O
f all of Mentone Grammar’s 86 years, the last five have seen some of the most
dramatic change, not the least being
the school’s transition to co-education.
Perhaps the second most visible change has
been to Mentone Grammar’s buildings, which
are progressively being made over.

Much of the campus was built in the 1960s
with, Principal Mal Cater admits, a slight over
emphasis on grey. The school’s new Science and
Environmental Studies Centre is certainly a
departure from there.

The two-storey building is big on light, air
and space with a judicious use of colour. Wide
corridors run past classrooms behind floor to
ceiling glass, making for an attractive, functional
space.

Much of the centre’s success lies in the
inclusive approach that Mr Cater and the
Mentone Grammar Board took towards its
planning.

A lot of potential complication was removed
from the design process by asking teachers and
students what exactly it was they wanted from
the centre.

With very definite parameters in mind, the
architects from Henderson

and Lodge, who specialise in educational
projects, were able to come to a suitable solution
very quickly – design, build and fit out were
completed within 12 months.

All the boxes have been ticked, from high-end
technology, environmentally friendly features
like solar power and a 50,000 litre water tank
that gathers rainwater from the roof, right down
to drawers that are tailor made to fit awkward
scientific equipment.

“Small things like Having power outlets close
at hand have a surprising impact on teaching.

A study tour Mr Cater undertook of UK
schools was important in identifying overseas
trends that were later reinterpreted for the
environmental studies centre.

“Some of the facilities that I visited in the UK
were outstanding, if not a little over the top. But
trends like split classrooms – which are divided
into practical lab work and sit down learning
areas – and the orientation of furnishings to
maximise interaction between students and
teaching staff have been adopted at the new
facility.”

Fronting the centre is a glass-roofed courtyard
with seating. It is a flexible area that doubles up
as a venue for school functions.

The bottom level takes in a learning lounge
that students use for quiet revision during breaks
or as a place to meet informally with teachers.

Just down the hall is a walk-in aquarium.

“The younger students love the aquarium
display, it’s also a good way to get them interested
in ecology and nature,” Mr Cater says.

The consulting process with science teaching
staff has resulted in lab rooms dedicated to a
particular subject, each with a distinct layout.
The physics laboratory has specially designed benches that are ideal for force of motion studies and the room can also be totally blacked out for the study of light. A specially engineered ceiling beam allows for interactive experiments using pulleys, block and tackle.

Large round benches featured in the biology room help with group work and discussions and lend a nice organic feel. A wall length concertina door provides access to an outdoor learning zone.

The chemistry room has four fume cupboards and a vacuum filtration system for senior experiments. There is also access to deionised water and electronic balances.

Adjacent to the outdoor learning zone, the environmental studies room is an open learning space. Large 2 m x 2 m student island work benches are on casters so they can be moved around for group work – they can also be moved to the outside zone.

“We never want the staff or students to feel locked into their learning spaces. The learning should take place in the most appropriate setting and if that means students should be located on the outdoor balcony then this should be allowed. The design of this building should also assist out senior students in the transition to University,” Mr Cater says.

The very latest in teaching technologies, including interactive whiteboards, feature in all the classrooms and the cutting edge digital microscopy equipment in the biology room is the best available in an Australian secondary school setting, allowing advanced senior students to take on university subjects.

“Eventually, we’d like to open the facility to researchers. Having someone conducting university level research at the centre and giving students access to the process would be a great thing for us to be able to offer,” he says.

Sir Gustav Nossal opened the centre at an official ceremony on 17th July and this distinguished Australian Scientist was very impressed with what he saw.

“It was good to see representatives from universities and various education bodies taking very careful note of what we’ve achieved here for future reference. I’ve also received a couple of CVs from science teachers keen to work at Mentone after attending the launch and several new students have been enrolled following our Open Days.

“I’m confident that this is an absolutely world class teaching facility.”