Cherrell Hirst Creative Learning Centre

Place Makers: Contemporary Queensland Architects
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Building area: 8000m²
Location: Brisbane Girls Grammar School, Spring Hill
Completed 2007

This project involved both developing a master plan for Brisbane Girls Grammar School (BGGS) – one of Brisbane’s oldest private girls schools – and designing a new six-storey building to accommodate art, music, drama and technology facilities in a single centre, the Cherrell Hirst Creative Learning Centre (CLC). As in the Micro Health Laboratory, the master-planning process played the most significant role in determining the form of the final building.

BGGS, established in 1875, has occupied its site on Gregory Terrace close to the city centre, since 1884. Surrounding the site is a maze of inner city development, including the major rail artery leading to Roma Street Station, a busway and a six-lane highway. The site has experienced several different stages of growth over its long history and, consequently, the limited space left for new development determined the positioning of the CLC building at the north-west corner of the site.

Retaining visual and circulatory connection to the historical buildings on the Gregory Terrace (opposite) edge of the site was a concern for the architects, as was enabling a sense of connection between the disparate activities that take place within the CLC and the rest of the campus. In fact, the idea of connections – between disciplines within the building itself, the building and the rest of the school, the BGGS and the adjoining Brisbane Grammar School, and the BGGS and the city – became a defining one in the design of the centre.

The eastern wing of the CLC derives its unusual form from the desire to preserve sightlines to and from the school’s historic foundation buildings. This visual connection is literally carved out of the eastern façade, forming a series of ‘K’ shapes when seen in profile. In turn, the resulting void space, which contains the stairwells between all levels, is a busy hub of students moving between classes, holding meetings and relaxing and socialising during breaks. This eastern wing of the building therefore contributes significantly to the social spaces of the school. The western wing, on the other hand, is a layered series of flexible spaces for teaching and learning. The lower floors contain rehearsal and performance spaces. This wing is situated behind the building’s most distinctive feature, the rectangular western façade that creates an optical illusion in the manner of paintings by well-known British artist Bridget Riley. The shimmering moire effect – inspired by the circular motifs and arches that feature in the balustrades and façade of the
existing foundation buildings – was created using anodised aluminium battens set against a backdrop of vertical black and white painted stripes. These relatively low-tech means create what appears to be a very high-tech motile surface which also functions as sunshading and as a means of articulation that is cognisant of both building and context.