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INTERIOR DESIGN REVIEW

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CELEBRATING 20 YEARS OF INTERIOR DESIGN

text - Jan Henderson

REWORKING EDUCATION

DESIGN IN EDUCATION HAS COME A LONG WAY FROM A SINGLE CLASSROOM AND ONE TEACHER IN A SMALL COUNTRY TOWN. THE CHANGES IN EDUCATION DESIGN OVER THE PAST 10 YEARS ARE NOTHING SHORT OF REVOLUTIONARY, SOME MAY ARGUE THAT THE REWORKING OF THE SCHOOL ROOM RIVALS THAT OF THE WORKPLACE AS FAR AS INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY GO. IT'S NOT ONLY ABOUT WHAT OUR CHILDREN LEARN, BUT THE WAY IN WHICH THEY ARE LEARNING THAT HAS CHANGED THE DESIGN OF SCHOOLS ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

Education design features in many practices' portfolios and, through new design, architects and designers are not only refashioning the way schools look, they are also paving the way for a new style of learning. The approach is one of collaboration, inclusiveness and sharing, an embracing of space with a move away from delineating areas such as the single classroom. In most cases, the impetus for change is coming from school councils, teachers and, sometimes, even the students themselves. There is a greater desire to move the design of schools forward, but to tailor the end result to the specific needs of a particular school and its students' requirements.

We are familiar with the open plan and more individual approach to learning in tertiary institutions, but change is most definitely happenings in primary and secondary schools as well. Andrew Croxon, director at Croxon Ramsay, has been involved with many education projects and understands the importance of 'getting the design right'. His work with Westbourne Grammar School has rewritten the way a primary school is designed. "We were designing a building while they were designing a teaching program," says Croxon.

"The classrooms are really built around the notion of hubs as opposed to a series of classrooms," he explains. "This particular school has three hubs in it for prep, one and two and within each hub there are effectively three classrooms, but they are all interlinked around a central studio. The three classrooms don't have doors between them – they're all in one space and the central studio is something they all connect to. So what we have done from the planning point of view is used the architecture to create three home bases for the kids, but it's still the one large space and the central studio becomes the collaborative space, the specialist teaching space, intensive knowledge space... then the three hubs are all connected by the piazza, which is the big multipurpose space in the middle."

There are parallels for these changes in education design in the workplace where open plan areas are a given, with

LEFT AND ABOVE TOP Westbourne Grammar School designed by Croxon Ramsay. Photography by Rhiannon Slatter

ABOVE BOTTOM Caulfield Grammar School, Wheelers Hill campus designed by Hayball. Image Dianna Snape

quiet spaces and breakout areas the norm. Croxon elaborates, "The principal wanted glass walls, so there would be this honest transparency through everything and that's management talk that you hear all the time in relation to offices. They wanted to have that mentoring of teachers, the collaboration, so that students could be flexible in how they worked, where they went to, and these are things you hear discussed in workplace design constantly."

At Caulfield Grammar, Hayball has reworked the traditional ideas of design over the three campuses that foster primary and secondary education. Lisa Horton, associate of interior design at Hayball, says, "With Caulfield, for instance, the staff were basically trying to shift their pedagogy in very traditional spaces… and that was the challenge of the project: to design spaces that would actually enable them to do very different things without the confines of a classroom space. The [campus at Wheelers Hill] building is designed in four main studio areas, but each of those studios is enriched with smaller group activities. [It's] things like large kitchen table type settings, where it's basically set up for democratic discussion, so perhaps a group of 16 students, and there is no head of the table… or small nook-type spaces that are acoustically separate."

There are spaces that offer a more comfortable lounge setting to support reading and relaxing activities, as well as spaces that are more like a boardroom for formal instruction. In some spaces there is less furniture to allow ease of movement as required and others are very highly purposeful with the interiors fixed.

"The links between activity-based working (ABW) and education are really interesting and I've been following this for the last decade or so because it's hard to pinpoint what's leading what a lot of the time," says Horton. "We often see ABW go off in one direction and education appears to follow it, but I think in equal measures education has progressed to some degree and ABW is learning from that at the same time. So it's an interesting dialogue… The critical point with ABW and education design is that it's not a one-size-fits-all approach."

Wayne Stephens, partner at Clarke-HopkinsClarke, designed the Elizabeth Blackburn School of Sciences, which is part of University High School in Melbourne. This secondary college is home to 200 VCE students with a specific interest in science. The school wanted to deliver its curriculum to its students in a completely different way and so the lecture theatres are supported by collaborative spaces, small group discussions spaces and tutorial rooms. "[The design is] almost a sort of a tertiary model that has a more agile space with a variety of different settings," explains Stephens. "So we have a 'super lab' with two teachers and 50 students who can actually work there and it's more of an interdisciplinary lab that is not specific to biology, chemistry or physics. You can actually run the whole curriculum in the one space… They also teach in a lecture format with one teacher to 100 students and being with that teacher for one hour actually counts as four hours of their time. So they have three spare hours to do one-on-one teaching or small collaborative work or just polish their content."

Another innovation designed by Clarke-HopkinsClarke is the indoor and outdoor labs. "If it's a really nice day you can simply change the mode of learning by simply walking out the door," says Stephens. "We have benches that extend from inside to outside and students can be working off the same bench and some can be inside and some can be outside."

Lyons Architecture has been involved with many high profile tertiary institutions and, with the Sylvia Walton building at La Trobe University, there was the opportunity to design a collaborative and connected space for the students. Director James Wilson says, "Educational design at all levels has undergone massive transformation in response to a desire to attract high calibre students and increase research output. There has been recognition of the value of retaining students on campus outside of formal learning activity, as it adds to the 'buzz' of the campus.

The social or informal space within a campus is also where much of the critical thinking and sharing of ideas is formed, which is in turn of immense value to a university and the students who attend. I would say that the link of transformation of workplace culture is similar in the way the commercial sector appreciates the value of collaboration inside and adjacent to the traditional workplace setting, but the 'campus' building is much more like a microcosm of a city, and can be much more complex or rich."

The Sylvia Walton building comprises five levels and includes 41 teaching spaces and key student support facilities. To maximise interaction and connectivity, Lyons designed an interconnecting stair or 'pathway' that joins all the double-height social spaces along the spine of the building, starting at the bottom with the foyer and continuing to the library at the top. This staircase has become a social area with students and academics meeting and mixing throughout the building and promoting an atmosphere of collaboration between those who work within it.

Referencing Westbourne Grammar School, Andrew Croxon sums up present day education design perfectly.

"The new design has been embraced, but it's really critical to get it right because, if the architecture isn't responsive and isn't dealing with the subtleties of boundaries and demarcation, then it probably wouldn't work. If you literally had three classrooms next to each other without any walls, then I don't think you'd have the same success, but if you really work hard to create the subtle demarcations between rooms it gives people the security and sense of individual focus, but also allows for being part of the larger group as well."

There is a greater desire to move the design of schools forward, but to tailor the end result to the specific needs of a particular school and its students' requirements.

OPPOSITE TOP Elizabeth Blackburn School of Sciences, University High School designed by ClarkeHopkinsClarke. Image Dianna Snape

OPPOSITE BOTTOM Sylvia Walton building Latarobe University designed by Lyons Architecture. Image Dianna Snape