Girls help build a vision for the future

The Australian

18 February 2009

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By Diana Jenkins

Something’s happening at Brisbane Girls’ Grammar high school to 1165 young women in Years 8-12, and it’s got nothing to do with environment.

Theiris is daring to be different, demanding a rethink of school architecture and its possibilities for growth and learning. Why, asked Principal Amanda Bell, shouldn’t significant architectural and innovative design be part of a child’s learning experience? Why shouldn’t educational spaces be inspirational?

“We focus on education for teenage girls,” explains Ms Bell, “so when we were looking at putting up such a large structure, because we wanted to have a home for the arts, we also wanted to make it a social hub for the school.

“We’re a confined city site, and we’ve got a lot of girls on the campus, and they’re all teenagers, and when we looked at having a home for the arts—music, art, drama, creative technologies—we looked and looked at improving the social hub of the school.”

The eventual result, the school’s Creative Learning Centre (CLC), won the prestigious National Sir Zelman Cowen Award for Public Architecture, and surprised some who perhaps recall their own school days as drifting without enthusiasm from one unlovely demountable to another, or running between classes in slightly depressing Soviet-style bunkers.

What was this award-winning space doing on secondary school grounds? Wasn’t it audacious to think mere teenagers worthy of such quality design?

“Girls like to feel connected, Ms Bell says. They learn best when they feel connected to each other, so the design of the building was based on the concept that we wanted the girls to feel connected in their movements around the school, and more connected in their learning spaces and their social spaces.

The architects, M3 Architecture, were fantastic listening to us and understanding this.

“So there’s lots of glass, there are lots of voids, there are lots of different directions in the stairwell, so that wherever the girls are, they can look up, look down, and actually see each other and feel connected to each other through the use of the spaces.

“When you make such a large capital investment into a building like that, that will be here for a long, long time, I think you’re obliged to make sure that you put up something spectacular. The longevity and flexibility to morph with the way the fashions will change in the future.”

Build to last and respond to the school’s changing cultural needs, while servicing generations of students, here is another structure continuing the work of the GOMA and Library precinct in transforming Brisbane’s architectural character.

The Queensland capital is fast becoming the most ambient contemporary skyline in Australia. That, too, was part of the plan.
“Part of our brief was because it was such a large building, it had to contribute to the cityscape of Brisbane,” says Ms Bell. “Parents can see the benefit, not only to the girls and their education but also the fact that we’ve thought about how it contributes to the city.”

As well as fast becoming a prime venue for the Brisbane community, the school has already attracted international notice, with both public institutions and architectural firms abroad sending emissaries to watch and, well, learn.

“We hire the space out for people who wish to use it,” confirms Ms Bell, “particularly the music rooms and the main social space level are really very highly sort after.

“We have a big Open Day on Friday, July 31, between 4-8pm, and it’s just open to anyone who wants to come and see the school. We do have people asking to bring in other architects, in particular, other educators, and we’ve had people from overseas universities come to see classes take place in it and how the space is operating.”

With a price tag of $25 million for construction and $2 million fit-out, the Creative Learning Centre is significant in more ways than one.

Indeed, one of the curricular enhancements of the CLC, the school’s Creative Technologies program, offers the girls an opportunity to study architectural principles and spatial solutions.

Starting this kind of thinking at the junior school level may well be sowing the seeds of the next wave of Australian architects with very different memories of the old school yard.