

Mentone Grammar's new Science and Environmental Studies Centre

A Melbourne bayside institution puts on a new face

Of 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



Simon Appel Chairman, Mal Cater Principal and Sir Gustav Nossal

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.

It means that rather than having to constantly mess about with wires, teachers can devote their energy and class time to learning," he says.

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

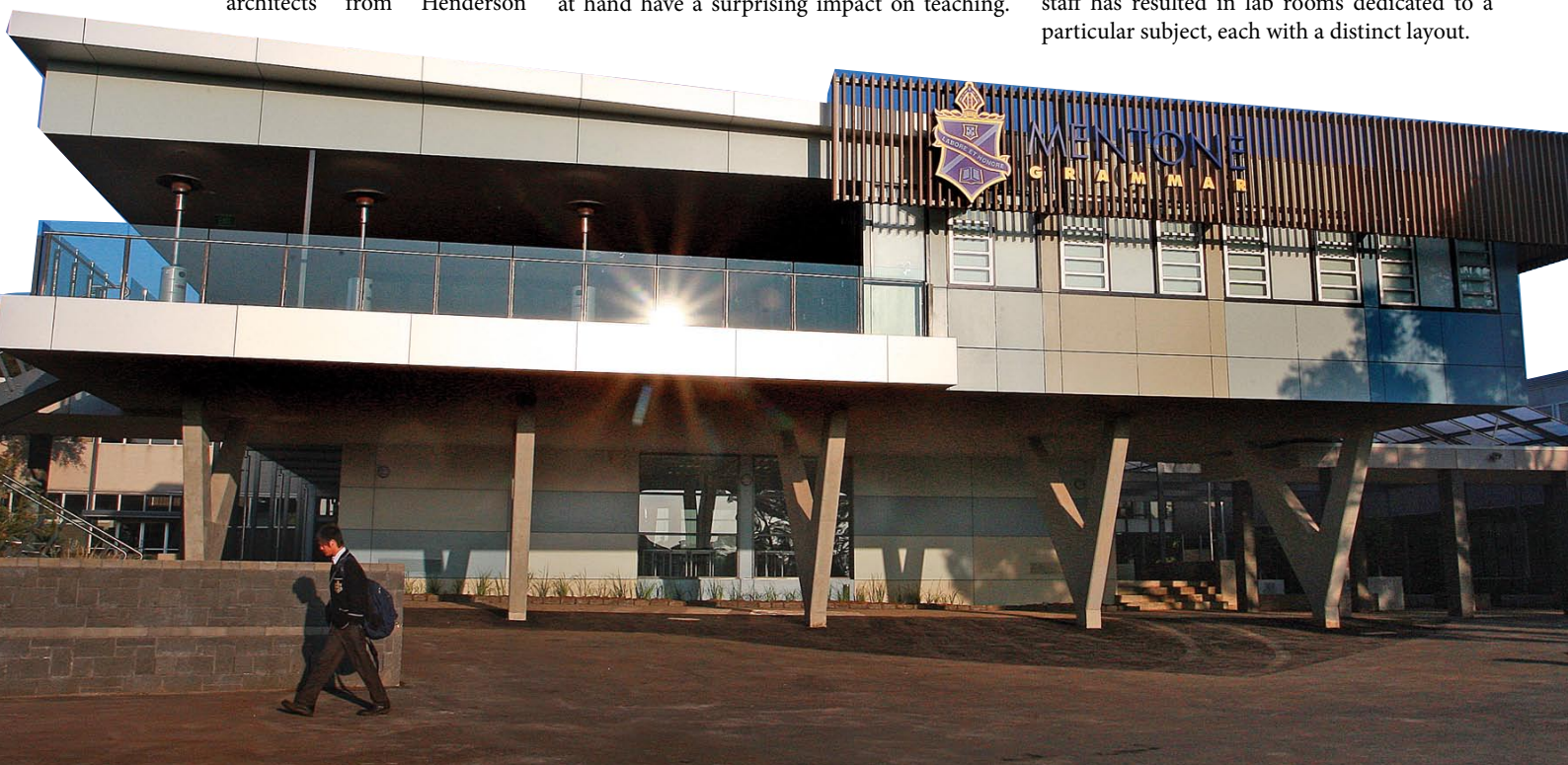
"Some of the facilities that I visited in the UK were outstanding, if not a little over the top. But trends like split classrooms – which are divided into practical lab work and sit down learning areas – and the orientation of furnishings to maximise interaction between students and teaching staff have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

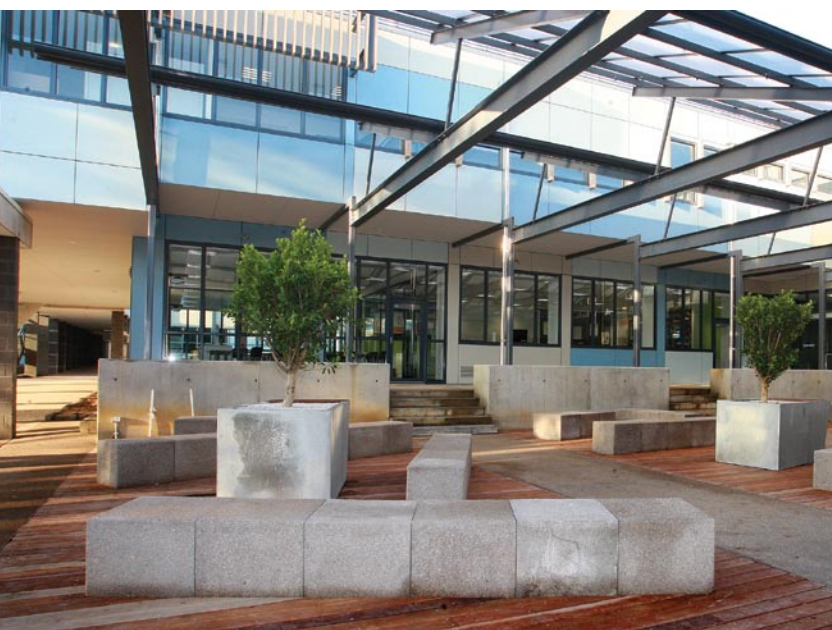
Fronting the centre is a glass-roofed courtyard with seating. It is a flexible area that doubles up as a venue for school functions.

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.





Clockwise: Kyle and Sir Gustav Nossal; learning lounges enhance opportunity for pastoral care; students have taken to the new spaces; the Denyer Courtyard

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.”