, drama, photography, textiles, food technology, art and graphics; a library, gym with two basketball courts, cafeteria and student services.

The school also uses an outdoor education and learning campus at Torquay where students from years seven to 10 participate in a sequential program covering personal safety, outdoor and life skills and the natural environment.

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For further details and to register for the evening please contact:
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