

# Synergy in action

*Coffs Harbour Catholic College renovations allow students to prepare for an unpredictable*



When the principal of Coffs Harbour's John Paul College started planning improvements for his school seven years ago he wanted to give students the quality academic resources they deserved.

The brief was simple – provide for an ever-expanding vocational curriculum, ensure the school serviced the needs of its ever-changing community and meet the budget set by parish and school constraints.

And while the experienced schoolmaster in Ian Walton took care of the first two requirements, the astute businessman in him saw a chance for something more.

Business plans came before building designs and the project took on another dimension – to be functional, aesthetically inspirational and income generating.

"I knew the reality was the more revenue the

school could generate, the less parents would have to pay for," said Ian, who has teenage children of his own.

"The major focus at John Paul College has always been that we are a Catholic school, but there must also be a business focus – the school needs to be run like a business."

Built in 1983, the school had well outgrown its original population of 750 students and was in desperate need of a performance space, updated art rooms and facilities for some of the more recently introduced vocational streams, including hospitality, IT and business studies.

But as planning commenced, Ian's business mind kicked into gear and the multifaceted possibilities of the project began unfolding.

The result is a string of new buildings, beginning with an architecturally designed theatre complex with tiered seating for 210, state-of-the-

art lighting and Bose sound, video conferencing, cinema and data projection facilities plus a baby grand piano to keep the music students happy. A perfect balance of live and dead space keeps the thespians smiling, too, and with a vocationally weighted entertainment studies course coming soon to the college, it's a facility that will pay for itself in opportunities for students for many years to come.

But here's the clincher – the City of Coffs Harbour has been screaming out for a modern, intimate venue for years where guitarists, world musicians and chamber groups could perform on their way up and down the east coast.

"This is a stand-alone venue with its own amenities that is a huge asset for wider community to use," said Ian, who is quick to add that the Sydney Symphony Orchestra is booked to play at the theatre.

"The spin-off for the school is that while these groups may hire our theatre for public performances, we always work it so the students also gain access to the musicians while they are in town."

So it is synergy in action.

From a design standpoint, the theatre is magnificent. Avocado walls, a pitched roof line and impressive glass entrance foyer are far removed from the dark brick Catholic school corridors of years gone by. And it's a design that brought tears to the architect's eye when the first performance was held.

"Year 12 put on a performance of their HSC pieces and we invited the designer along and there was a moment when all the work we had done on paper came together and we were sitting there seeing it all unfold – he actually got quite emotional," Ian said.

No less impressive is the school's quirky new art centre where function and practicality reign supreme. Soaring glass to the angular roof line make it as much a design masterpiece as the works its six art rooms produce.

An open exhibition space runs through the heart of the building illuminated by southern skylights, giving students a sense of belonging and a purpose for inspiration.

Innovation is apparent throughout the centre. Pin boards line three walls of each art room, colourful cabinetry was purpose built by a local kitchen manufacturer and a seniors' only room provides a safe haven where HSC candidates can leave works in progress, without fear of intrusion by younger students.

Sliding stacker doors lead to the wet/dry outdoor art area where the messy pursuits of paper mache or environmental art can be easily



forgiven and staff and storage areas ensure a place for everything and everything in its place.

Some of the school's plans are yet to be realised and an outdoor classroom and expanded staff room are next on the list. Other facilities, like improved storage and change rooms for the textiles classes came when the art department moved to its new home.

But by far the greatest asset to John Paul College, given the growing popularity of hospitality courses among students, is the shiny new commercial kitchen and function centre which, like the theatre, is a stand-alone facility that can be hired out to generate further income.

"We built the hospitality centre adjacent to the school hall so we could cater for up to 500 people if we needed to, with the food coming out of the back of the kitchen on trolleys and into the hall up a ramp," Ian said. "There is also a function centre to seat 100 people that can be used for conferences or smaller functions like dinner parties or training groups."

And while ovens worth in excess of \$20,000 and space to train 18 students to apprentice level may sound impressive, it's the minor details, like sectioned lockable storage for the student's knives that gives Ian the greatest sense of achievement.

"So much thought went into the design of this area," he said, citing many fact-finding tours of TAFE campuses, private and public schools and consultations with trainers and commercial chefs as the basis for its success. "We went and looked at many other benchmark schools and we were

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able to learn from their mistakes."

The fridges, for example, are double sided so that the whole area can be closed off. There is no need for delivery staff to enter the main kitchen.

Students from Year 9–12 prepare food in the eight stainless steel workstations and external caterers are called in when a function requires food to be prepared.

"Once again there's a spin-off for the students who can be called in and given paid work while gaining valuable real-life experience," Ian said.

"As a regional Catholic high school it is our responsibility to prepare students who want to be doctors, radiographers, solicitors and the like for their tertiary studies but we are also striving to cater to the needs of the vocational education students and also students who do both – a few vocational subjects while they're at school so they can work while they go through uni."

The kitchen's original alter ego was to provide meals for the area's Catholic Aged Care service using a cook/chill system. But when Catholic Aged Care changed its direction, Ian and his executive team were forced to rethink and the idea for a functions centre was born.

"I think the days are long gone where we can

say 'we are a school, these are our facilities'... There have been many spin-offs for our students and more are discovered all the time once you open your mind to the possibilities," Ian said.

"We needed these facilities to run our courses but we have set it up so that over a period of time the facilities will pay for themselves."

Ian thanks a patient and understanding parish priest and an "incredibly supportive" business manager for spending hour after hour crunching figures that allowed the improvements to take place. At one point, it looked like the plans would remain on paper.

"We brought in a quantity surveyor who came up with a horrendous figure," Ian recalls. "It looked as though we couldn't go ahead."

But then, as if by divine intervention, the local building sector saw a minor slump and construction came in at a price the school could afford.

Ian swells with pride as he says "we are so happy with the buildings, they are not just what we wanted, they are better than we could have ever imagined."

And while financial viability was always a concern for the man who hires out the school's car park to motorbike training workshops most weekends, it was providing for the needs of students now and in the future that motivated Ian the most.

"They deserve to have facilities like these," he says. "Whatever path they choose is tough out there but a solid education is the foundation for everything. Our young people deserve the very best we can give them."