

When Jeff Kennett's conservative coalition defeated Joan Kerner's Labor government in 1992, an early priority was to rationalise Victorian schools. Despite widespread opposition from parents and local communities, during the following three years 350 schools were closed.

One of the first schools nominated for closure was Fitzroy High School in inner suburban Fitzroy North. Though parents and supporters maintained a 24-hour vigil, slept in the library and defended their turf, the school closed its doors for the last time at the end of the school year in 1992.

Leaving aside the rights or wrongs of closing schools, the fact was that Fitzroy North was a suburb in change and the school's enrolment had declined to the point where it wasn't really viable.

Along with nearby Collingwood, Carlton, Northcote and Clifton Hill, North Fitzroy had long been a migrant suburb. New arrivals had big families and the kids went to Fitzroy High. Over time, the parents aged and their children became adults and moved out of the area.

Fortunately for future generations, a deal with the local community saw the Kangan Batman TAFE occupy the site in 1993, thus saving it from the real estate developers, and it functioned as a trades training facility until 1998.

Meanwhile, attracted by relatively cheap real estate and proximity to Melbourne's CBD, young marrieds bought into Fitzroy North and in turn started their families. By 2001, once again there were enough children approaching high school age in the community to warrant another look at Fitzroy High, which, except for occasional use as a film set, had been empty since the TAFE closed.

That year, Mary Delahunty, then Education Minister, approved Fitzroy High to re-open and, after the original 1915 red brick building and the newer 1960s wing were refurbished, the first student intake was in January 2004 when 135 Year 7 and 8 students enrolled.

Pauline Rice, the school's current principal, worked at the Department of Education while the reopening was being planned and worked with community representatives to incorporate much of the existing educational research that underpins the school's inquiry learning philosophy.

She was actively involved in the refurbishment, which "opened up a rabbit warren of little rooms in the existing buildings and, wherever we could, positioned teachers' rooms to enable direct line of sight into the classrooms.

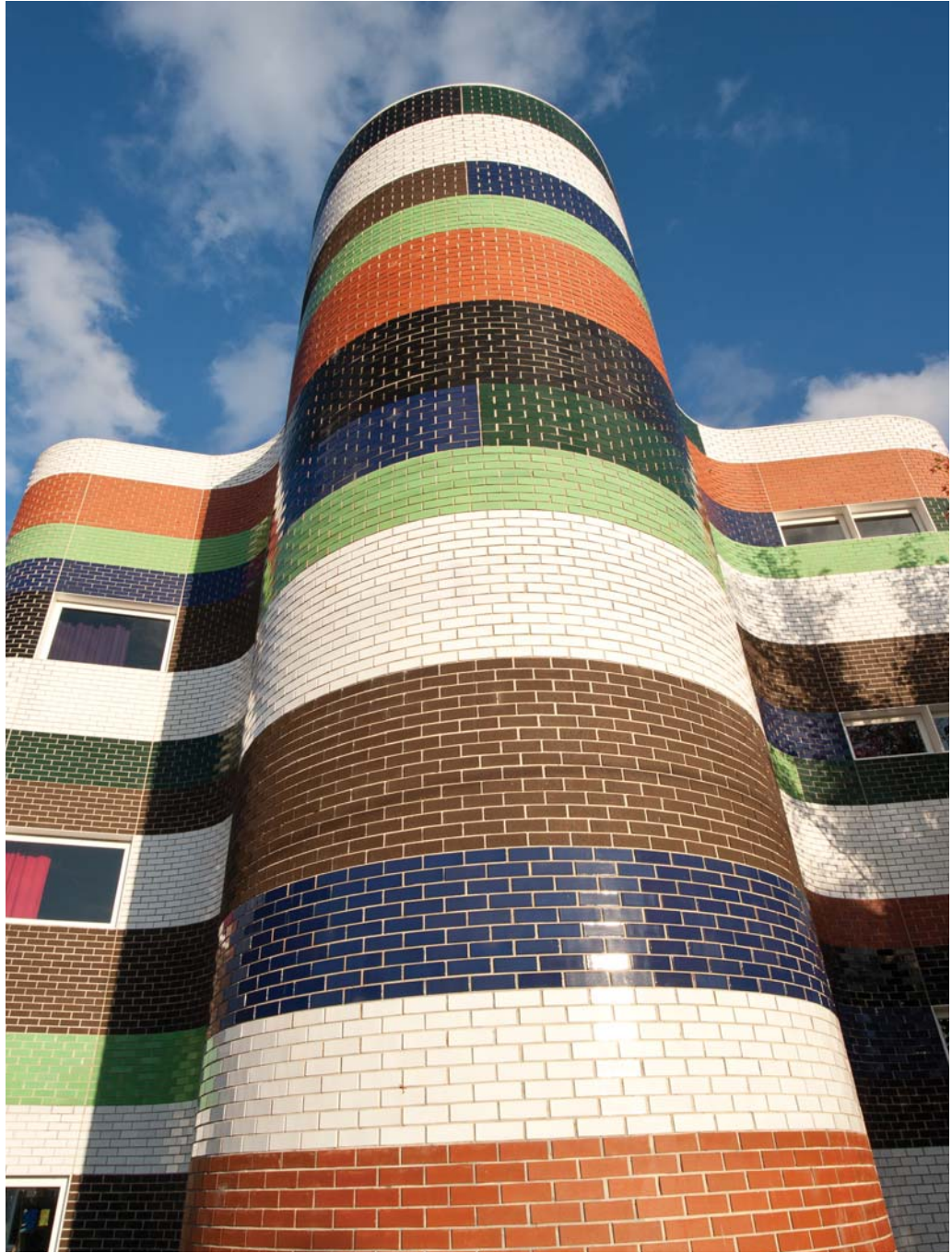
"The objective was to create a 'home space' for each age group... where the children could feel a sense of ownership, of belonging," she said.

Transferring to a teaching position at the school, Rice was a member of the team that welcomed the first student intake. She was appointed acting principal in 2009 and confirmed as principal last year.

Though the school, in line with education department policy, can't hire and fire teaching

Inner city high

Education Today visits an award winning inner suburb school





staff, Rice says that Fitzroy High is “seen as a desirable place to teach. We get many applications, teachers wait for a position to open up.”

The student body numbers 454 this term and Rice feels “550 would be comfortable”, though the theoretical total is 600.

The school’s inquiry learning approach doesn’t suit every child, she admits. But for children who don’t thrive in more conventional schools and aren’t happy wearing a uniform, Fitzroy High “feels right.”

A team structure underpins the educational model. Each student is allocated to a team and stays in the same team for Years 7 and 8. They join other teams in Years 9 through 12 as their interests and strengths develop.

The teams are divided into advisory groups consisting of an advisory teacher and a small group of students. The Years 7 through 10 groups meet for 30 minutes at the start of the day and three times a week in Years 11 and 12. It is the advisory teacher’s responsibility to make sure that each student is working towards goals identified in their personal learning plan. In place of 45-minute classes, the school day at Fitzroy High is divided into three 90-minute blocks.

The key words are Inquiry, Toolbox and Excel. The school takes an inquiry approach to the curriculum, with Years 7 and 8 learning based around Community and Identity. For Year 9, the topics are Urbanisation and Globalisation. Toolbox focuses on baseline skills in English maths, science and Italian. Excel allows students to explore and develop their interests from the wide choice of offerings that respond to their personal goals.

The school doesn’t rely solely on published textbooks, developing instead tailor made student workbooks. If this sounds a bit loose, Rice points to the school’s exam performance as evidence that its academic approach is effective. Last year better than 90 per cent of Year 12 students achieved their first preference tertiary course. Melbourne, RMIT and LaTrobe are popular choices.

By 2008, the school was filling fast and the Department of Education gave the go ahead for a



Old and new merge in the upgraded school

new building, with a budget nudging \$3 million. Following a selection process that Rice describes as “rigorous”, McBride Charles Ryan Architects was appointed, with the practise’s track record in the education sector and willingness to consult closely with the school – down to student level – tipping the decision in its favour.

The school’s small land area and need to limit height to the three levels of the earlier buildings led, following a consultation process

that included student tours to see other schools and detailed discussions with both teaching staff and parents, eventually to the final concept.

“We looked at all sorts of shapes and forms,” Rice said. “We wanted the smallest possible footprint and the three levels needed to line up with those of the existing buildings.”

“A building that would be economical to run... cool in summer and warm in winter was important.”



Pauline Rice



Colour is everywhere in the refurbished play areas and classrooms

Architects described the final concept as “a three level building with a undulating perimeter constructed from double brick with a deep cavity, allowing the building to perform structurally. The exposure of the inner skin of brickwork, and the underside of the slabs, maximises the building’s latent thermal stability, considerably reducing the need for additional climate control. The four metre floor-to-floor height required to meet the existing building at each level also increases the quality of daylight deep into the proposed plan.”

In layman’s language this means that the classrooms have interesting curved exterior walls and ceilings heights that are not often seen in school buildings. Internal movable partitions provide flexibility while tracked curtains can be used to delineate smaller spaces.

Homes surrounding the school are for the

most part single level classic Federation red brick structures, with some elegantly restored Victorian Lace terraces and large houses nearby.

The safe choice would have been red brick to blend with the built environment but the architects took entirely another direction. Specifying bands of glazed bricks in white, burnt orange, green, dark brown, blue and black, penetrated by horizontal window openings, they have created a building that is “an exuberant expression of the aspirations of the school and its community.”

Does it blend into the streetscape? That would have to be a ‘no’ but what it does achieve is a strong visual statement that positions the school at the heart of a vibrant close-to-the-city suburb.

Emphasising the school’s involvement with the community, there is no significant perimeter fencing or gates to keep the neighbours out. And that’s the way Pauline

Rice likes it. “Fitzroy High is the community’s school, we want it to be accessible... though perhaps the skateboarders could find somewhere else to practice their moves instead of on the edge of the timber seating in the outdoor performance area.”

A \$200,000 windfall from the BER funds has been used to landscape the grounds; yellow hued gravel has replaced asphalt; there are shaded seating areas; a set of outdoor exercise bars; and extensive native plantings.

Last year the new building won the commercial category of the Horbury Hunt Award which recognises architectural innovation and brickwork and is named in honour of renowned Australian architect John Horbury Hunt. The awards are staged by Think Brick Australia, the representative body of the country’s brick and paving manufacturers.

EXCLUSIVE
TEACHER OFFER

Make your hours count



Save 78% with a home delivered teachers' subscription

Your time is precious. Plan your lessons and plan your weekend with *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Take advantage of award winning journalism and special features such as Opinion, Business Day, Money, News Review, Spectrum, Good Weekend, Travel, and more.

It's time to invest in a Teachers' subscription to the *Herald* for only \$135 home delivered.

SUBSCRIBE NOW

Visit heraldeducation.com.au/teachers or call 1800 628 011

HeraldEducation

The Sydney Morning Herald | *The Sun-Herald*

Terms and conditions: Only available to current full-time and part-time teachers registered in NSW and ACT where normal Herald home delivery exists and is limited to one subscription per teacher. A deduction will be made upfront for a minimum delivery period of 52 weeks. Cancellation fees may apply for subscriptions paid upfront and terminated prior to expiry. Price is inclusive of GST. Delivery to addresses in security apartments or office buildings is subject to delivery capability. To check if delivery exists please call 13 66 66. Subscriptions are for individual use only and cannot be on sold. This offer is separate from any other subscription offer for *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Sun-Herald*. Offer expires 31/12/2011. Fairfax Media Publications ABN 33 003 357 720