2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

OVERALL WINNER 2026

Young High School, Hilltops Young High School Library
Campbell St, Young
New South Wales, Australia

Architect: Hayball

Summary Citation

Hilltops Young High School Library brings boundary stretching meaning to the notion of "Library." This joint-use school and community facility reaches beyond books and quiet study for young people and encompasses a wide gamut of specialist spaces, engagement with an impressive range of learning modes, shared with the wider community, and cultural inclusiveness settled into a building that demonstrates design excellence, sustainability, and lovely, enlivening surroundings.

Full Citation

Hilltops Young High School Library brings boundary stretching meaning to the notion of "Library." This is a facility that reaches beyond books and quiet study for young people and encompasses a wide gamut of specialist spaces, engagement with an impressive range of learning modes, shared with the wider community, and cultural inclusiveness settled into a building that demonstrates design excellence, sustainability, and lovely, enlivening surroundings.

The project is a unique partnership between school and local council creating a joint-use facility combining public and school libraries with specialist teaching spaces serving both school and the wider community. The facility is designed to leverage the benefits of a co-location while providing meaningful, safe, and practical access for school students and community members. The design provides valuable, available access to spaces and functionalities that could not be provided if separate facilities had been planned for school and community.

Through wide and active consultation, the library design has included specialist spaces tailored to the particular learning process of the subject so students can engage in study and creative work in an environment that inspires their learning. Subjects such as multi-media production, art and design and computing, for example, are supported. A presentation space, different sized meeting rooms, exhibition and gallery spaces, studios, study and reading spaces, STEAM areas, storage spaces, project rooms, and many more are available to the school and community. These spaces facilitate and support many learning modes across the spectrum of directed to self-directed, team and individual.

Acknowledging the rich history of the building's High School precinct site, the design incorporates cultural narratives from the Wiradjuri Country paired with cues from the site's colonial history in respectful and inclusive presentation.
The building operates over three well resolved levels with light infused connectors taking users to their activity and space of choice. ESD initiatives include solar power, rainwater treatment, low VOC specification, and mixed-mode ventilation.

Commitment to continuous improvement and enhancement of functionality is reflected in the implementation of a Post Occupancy Evaluation that has highlighted next steps in the development of the library.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

CATEGORY WINNER: AN INNOVATIVE EDUCATION INITIATIVE (Category 1)

Designed to showcase significant contributions to learning environments by schools, educators, students, designers, community organisations etc.

Woodleigh School, Woodleigh Regenerative Futures Studio
485 Golf Links Rd, Langwarrin South
Victoria, Australia

Architects: McIldowie Partners

Summary Citation

The Regenerative Futures Studio at Woodleigh School is a carbon-sequestering, solar powered living eco-system that filters pollution, fosters animal life and generates almost zero waste.

Set on a sloping site on the outskirts of the senior campus, the Futures Studio, designed in collaboration with Joost Bakker, provides a dynamic project-based learning environment for students to explore and address real-world problems with a regenerative focus.

This is an exemplar project that has addressed the innovation criteria by demonstrating the transformative role that education facilities can play in the learning process. With ideas and approaches that focus on regenerative design as a key outcome, this project provides a vibrant hub for learning that enhances collaboration between educators, students and community.

Full Citation

Woodleigh's long-standing 'Homestead' ethos begins in Year 5, as students are welcomed to purpose-designed environments that run collaboratively, much like a home. By the time students reach Year 10, it's their turn to take ownership of the Futures Studio and everything that it represents.

The Futures Studio consists of three pavilions linked by courtyards and sheltered outdoor learning areas, framing views to the farm, nature reserve and main school campus. Each pavilion houses a separate function and aspect of the brief.

The largest pavilion accommodates a collection of five learning spaces and two quiet learning pods, offering a range of flexible learning settings for personalisation and student agency.

The learning spaces, fitted with acoustic ceiling panels made from reclaimed fabric, feature large sliding doors, allowing collaborative project-based work to occur alongside subject-based learning. Large sliding hemp whiteboards provide further learning and display opportunities while reframing the interior spaces as a linear gallery for exhibition of student work.

The second pavilion accommodates staff areas and amenities while the third pavilion serves as the ‘homestead’ with a communal kitchen and social space shared between students and staff, building a sense of belonging and community.

The building’s innovative construction system combines a prefabricated steel truss post and beam frame with Durrapanel straw wall and ceiling panels. These are embedded with biochar to filter pollutants from the air. A recycled cork façade spray and a living green roof is provided with a drought-resilient wicking bed. The system is unitised as prefabricated components, which when combined with local procurement, has produced a near-zero construction system.

The building is run entirely on solar power with an Australian-made battery storage system that is completely recyclable, as are all materials used across the project. VOC-free, toxin-free, low-embodied carbon and carbon sequestering are at the forefront of all design and material choices.

The green roof is planted with native species including the yam daisy (murnong) and kangaroo grass (Themeda triandra) providing a protected habitat zone fostering the lifecycles of native butterflies, bees and birds, safe from invasive species like rabbits.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

COMMENDATION: AN INNOVATIVE EDUCATION INITIATIVE (Category 1)

Designed to showcase significant contributions to learning environments by schools, educators, students, designers, community organisations etc.

Newington College, Eungai Creek Campus
Tamban Road, Eungai Creek
New South Wales, Australia

Architect: AJC Architects

Summary Citation

Eungai Creek Campus is designed to support Newington College's Social Service Immersion and Outdoor Education program, providing a residential learning environment for Year 9 students. Informed by extensive consultation and research, the campus integrates safety, wellbeing and supervision into its planning, embedding learning in daily life, community, Country and service.

Full Citation

Eungai Creek Campus is designed around its natural setting to provide a safe, supportive residential environment for 64 students at a time, underpinning Newington College's transformative Year 9 Social Service Immersion and Outdoor Education program. The campus is conceived as a place where living, learning and community are deeply intertwined.

To inform the educational and programmatic brief, an expansive consultation process was undertaken by the Architects with school leadership, educators, pastoral care staff, wellbeing specialists, risk and safeguarding advisors, students, parents and local community stakeholders. This was complemented by research into comparable immersion and residential education models in Australia and internationally, and reviews of academic studies on outdoor learning, adolescent wellbeing and service learning. Together, these inputs shaped a clear vision for how the campus should function educationally, socially and environmentally.

This strategy defined programmatic requirements that embed learning within lived experience. Supervision, operational management, safety and regulatory requirements associated with the camp are integrated into the spatial planning and staffing models, embedding risk and wellbeing considerations into the design.

Site planning follows a landscape-led approach, with buildings oriented to optimise natural light, breezes and sightlines. Pedagogically, the bushland setting positions land, water and environment as learning tools that complement and extend the built spaces, encouraging curiosity, stewardship and connection to Country.

Configured as an educational ecosystem, the camp provides residential accommodation in cabins of eight bunks, supported by communal dining areas, outdoor spaces and shared living environments.

These communal settings also serve as sites for learning, dialogue and community building, enabling both structured sessions and quiet reflection. With the camp as a base, students participate in service activities, cultural exchange and volunteering which benefit the local community and environment, reinforcing the values of reciprocity and social responsibility.

Across the 8-week program, the depth of immersion provided by the Eungai Creek campus enables learning through daily routines and shared experiences, fostering self-reliance, independence and strong interpersonal connections among students, and creating lasting memories that extend well beyond the school year.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

COMMENDATION: AN INNOVATIVE EDUCATION INITIATIVE (Category 1)

Designed to showcase significant contributions to learning environments by schools, educators, students, designers, community organisations etc.

Brighton High School
1 Elderslie Rd, Brighton
Tasmania, Australia

Architect: JAWS Architects in association with K2LD Architects and HBV Architects

Summary Citation

The Brighton High School is a project whose innovation is in the forward-looking educational approach. The design of various spaces, consistently organised in a zoning scheme, was entirely guided by the idea of choosing the most relevant environment for each teaching and learning practice. The project stands out for its integration into the local environment and the cultural heritage overlay.

Full Citation

The Brighton High School project consisted of a 7,600 sqm secondary education new facility, to host 600 students which strongly emphasised pedagogical innovation.

The extensive planning process not only involved stakeholders and upcoming users, but also educational research and community participation. Indigenous culture and heritage, and the connection to nature were at the core of the project from its beginning. This process intended to address a fundamental question: 'How might the physical environment actively enact pedagogy rather than merely contain it ?'. The spaces were intended to work in synergy with pedagogical needs.

This innovative approach relied on a shared pedagogical language that guided the educational specifications, and the spatial configuration. At the centre of the requirements was a choice model, based on a variety of space typologies, consistently organised in an interesting approach to zoning, that also fostered flexibility. Brighton High School offers a set of affordances for multiple learning settings of varying size and configurations that students and teachers can choose and switch between, according to the activities to be conducted. This is an example of teaching and learning practices guiding the design decisions.

There is a deep connection between the pedagogical approach and the nature and cultural aspects. Indigenous design narrative is an active curriculum source, and cultural knowledge is the primary organising logic.

Brighton High School is well integrated into its environment. The design process included locally sourced materials and took into consideration sustainability through features such as northerly orientation for solar access, and ecological stormwater management. The colours used reflect the connection with country, and the buildings appearance makes them grounded with the land and approachable.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

CATEGORY WINNER: NEW CAMPUS WITH NEW EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES (Category 2)

Applies to construction of a new school or educational institution on a new campus.

Newington College, Eungai Creek Campus
Tamban Road, Eungai Creek
New South Wales, Australia

Architect: AJC Architects

Summary Citation

Eungai Creek Campus is a values-led educational environment in which architecture, landscape and curriculum are inseparable. Designed by AJC Architects with First Nations knowledge holders as central partners, the campus embeds Ngambaa meaning, prospect and refuge theory, and the Circle of Security model into a village layout that rejects the conventional classroom as the default educational setting. Material commitments, including compressed straw panels, a carbon positive palette and a kit of parts construction system, demonstrate that regenerative ambition and cost efficiency can coexist. The spatial sequence from arrival through tents, cabins and community service is not incidental; it is the curriculum. The result is a project of rare clarity and conviction, in which every decision serves the adolescent development program it was designed to support.

Full citation

Eungai Creek Campus stands apart from the broader cohort of education projects not simply for its architectural quality, but for the integrity with which its values are expressed at every scale. AJC Architects have delivered a project in which the brief, the design process and the built outcome are in genuine alignment.

The planning process is distinguished by its engagement with First Nations knowledge holders as central partners in both program development and site planning. This is not a project that gestures toward cultural acknowledgement as a footnote; rather, the layering of Ngambaa meaning into the central village layout reflects a deep and sustained collaboration that shapes the spatial logic of the entire campus.

The educational brief is bold and unambiguous. Setting hard targets around material selection, including no concrete, no aluminium, and no ceramic tiles, reflects a commitment to biogenic construction that goes well beyond environmental compliance. The regenerative framework is the standout contribution: carbon positive materials, compressed straw panels and a kit of parts system that delivered eight cabins in four months make a compelling case that environmental ambition and cost efficiency can coexist.

The design has been intelligently considered from the macro to the micro. The spatial sequence from bus drop-off through tents, cabins and community service spaces is not incidental; it is the curriculum. The kitchen, laundry and clothesline are learning environments. The surf break, the

nursing home and the night sky are part of the pedagogical program. This understanding of how environment shapes learning goes well beyond brief compliance and reflects a sophisticated grasp of adolescent development.

Flexibility in this project operates at a fundamentally different level to others in this cohort. The practical decisions are strong: designing for a transition from single sex to co-educational from day one, and using lightweight construction that can be relocated or removed entirely, reflects genuine long-term thinking. Flexibility here emanates from what has not been built. It is the space around the buildings, and the project's reach beyond the site boundaries, that offers the most potentiality.

The buildings themselves are pragmatic and functional, and all the better for it. They refrain quietly, keeping the focus firmly on the educational and pastoral intentions of the program. The vision, ambition and values of the project are clearly stated and genuinely evidenced in the outcomes. Eungai Creek Campus is a meaningful and exemplary contribution to the design of learning environments in Australia.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

COMMENDATION: NEW CAMPUS WITH NEW EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES (Category 2)

Applies to construction of a new school or educational institution on a new campus.

Brighton High School
1 Elderslie Rd, Brighton
Tasmania, Australia

Architect: JAWS Architects in association with K2LD Architects and HBV Architects

Summary Citation

Brighton High School is a project in which the cultural and pedagogical narrative has not been applied to the architecture but has become the architecture. The Jordan River as organising spine, a geomorphological material palette and ceiling heights calibrated to learning mode are not gestures toward an idea; they are the idea built. The planning process is distinguished by unusually specific briefing principles, including trauma informed design, thigmotaxis and gallery entries to make learning visible, drawn from a deeply engaged community consultation that included Grade 6 feeder primary students and First Nations knowledge holders from the outset. Flexibility operates at the organisational level, with the capacity to reconfigure the entire learning community model by year level or subject grouping without any building modification. Brighton High School is a thoughtful, values-driven contribution to secondary school design in Australia.

Full citation

Brighton High School is commended for the integrity and depth with which First Nations cultural narrative has been woven into both the planning process and the architectural outcome. The Jordan River as the organising spine of the campus, the geomorphological material palette drawing from the surrounding landscape, and ceiling heights calibrated to support different learning modes are not decorative gestures. They are the structural logic of the building.

The planning process is a genuine standout. The decision to introduce Thornburg and Bosch's spatial typologies to teachers before any design was presented reflects sophisticated practice, ensuring the brief emerged from educational thinking rather than spatial assumption. The inclusion of Grade 6 feeder primary students in visioning workshops is rarely done and directly relevant for a Year 7 to 12 school. The Jordan River cultural narrative as an organising principle was embedded from the earliest stages rather than applied retrospectively, reflecting genuine First Nations integration.
The brief itself is unusually specific. Trauma informed design principles, thigmotaxis, and gallery entries to make learning visible are not generic requirements. They reflect a community that knew what it needed and a process that listened carefully. From an educational perspective, the trauma informed spatial decisions are particularly significant. Positioning self regulation spaces to maintain visual connection to learning reflects a nuanced understanding of how vulnerable students actually move through a school day.

The spatial sequencing and adjacencies respond directly to the brief, with Thornburg's spatial typologies clearly legible in the design. There is genuine care in the treatment of edges, thresholds and moments throughout. The provision of spatial variety allows learners and teachers alike to find the right space for the task at hand, while the dispersal of meeting rooms available to students as well as staff reflects a sophisticated understanding of how a contemporary secondary school actually operates.

The critical distinction in the approach to flexibility is that it operates at the organisational level rather than simply the spatial one. The ability to reconfigure the entire learning community model by year level or subject grouping, without any building modification, is a genuinely significant capability. The five year cultural fire cycle embedded in the landscape as active curriculum, and the Unfinished Basket acknowledging colonisation, speak to a project with the confidence to embed First Nations knowledge as architectural logic rather than decoration. The inclusion of dark sky lighting is a further example of considered and uncommon thinking in an education facility.

Brighton High School demonstrates what is possible when a community knows its values, a process listens carefully, and an architect has the skill to translate both into built form. It is a worthy commendation in this category.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

COMMENDATION: NEW CAMPUS WITH NEW EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES (Category 2)

Applies to construction of a new school or educational institution on a new campus.

Canberra Institute of Technology, Woden
36 Bradley St, Phillip
ACT, Australia

Architect: Gray Puksand

Summary Citation

The Canberra Institute of Technology's Woden Vocational Training Campus is a well-resolved and forward-thinking response to contemporary vocational education, distinguished by strong stakeholder engagement, including meaningful First Peoples consultation, and a rigorous, evidence-based briefing process.

A clear four-stage learning framework underpins an engaging and legible design that successfully connects pedagogy with space, notably through authentic community interaction as a core learning condition. The project demonstrates genuine long-term adaptability and flexible design strategies.

The campus sets a strong benchmark for aligning educational vision, spatial design and community connection in vocational learning environments.

Full citation

The Canberra Institute of Technology's Woden Vocational Training Campus presents a confident and carefully considered response to the evolving needs of vocational education, distinguished by the strength of its planning process, clarity of pedagogical vision, and commitment to long-term adaptability.

The project's genuine stakeholder engagement and consultation, supported by site visits that meaningfully informed the education brief. The inclusion of authentic First Peoples engagement enriches the cultural and educational narrative, while benchmarking beyond the education sector demonstrates a thoughtful and outward-looking approach. The delivery of a comprehensive design guide is a particularly valuable contribution, acknowledging that engagement and evolution must continue well beyond the completion of the built form.

The design outcome is both engaging and legible, underpinned by a coherent four-stage learning sequence which offers a clear articulation of how VET pedagogy can translate into space. The project's emphasis on real community interaction as a core learning condition, rather than a simulated one, is especially commendable and sets it apart from more conventional approaches to education design.

The project demonstrates adaptability across both physical and virtual domains, supported by strategies such as the Level 3 warm shell and raised floor services, which reflect genuine long-term thinking. The post-completion integration of EV training provides compelling evidence of adaptability in practice, moving beyond aspiration to real-world application. The balance between adaptable environments and dedicated specialist spaces effectively supports diverse teaching and learning modes.

Innovation is evident in both architectural and pedagogical terms. The induction kitchen stands out as a particularly strong example, where a design decision directly reshapes how a trade is taught demonstrating the powerful alignment of space and learning. The use of mass timber construction at this scale is commendable, representing a significant achievement within the Australian institutional context. Additional initiatives including the vertical campus model, electric campus strategy, smart building systems, and strong community connections are well executed and contribute to a forward-looking and sustainable outcome, even as some reflect emerging best practice rather than wholly new approaches.

The Woden Vocational Training Campus is a thoughtful, innovative and well-resolved project that successfully aligns educational intent, spatial design and community engagement, setting a strong benchmark for vocational learning environments across Australasia.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

JOINT CATEGORY WINNER: NEW BUILDING/S OR FACILITIES - LARGE (Category 3)

A new building or new buildings in an existing school or campus, value over $15 million.

Auckland University of Technology, Tukutuku
90 Akoranga Drive, Northcote
Auckland, New Zealand

Architects: Jasmax

Summary Citation

The Auckland University of Technology, Tukutuku project sets a benchmark for sustainable tertiary development, achieving the lowest carbon emissions per square metre of built space in New Zealand through an integrated design approach that combines considered planning, cultural collaboration, and structural innovation. Grounded in the concept of tukutuku - woven latticework panels of Māori meeting houses - the project interlaces people, place, and purpose into a cohesive architectural and cultural narrative. A decade-long briefing and research process, underpinned by meaningful partnership with Ngāti Pāoa, allowed cultural narratives to be intrinsically embedded within the building's identity, spatial experience, and connection to place. Central to the project is its engineered timber structure, which responds to challenging geotechnical conditions while significantly reducing embodied carbon, unifying the building structurally and aesthetically, and establishing a flexible framework for future adaptation. Strategic campus planning, guided by a detailed building condition assessment, enabled the selective retention, upgrade, and removal of existing structures, while a central atrium links key buildings and creates a highly connected, adaptable learning environment that sets a leading model for sustainable futures.

Full citation

The Auckland University of Technology, Tukutuku project, designed by Jasmax, sets a new benchmark for sustainable tertiary development, achieving the lowest carbon emissions per square metre of built space in New Zealand. It is an exemplar learning space including careful planning, cultural collaboration, and spatial connections.

Tukutuku, meaning woven latticework panels traditionally used in the walls of a Māori meeting house, becomes both the project's name, conceptual framework and metaphor, expressing how people, place, and purpose are interlaced throughout the design.

The project's success begins with its briefing and planning process. Developed through a rigorous briefing, research program and reflection spanning nearly a decade, it engaged a broad range of stakeholders and embedded meaningful partnerships with mana whenua. Collaboration with Ngāti Pāoa saw local cultural narratives not simply applied but intrinsically woven through the building—informing its identity, spatial experience, and purpose.

Central to this process was a comprehensive assessment of AUT's North campus fabric. An initial building condition assessment established a clear hierarchy across the site, enabling strategic decisions about buildings to retain, upgrade, or remove. This approach saw the demolition of relocatable structures, the improvement of viable assets, and the careful integration of retained buildings into a cohesive masterplan. Rather than starting anew, the project demonstrates the value of working thoughtfully with what exists.

A pause during the COVID-19 pandemic further reinforced the university's commitment to physical places of learning and gathering, shaping a brief centred on creating a "sticky campus" where students choose to spend time. The resulting response is both strategic and generous: the building is carefully inserted into the campus, reinforcing north–south circulation spines and strengthening connections between surrounding buildings while contributing to the public realm.

At the heart of this strategy is the atrium, conceived as a pivotal node that links the existing AF Lecture Theatre and AL Library buildings. This central space forms the social and academic heart of AUT North, organising student services, study areas, social spaces, hospitality, and academic functions into a highly legible and interconnected environment. It enables seamless movement between learning modes—formal, informal, collaborative, and individual—while reinforcing wellbeing, community, and belonging. Thorough quantitative post-occupancy outcomes confirm the success of this approach.

Flexibility is embedded throughout. Spaces support a wide spectrum of uses, from large community gatherings to intimate study, while a consistent architectural language provides cohesion and moments of retreat. The structural and services strategy further supports long-term adaptability, with a timber framing system and underfloor services plenum enabling future reconfiguration. Innovation is evident in both environmental and structural responses. The integration of Australasia's largest post-tensioned engineered timber structure with the adaptive reuse of a 45-year-old building significantly reduces embodied carbon while adding long-term value. The timber structure establishes a strong material connection to place and responds effectively to challenging geotechnical conditions through its lightweight and resilient design.

Together, these strategies position Tukutuku as a leading benchmark for sustainable futures—one that meaningfully integrates culture, sustainability, and thoughtful planning to create an exemplary, enduring and adaptable learning environment.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

JOINT CATEGORY WINNER: NEW BUILDING/S OR FACILITIES - LARGE (Category 3)

A new building or new buildings in an existing school or campus, value over $15 million.

YOUNG HIGH SCHOOL, Hilltops Young High School Library
Campbell St, Young
New South Wales, Australia

Architects: Hayball

Summary Citation

The Hilltops Young High School Library began with a question: What could a school and its community build together if they were genuinely willing to plan together? The answer, on Wiradjuri Country in regional New South Wales, is a facility that holds a school library, public library, Wiradjuri cultural centre, community gallery, wellbeing services, café and creative arts spaces under one roof, open to all ages for around 3,000 hours every year. Getting there took years of genuine consultation, not just with teachers and students but with Wiradjuri elders, heritage specialists, community user groups and wellbeing practitioners, and that depth of engagement shows in a building whose design cannot be separated from the place and people it serves. A post-occupancy evaluation found that students and staff describe the environment as inspiring, calm and city quality, which means something particular in a regional community where young people have not always had access to spaces that feel genuinely excellent. This is a building that holds many communities at once and makes each of them feel they belong.

Full citation

Some buildings accommodate learning. This one was built by a community, for a community, around a shared belief that everyone, regardless of age, background or postcode, deserves a space that lifts their sights.

The Hilltops Young High School Library sits on a layered and significant site in Young, New South Wales: Wiradjuri gathering place, a historic justice precinct, and the location of the 1861 Lambing Flats riots. Rather than smoothing over this complexity, the project embraces it. A dual narrative runs through the building, with the proportions and scale of the colonial courthouse reading to the northwest, and nonlinear interstitial spaces of exchange and reconciliation opening to the northeast. Wiradjuri language, embedded totems, custom artworks created together with local elders, and archaeological artefacts uncovered during construction and integrated into the building's fabric ensure that the history of this place is not commemorated but actively present, available for learners of every generation to encounter.

The planning process that produced this outcome was exceptional in its breadth and sincerity. Hilltops Council, Schools Infrastructure NSW, Wiradjuri elders, students, teachers, community user groups, heritage specialists, wellbeing practitioners and accessibility consultants all shaped a brief

that ultimately expressed seven guiding design principles. These principles are not aspirational statements on a wall. They are legible in every corner of the built outcome.

This is not a school building that the community can occasionally access. It is a community facility that the school helped make possible. Each part of the building has its own entry and circulation so that school students, community members and public library users can all be in the building at the same time without any group compromising another's needs. Collaboratively developed protocols sit alongside the spatial planning to make that work in practice. The building ends up being used for around 3,000 hours per year, which is roughly double that of a typical school library. In a regional community, that is not a small thing.

A post-occupancy evaluation conducted by Dr Julia Atkin of Learning by Design confirmed what the design promised. Students and staff describe the environment as inspiring, calm and city quality, a phrase that carries particular weight in a rural context where young people can too easily conclude that the best opportunities exist somewhere else. Adjacency to wellbeing services is normalising help-seeking. Multimedia and maker spaces are lifting the quality of student work. And the simple fact of having a space that feels genuinely excellent, that a community built together and can call its own, is doing something hard to measure but easy to recognise.

Equity of aspiration is real. Good design can shift it. This building is proof.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

COMMENDATION: NEW BUILDING/S OR FACILITIES – LARGE (Category 3)

A new building or new buildings in an existing school or campus, value over $15 million.

Damascus College, Xavier Flood Senior Learning Centre
1412 Geelong Road, Mount Clear
Victoria, Australia

Architect: Law Architects

Summary Citation

An exemplary new senior learning environment, this substantial and transformative addition to the campus has evidenced a major shift in the senior student culture and agency, identified on the ground through learning outcomes, student engagement and a considered post occupancy analysis. More akin to a tertiary learning environment, extensive engagement undertaken with the college leadership, educators, careers, wellbeing staff and students has resulted in a mature, confident and considered response to the educational aspirations, technologies and cultural needs of the students and staff. The centre has assisted in enhancing the senior student cohort identity and connection to their learning pathways, with staff indicating that aspiration, independence and ownership is more evident, with the culture shifting from one of "supervision to self-direction". It is evident that this project, as a destination for senior students at the college will no doubt have a more tangible impact as its DNA permeates out through the broader campus teaching and learning landscape, providing an inspirational venue which younger student cohorts will aspire to become a part of.

Full citation

An exemplary new senior learning environment, this substantial and transformative addition to the campus has evidenced a major shift in the senior student culture and agency, identified on the ground through learning outcomes, student engagement and a considered post occupancy analysis.

More akin to a tertiary learning environment, extensive engagement undertaken with the college leadership, educators, careers, wellbeing staff and students has resulted in a mature, confident and considered response to the educational aspirations, technologies and cultural needs of the students and staff. Across numerous levels, the balance of proximity and separation has been duly considered, across formal and informal learning environments and study zones. The placement of teaching workspace amongst learning settings, provides opportunities for a more authentic and adult like community of learning, where educators and students work together as one.

It is evident that engagement and genuine rigour have been applied to create and realise these spaces, with a similar academic rigour applied to the evaluation process, established to measure behavioural, cultural and academic impact. This element of the project is to be acknowledged, with

very few projects undertaking authentic post occupancy evaluation of their process and outcomes, both educational and cultural.

The centre has assisted in enhancing the senior student cohort identity and connection to their learning pathways, with staff indicating aspiration, independence and ownership is more evident, with the culture shifting from one of “supervision to self-direction”. The co-location and integration of VM and VCE students within the same senior environment, is of note, ensuring equal dignity, access and shared aspirations across different learning pathways.

It is evident that this project, as a destination for senior students at the college will no doubt have a more tangible impact as its DNA permeates out through the broader campus teaching and learning landscape, providing an inspirational venue that younger student cohorts will aspire to become a part of.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

CATEGORY WINNER: NEW BUILDING/S OR FACILITIES - SMALL (Category 4)

A new building or new buildings in an existing school or campus value less than $15 million.

Woodleigh School, Woodleigh Regenerative Futures Studio
485 Golf Links Rd, Langwarrin South
Victoria, Australia

Architects: McIldowie Partners

Summary Citation

The **Woodleigh Futures Studio** represents a global benchmark in educational design, seamlessly integrating a bold, student-led pedagogy with a pioneering regenerative ecosystem. Developed through a rigorous 12-month consultative process, the project translates a visionary Year 10 curriculum into a physical "third teacher" that fosters agency and environmental stewardship. As the first commercial project in Australia to utilize 100% Australian-grown hemp panels, the Studio achieves carbon-positive status while producing 126% of its own energy needs. Its "spatial DNA" features a modular grid and mobile systems that allow the environment to evolve alongside shifting educational requirements, from quiet reflection to public exhibition. By sharing its entire design via open-source licensing, the project moves beyond a singular architectural achievement to become a scalable blueprint for a regenerative future.

Full Citation

The **Woodleigh Futures Studio** stands as a global benchmark for the seamless integration of a bold, student-led pedagogy and regenerative architecture. Moving far beyond the constraints of a traditional school building, the project presents a "living ecosystem" where the physical environment serves as a primary tool for learning, reflection, and environmental restoration.
The excellence of the Studio is rooted in an ambitious, 12-month consultative planning process that prioritized deep engagement with students, educators, and specialist consultants. This rigorous information-gathering phase resulted in a comprehensive educational brief tailored specifically to the **Regenerative Futures Program (RFP)**. By framing the Year 10 experience as a formative rite of passage, the planning process ensured that the building's spatial logic—from its five interconnected studios to its communal "homestead"—directly supports student agency, mastery-based assessment, and real-world project work.

The project marks a significant shift from sustainable to **regenerative design**, positioning the building as a functional participant in its local ecology. Notable innovations include:

- **Carbon-Positive Materials:** As the first commercial project in Australia to utilize **100% Australian-grown industrial hemp panels**, the Studio sequesters more carbon than it emits, while Durrapanel strawboard and biochar-embedded surfaces ensure a non-toxic, VOC-free interior.

- **Energy and Resource Leadership:** With a solar array producing **126% of the building's energy requirements**, the Studio is a net-positive contributor to the campus grid.
- **Living Systems:** The drought-resilient green roof serves a dual purpose: providing a protected habitat for endangered pollinators and acting as a cost-neutral structural solution that reduces the need for carbon-heavy footings.

Flexibility is embedded into the very "DNA" of the Studio. A modular **4.5 x 9m structural grid** and large, hemp-clad sliding partitions allow the learning spaces to be instantly reconfigured. Whether functioning as a quiet sensory refuge, a collaborative workshop, or a public exhibition gallery, the environment remains responsive to the immediate needs of students and staff. This inherent agility ensures the building will continue to evolve alongside shifting pedagogies and future enrolment needs.

Beyond its physical form, the Woodleigh Futures Studio is distinguished by its **open-source licensing**. By sharing all systems and documentation via Creative Commons, the project moves from a singular architectural achievement to a scalable model for global change. It is a rare example of design excellence that combines technical brilliance with a profound ethical commitment to the future of our planet and the next generation of learners.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

COMMENDATION: NEW BUILDING/S OR FACILITIES - SMALL (Category 4)

A new building or new buildings in an existing school or campus value less than $15 million.

Crest Education, STEAM Centre
500 Soldiers Road, Clyde North
Victoria, Australia

Architect: Smith + Tracey Architects

Summary Citation

The Crest Education STEAM Building delivers a highly authentic, future focused learning environment that mirrors the spatial and social qualities of tertiary and industry settings. Designed to support interdisciplinary, inquiry led education, the building integrates science laboratories, technology workshops, art and media studios, and collaborative galleries within a flexible and visible learning landscape. A central courtyard acts as the social and pedagogical heart, reinforcing wellbeing, connection, and community. The project exemplifies how architecture can actively support contemporary STEAM pedagogy, student agency, and real world learning.

Full Citation

The Crest Education STEAM Building is a purposeful response to the evolving demands of senior secondary education, conceived as an environment that behaves like the world beyond school. Drawing inspiration from TAFE workshops, university studios, laboratories, and public commons, the building provides students with an authentic setting in which to plan, prototype, test, exhibit, and critique their work in view of peers and teachers alike.

The design is underpinned by Crest Education's Teaching and Learning philosophy, translating interdisciplinary, inquiry rich learning into a spatial framework that enables visibility, connection, and agency. Science laboratories, technology workshops, and art and media studios are arranged as interconnected learning zones rather than isolated classrooms. Adaptable layouts support both theoretical instruction and hands on making, allowing learning to shift seamlessly between individual focus, small group collaboration, and large shared activity.

At the heart of the building is a central gallery and collaborative zone that functions as both circulation spine and learning commons. This space supports presentation, exhibition, critique, and informal learning, reinforcing a culture where learning is visible and celebrated. The openness of the environment encourages interaction between disciplines, while centrally located staff areas promote accessibility, mentoring, and positive student teacher relationships.

Outdoor learning is integral to the project's success. A generous courtyard forms the social heart of the building, incorporating rain gardens, swales, and landscaped wellbeing spaces that support both

environmental learning and student respite. Covered loggias and outdoor work yards extend making, art, and science activities beyond the building envelope, embedding nature and sustainability into everyday learning experiences.

Flexibility is a defining strength of the design. Spaces are deliberately adaptable, allowing students and teachers to reconfigure environments for project based learning, exhibitions, or quiet reflection. This adaptability supports multiple senior pathways, including VCE, VCE VM, and IB, and reinforces a future focused approach capable of responding to changing pedagogies over time.

The jury commended the Crest Education STEAM Building for its clarity of educational intent and the strength of its architectural response. The project demonstrates how thoughtful design can actively shape learning culture, bridging education and industry while supporting wellbeing, collaboration, and lifelong learning. It stands as an exemplary model for contemporary STEAM environments that are authentic, connected, and deeply pedagogically aligned.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

COMMENDATION: NEW BUILDING/S OR FACILITIES - SMALL (Category 4)

A new building or new buildings in an existing school or campus value less than $15 million.

Wilderness School, Early Years Development
30 Hawkers Road, Medindie
South Australia, Australia

Architect: Grieve Gillett Architects

Summary Citation

The Wilderness School Early Years Development delivers early years learning environments that place strong emphasis on the child as protagonist and the educational value of space as an active participant in learning. The project aligns pedagogy, spatial planning and architectural expression while the surrounding outdoor environments form a nurturing and connected precinct for girls from three years of age to the end of Year 2. Reggio Emilia principles, a domestic design language and purposeful whimsy support curiosity, wellbeing and independence. Flexible spaces, integrated support services and future ready planning collectively deliver an inclusive, resilient contemporary early learning and junior primary education within an established school campus.

Full Citation

The Wilderness School exhibits a considered and cohesive response to contemporary early learning and junior primary education, translating a clear educational vision into well-resolved, adaptable learning environments. Emerging from a rigorous master planning process, the project demonstrates strong continuity between strategic intent and built outcome, ensuring that planning principles, pedagogical aims and architectural expression remain aligned.

Educational concepts are embedded with care across the project. The Early Learning Centre draws on Reggio Emilia principles, positioning the environment as an active participant in learning through purpose designed ateliers, carefully sequenced spaces and strong connections to outdoor environments. Whimsical architectural moments — including a child scaled annexe entry, secret garden and playful spatial transitions — support curiosity, imagination and a sense of ownership. Purpose designed mud laboratories, informal art spaces and a kitchen and kitchen garden enable experiential, sensory and life skill learning aligned with contemporary early years pedagogy.

A domestic architectural language underpins both buildings, reinterpreting familiar residential forms, scales and materials to create environments that feel intuitive, welcoming and emotionally supportive. This approach is reinforced through the careful integration of building services and regulatory requirements to minimise institutional cues and maintain child centred environments.

The Junior School is conceived as a ‘stepping stone’ between early learning and primary education, offering generous classrooms, shared central learning areas, retreat nooks and a centrally located

STEM and multi purpose space. Learning areas are organised to support individual, small group and whole cohort activities, with open floor plans, loose furniture and integrated joinery enabling flexibility and future adaptation.

Learning environments extend beyond the classroom to a network of outdoor learning spaces, loggias and piazzas, including a custom designed ‘seed pod’ playground supporting imaginative and social play. The Wilderness School is a well considered early learning design, demonstrating clear educational intent and disciplined architectural execution, delivering inclusive, flexible and enduring learning environments.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

CATEGORY WINNER: MODERNISATION – LARGE (Category 5)

Renovation/modernisation projects valued over $5 Million.

University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle Campus Library and Student Hub
32 Mouat Street, Fremantle
Western Australia, Australia

Architect: Hames Sharley

Summary Citation

The University of Notre Dame Australia's Fremantle Campus Library and Student Hub is a quietly transformative project — one that achieves impact not through addition, but through the precision of its editing. Genuine and deep stakeholder engagement and utilisation data resulted in a design that is both spatially compelling and pedagogically assured. The consolidation of library collections to unlock generous, varied learning settings, and the creation of a double-volume link space that stitches two previously disconnected buildings into a coherent campus heart, represent thoughtful and confident architectural moves. The project demonstrates that adaptability is most powerful when it is purposeful, not merely latent, and that innovation need not be loud to be real. This is a measured, rigorous, and considered project.

Full Citation

he University of Notre Dame Australia's Fremantle Campus Library and Student Hub is a quietly transformative project — one that derives its greatest strength not from what has been added, but from the discipline and confidence of its decisions. Where a lesser approach might have accumulated, this project edited, consolidated and clarified, with results that are both spatially compelling and educationally generous.

The planning process behind the project is exemplary. Stakeholder consultation extended beyond the expected — drawing in Indigenous representatives, faith communities, and student associations in ways that speak to genuine engagement rather than procedural obligation. Six spatial scenarios were tested and documented, with trade-offs examined and assessed, developing into the preferred outcome. Utilisation data directly shaped room sizing and seminar mix, ensuring that design decisions were grounded in how the campus actually functions rather than how it was assumed to.

The architectural outcome is assured. The consolidation of dispersed library collections into a compact compactus zone is a practical and forward-looking decision, unlocking a breadth and variety of learning settings that would otherwise have been impossible within the existing fabric. The double-volume link space between two previously disconnected buildings is the project's most significant gesture — a relatively modest structural intervention that achieves an outsized spatial

and experiential impact, creating a new campus heart and resolving a longstanding wayfinding problem identified in the brief.

Adaptability is embedded in the project's bones. The use of lightweight, non-structurally integrated elements — pods for seminar rooms, an extensive palette of loose furniture and joinery — means the spaces can evolve as needs change. The compactus strategy is honest about its assumptions: the logic holds as collections continue to contract, which is both a reasonable projection and a thoughtful acknowledgement of where vocational and higher education library models are heading.

The double-volume link space stands out as a move that transforms the campus experience through restraint rather than spectacle. The jury notes that the project executes established approaches with exceptional care and quality — and that this, in itself, represents real value. The selective editing of the existing fabric to sharpen wayfinding and clarify built form is a confident and successful architectural act. The project adopts moments of landscape and indoor-outdoor blurring to support students as whole people — not only as learners, but as social, emotional and sensory beings.

The University of Notre Dame Australia Fremantle Campus Library and Student Hub is a rigorous, considered and quietly exceptional project. It demonstrates that the most meaningful transformations are often achieved not through grand gestures, but through the patient, evidence-led work of understanding a place, people, and potential.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

CATERGORY WINNER: MODERNISATION – SMALL (Category 6)

Renovation/modernisation projects valued less than $5 Million.

Waranara School, Mackillop Education
11 Mathieson Street, Annandale
New South Wales Australia

Architect: Bickerton Masters Architecture

Summary Citation

Located within a former liquorice factory, Waranara School is an Independent Special Assistance School for 88 young people in Years 9–12 who have disengaged, or are at risk of disengaging, from mainstream education. Grounded in evidence-based research, co-designed educational specifications and Trauma-Informed Design Principles, the project creates calm, predictable and choice-rich environments that prioritise psychological safety, emotional regulation and student agency.

Full citation

Waranara School is an Independent Special Assistance School supporting a cohort of 88 young people in Years 9–12 who have disengaged, or are at risk of disengaging, from mainstream education.

Recognising that non-attendance is, for many students, not a choice but a nervous system response to trauma, stress and anxiety, the design is grounded in an evidence-based research approach and a comprehensive engagement process with school leaders, teachers, youth workers, counsellors and support staff. The resulting building sensitively balances pedagogy and wellbeing, responding with compassion to the unique and varied needs of the students.

The educational specification and program of requirements were co-created through iterative workshops, which made clear that mainstream learning environments had failed many students through a combination of overwhelming noise, unpredictable transitions, crowded circulation, inconsistent expectations, and spaces that did not support sensory regulation or psychological safety.

Drawing on Trauma-Informed Design Principles, the project is organised around the pillars of Safety, Trustworthiness, Choice, Collaboration and Empowerment. Design decisions were framed by the Architect around these principles to foster calming, consistent and predictable environments that reduce anxiety and support re-engagement with learning.

Located within the Inner West of Sydney, the design for Waranara School involves the adaptive reuse of a former liquorice factory, utilising the envelope and footprint of the existing building. Spread across three storeys, the school is organised around an open library at its heart, from which wellbeing rooms, quiet spaces and flexible classrooms are layered. Daily living is supported through student-use kitchens that encourage independence and social connection, while laundry facilities are provided for those who may not have access at home. A gymnasium responds to the need to release energy through movement without disrupting ongoing learning. The balance between providing sightlines and avoiding overstimulation is carefully managed through a considered palette of colours and materials, and the thoughtful use of glazing.

The project responds with empathy and care to the lived experiences of its learners, delivering a school intentionally designed around psychological safety, emotional regulation and student agency.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

COMMENDATION: MODERNISATION – SMALL (Category 6)

Renovation/modernisation projects valued less than $5 Million.

Richard Johnson Anglican College, Senior Studies Centre
93 Hyatts Road, Oakhurst
New South Wales Australia

Architect: Alleanza Architecture

Summary Citation

The Senior Studies Centre at Richard Johnson Anglican College is a thoughtfully designed renovation and expansion project. It was based on a planning process that widely and actively involved stakeholders, informed by multiple consultations. This approach resulted in a design that fully meets the educational requirements and stands out for its seamless and consistent integration of a variety of sub-spaces. This is a cleverly conceptualised and well executed project.

Full citation

The Senior Studies Centre project consists of the renovation and expansion of a 1,400 sqm space, intended to represent a bridge between secondary schooling, university and post-school.

The planning process relied not only on the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders but also on a six-month phase dedicated to defining future uses including modes of learning, recreation, and interconnection. An iterative approach enabled the establishment of specifications regarding the size and functionality of the spaces. The diversity of typologies resulting from this approach, as well as the coherence of the layout plan, are worth highlighting.

The design of the spaces is fully aligned with the learning modalities that were envisioned. The building is further structured around two linear wings with group learning areas and focused study spaces on one side and specialist spaces on the other. Between this is a zone of ancillary spaces of breakout and seminar rooms, and offices that can serve as a common room. This is an example of a consistent mix of formal, informal, and transitional learning spaces.

Flexibility goes beyond the classical features by using the diversity of the breakout areas and the circulation spaces. This is consistent with the educational approach. The plan supports a variety of learning modes including instructional delivery, collaborative and individual work, and larger peer group presentations. Wellbeing has also been taken into consideration as a key aspect of the design process, especially through interesting solutions used to optimise acoustics and to mitigate glare while allowing natural light and ventilation.

The philosophy behind this cleverly designed and well-executed project is summed up by the College principal's statement on Learning Environments that 'authentically reflects the College's vision and equips students for the next stage of their learning journey'.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

CATEGORY WINNER: SMALL PROJECT LESS THAN $2 MILLION (Category 7)

A new building or renovation, which is a learning environment.

St John XXIII Catholic College Stanhope Gardens, Biomechanics Lab & Gym
160 Perfection Ave, Stanhope Gardens
New South Wales, Australia

Architect: Watson Young Architects

Summary Citation

As schools and learning increasingly integrate a more holistic approach to physical activity and movement, this modest intervention within an existing campus under croft demonstrates an alternative approach to the large format multi court sports gyms typically found across most schools. Identified as a key element within the campus masterplan, the new Biomechanics Lab + Gym provides a range of settings and spaces that balance theory and activity, allowing students to seamlessly move from one activity to another. The new facility enhances the educational offering of the school by supporting their VET programmes in sport science, movement and load dynamics. Albeit a modest intervention, the architectural curation of spaces exhibits a dynamic and engaging design DNA, with technology supporting the study of movement and activity within and across the spaces. The jury was impressed with the way this modest project adds to the diversity of design approaches which encourage engagement and awareness of physical health and recreation, adding further value to traditional sports and game based educational programmes.

Full Citation

As schools and learning increasingly integrate a more holistic approach to physical activity and movement, this modest intervention within an existing campus under croft demonstrates an alternative approach to the large format court multi court sports gyms typically found across most schools. Identified as a key element within the campus masterplan, the new Biomechanics Lab + Gym provides a range of settings and spaces which balance theory and activity, allowing students to seamlessly move from one activity to another. The new facility enhances the educational offering of the school by supporting their VET fitness training programmes in sport science, movement and load dynamics.

At a master planning level, the location and functional characteristics of the new facility provide a logical continuum of connectivity to existing campus recreational and performance venues. The spaces demonstrate due consideration through the way they are planned and interconnected, being able to support a range of concurrent programmes, be them individual or group-based activities, analytical studies, theory and movement. Their interconnected and flexible spatial configuration extends into the indoor football court and running track, separated by adjustable ceiling-hung sports netting allowing real-time investigation and analysis of movement mechanics, load dynamics, and

applied sports science within the same learning environment - providing an integrated contextual learning setting.

The jury was impressed with the way this modest project adds to the diversity of design approaches that encourage curiosity and awareness of physical health and recreation, adding further value to traditional sports and game based educational programmes. Albeit a modest intervention, the architectural curation of spaces exhibits a dynamic and engaging design DNA, with technology supporting the study of movement and activity within and across the spaces.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

COMMENDATION: SMALL PROJECT LESS THAN $2 MILLION (Category 7)

A new building or renovation, which is a learning environment.

St Michael's Catholic Primary School
181-187 Longueville Road, Lane Cove
New South Wales, Australia

Architect: NBRS

Summary Citation

This project demonstrates how simple, achievable interventions can change traditional classrooms into flexible multimodal learning environments. Developed through collaboration with staff and students, the design aligns spatial changes with the school's evolving teaching practices. Modest insertions introduce colour, light, and spatial variety, which create engaging environments that joyfully welcome students and teachers to inhabit the spaces. Flexible furniture, breakout areas, and quiet zones support a range of learning formats and greater student movement. The project offers a practical and replicable model for adapting existing classrooms through thoughtful, low-cost design.

Full Citation

This project is to be commended for demonstrating how thoughtful, modest interventions can transform traditional learning environments into flexible, contemporary spaces that support evolving pedagogies. Through collaboration between the school community and the design team, the project shows how existing didactic classrooms can be adapted into multimodal learning environments through simple, achievable strategies that many schools could realistically adopt.

A clear and consultative planning process underpins the work. Engagement with staff and students created a brief that was grounded in everyday teaching and learning practices, while research-informed discussions helped align spatial changes with the school's educational vision. Importantly, the project embraces playful approach to low-cost adaptive reuse, demonstrating that meaningful change in learning environments does not necessarily require complex or high-cost architectural interventions.

The design outcome is both modest and effective. Carefully considered insertions introduce colour, varied scale, improved connections, and enhanced access to light, creating learning environments that are more engaging and welcoming for both students and teachers. The strength of the project lies in its clarity: the design is intentionally simple, and this simplicity underpins its success.

Flexibility is achieved through furniture, breakout areas, and quiet zones that support a range of teaching and learning formats. These spaces enable teachers to move between collaborative work, independent study, and focused instruction while accommodating greater student movement and

interaction. The design supports the school's transition toward more modal teaching approaches and encourages more personalised learning experiences.

Ultimately, the project's innovation lies in its clarity of thinking and its replicable strategies. By demonstrating how targeted, low-cost interventions can meaningfully adapt existing classrooms, the project provides a practical model for schools seeking to evolve their learning environments.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

COMMENDATION: SMALL PROJECT LESS THAN $2 MILLION (Category 7)

A new building or renovation, which is a learning environment.

TAFE NSW Wetherill Park, EV Training Facility
The Horsley Drive, Wetherill Park
New South Wales, Australia

Architect: Webber Architects

Summary Citation

The TAFE NSW Wetherill Park EV Training Facility is a commendable example of a purposeful and forward-thinking vocational learning environment. The planning process stands out for its rigour, with the design team visiting operational electric vehicle workshops to observe real industry workflows before a single design decision was made. The resulting facility transforms a former automotive workshop into a contemporary training space where safety, theory and hands-on practice are seamlessly integrated. A dedicated classroom sits directly adjacent to the workshop floor, allowing students to move between instruction and application in the way that effective vocational training demands. This project provides a strong and replicable model for how existing TAFE infrastructure can be intelligently upgraded to meet the needs of emerging industries.

Full Citation

The TAFE NSW Wetherill Park EV Training Facility represents a thoughtful and well-considered transformation of a former automotive body painting workshop into a purpose-built environment for training in both light and heavy electric vehicles. Delivered through close collaboration between Webber Architects and TAFE NSW, the project demonstrates how existing infrastructure can be intelligently adapted to serve a rapidly evolving curriculum without the need to build from the ground up.

The planning process is a highlight of this entry. Rather than relying solely on stakeholder meetings, the design team visited operational electric vehicle workshops to observe firsthand how technicians work, how vehicles move through a space, and how safety protocols shape the daily rhythm of a workshop. This industry-grounded approach gave the brief clarity and specificity that is evident in every aspect of the finished facility.

The design embodies the core principles of vocational education in physical form. The workshop layout mirrors real industry conditions, with vehicle bays, circulation routes and equipment zones arranged to reflect genuine workplace operations. A dedicated battery storage facility provides students with structured exposure to the safety protocols they will encounter throughout their careers, making safety not simply a compliance requirement but a genuine learning outcome. The classroom, converted from a former call-off room and positioned directly beside the workshop floor,

supports easy movement between theory and practice, reinforcing the connection between what students learn and what they do.

Upgraded lighting, ventilation and building services improve comfort and safety throughout, while new epoxy flooring and coordinated power, data, compressed air and electric vehicle charging infrastructure support both current curriculum delivery and future reconfiguration as technology continues to evolve. The straightforward planning, accessible service routes and durable neutral finishes ensure that the facility can adapt to new vehicle types, updated safety requirements and changing delivery models without significant disruption.

Opened by Federal and State Ministers, the Wetherill Park EV Training Facility is already recognised as a model for the broader TAFE NSW network. The jury commends it as a clear, purposeful and future-ready learning environment that serves its students and its industry well.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

JOINT CATEGORY WINNER: LANDSCAPING/OUTDOOR LEARNING AREA (Category 8)

Designed to showcase outdoor learning environments or landscapes targeted at improving educational outcomes.

Warriappendi Secondary School, Relocation
7 Ann Nelson Drive,Thebarton
South Australia, Australia

Landscape Architect: JPE Design Studio

Summary Citation

Warriapendi Secondary School Relocation by the Department for Education & JPE Design Studio is an exemplary demonstration of how landscape, culture, and identity can converge to shape a deeply meaningful educational environment.

Extensive community engagement, guided by Country and informed by First Nations knowledge, has generated strong design principles that thread through the project.

Contextual integration, cultural expression and environmental repair are the cornerstones of an inspiring, honest and sensitive response that provides space for active and passive recreation as well as ceremonial gatherings.

This project establishes a dialogue between indoor and outdoor learning environments to offer a deeply positive school experience—one where belonging, culture, and Country are not symbolic, but genuinely seen, felt, and lived.

Full Citation

Warriapendi Secondary School Relocation by the Department for Education & JPE Design Studio is an exemplary demonstration of how landscape, culture, and identity can converge to shape a deeply meaningful educational environment. Extensive community engagement, guided by Country and informed by First Nations knowledge, has generated strong design principles that thread through the works. The result is an authentic, inclusive landscape that feels profoundly connected to place, people, and legacy.

The design establishes a dialogue between indoor and outdoor learning environments supporting pedagogy and facilitating daily rituals. Landscapes supporting active recreation are distinguished from the passive areas using variations in planting density, landform, and enclosure to create zoning that feels intuitive. This approach supports active modes of recreation while also allowing quieter areas for reflection, informal learning, and social connection.

Contextual integration is one of the project's most striking achievements. Despite its suburban location, the site feels deeply immersed in bushland, an effect achieved through the retention of mature vegetation, sensitive grading, and immersive planting strategies. This sense of being "on Country" is reinforced by fluid landforms, curving paths, and spatial sequences that soften boundaries and encourage exploration, embodying First Nations perspectives in both form and experience.

Cultural expression is central to the project's success. Ceremonial spaces such as the yarning circles provide places for teaching, gathering, and storytelling. The relocation of the ceremonial yarning circle from the school's former campus creates a powerful connection between past and present landscapes, embedding continuity into the new site, enabling cultural practice to remain visible, lived, and authentic.

Environmental repair sits at the heart of the landscape response. The remediation of a previously contaminated site demonstrates a commitment to healing the land, while integrated stormwater basins, coastal planting, drought tolerant species, and extensive usable shade support long term resilience. These strategies enhance biodiversity, manage water responsibly, and create comfortable outdoor spaces suitable for year round use.

The landscape supports an exceptional diversity of use—from outdoor teaching spaces and passive recreation to cultural ceremonies and community gatherings. After hours, the site can adapt to host to social and celebratory functions, reinforcing its role as a shared civic landscape.
This project offers a deeply positive school experience—one where belonging, culture, and Country are not symbolic, but genuinely seen, felt, and lived. It is an inspiring, honest, and sensitive response that demonstrates how land can meaningfully drive design, creating environments that respect the past while shaping a hopeful, connected future.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

JOINT CATEGORY WINNER: LANDSCAPING/OUTDOOR LEARNING AREA (Category 8)

Designed to showcase outdoor learning environments or landscapes targeted at improving educational outcomes.

Wilderness School, Early Years Development
30 Hawkers Road, Medindie
South Australia, Australia

Landscape Architect: Tract

Summary Citation

This project shines in translating a poetic educational brief into a tangible, high-functioning reality. By embracing the vision as a 'first step into the wilderness', the design successfully carves out a magical-like feel, and a rich sensory oasis all contained within a busy urban setting.

Full Citation

The success of this project lies in its remarkable ability to achieve a balance that packs an ambitious program into a dense site without feeling cluttered, over-engineered or over delivered. The site 'works hard,' yet the resulting atmosphere remains soft, scaled perfectly for its young users, and deeply inviting.

The design expertly dissolves the boundaries between indoor and outdoor learning. The creation of ‘outdoor rooms’ and ‘small piazzas’ provides a versatile landscape that supports both structured teaching and free, exploratory inquiry.Through a gardenesque planting palette and the celebration of established trees, the project delivers a sense of discovery. The transformation of a busy urban environment into a ‘magical space’ to come to school each day provides a sensory-rich backdrop that aligns perfectly with the school's approach.

The project shows great restraint and respect for its context. By retaining mature trees and utilizing materials that complement the existing heritage buildings, the design feels both timeless and innovative at the same time. The innovation here is not found in complexity and programme, but in the sophisticated articulation of space. The terraced seating and amphitheatre formed around existing trees demonstrate a skill for creating a sense of joy and exploration through thoughtful, human centred and user focussed design.

This is a space where the built environment and the natural world meet at a scale that feels both safe and adventurous. It is an exemplary model of how a clear educational vision can be realized through sensitive, high-quality landscape architecture.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

COMMENDATION: LANDSCAPING/OUTDOOR LEARNING AREA (Category 8)

Designed to showcase outdoor learning environments or landscapes targeted at improving educational outcomes.

Monash Community Family Co-operative
11 Duerdin St, Notting Hill
Victoria, Australia

Architect: Law Architects with Oculus Landscape Architects

Summary Citation

Monash Community Family Co-operative by Law Architects with Oculus Landscape Architects is a compelling example of how landscape architecture can steer the design of educational environments.

Informed by extended briefing sessions and deep stakeholder engagement, the landscape strategy supports the design of the vertical early learning centre to deliver a rich, safe, and immersive environment where play, learning, and nature are inseparable.

Carefully contoured landforms follow the site's natural slope, creating a dynamic, legible, and age-appropriate sequence of play spaces. These elements are deliberately scaled and zoned, allowing children to engage with landscape features in ways that are both adventurous and safe.

The physical and visual relationship between the interior spaces and the playscape embeds outdoor learning into everyday routines reinforcing the centre's pedagogical emphasis on connection to nature.

Full Citation

Monash Community Family Co-operative by Law Architects with Oculus Landscape Architects is a compelling example of how landscape architecture can steer the design of educational environments; shaping childhood experience through nature, movement, and exploration. Informed by extended briefing sessions and deep stakeholder engagement, the landscape strategy supports the design of the vertical early learning centre to deliver a rich, safe, and immersive environment where play, learning, and nature are inseparable.

The playscape is the heart of the project. Carefully contoured landforms follow the site's natural slope, creating a dynamic, legible, and age appropriate sequence of play spaces. The design integrates rock elements, graded pathways, ecological planting, and retained canopy to create a risk positive, exploratory environment that encourages physical challenge, imaginative play, and independence. These natural elements are deliberately scaled and zoned, allowing children to engage with landscape features in ways that are both adventurous and safe.

Strong indoor–outdoor connectivity ensures the playscape functions as an extension of the indoor learning environment. All playrooms connect directly to outdoor spaces or covered verandahs, allowing children to move seamlessly between inside and outside throughout the day. This physical and visual relationship between the interior spaces and the playscape embeds outdoor learning into everyday routines reinforcing the centre's pedagogical emphasis on connection to nature. Visibility across the site enhances supervision and safety without compromising children's sense of autonomy.

Seasonal shading strategies and the deliberate framing of views to retained and newly planted trees bring daily awareness of natural cycles into the playscape experience. A commitment to canopy retention is reinforced through a 3:1 tree replacement strategy targeting 40% site coverage, ensuring shade, comfort, and long term ecological resilience. The playscape is not static; it is designed to grow and evolve as vegetation matures, strengthening connections between children and the living landscape.

Sustainability and innovation underpin the project's landscape response, which in turn drive the built form of the early learning centre. The desire to retain the natural slope of the site, rather than cut into it, drove the design of the 2 storey Early Learning centre which preserves the ground plane for expansive outdoor play while reducing environmental impact. Covered decks and sheltered undercroft areas further extend the playscape, providing all weather opportunities for play without increasing the building footprint.

Through its seamless indoor outdoor integration, nurturing material palette, and well considered landscape structure, this project delivers a warm, engaging, and restorative environment. It stands as a compelling example of landscape architecture leading educational design—where connection to nature is not an addition, but a foundational and lived experience.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

COMMENDATION: LANDSCAPING/OUTDOOR LEARNING AREA (Category 8)

Designed to showcase outdoor learning environments or landscapes targeted at improving educational outcomes.

Croydon Community School Outdoor Learning Spaces
61, Croydon Road, Croydon
Victoria, Australia

Landscape Architect: RB Landscapes and Crosier Scott Architects

Summary Citation

Croydon Community School, located in Victoria, is to be commended for its innovative and restorative design, which creates a landscape that seamlessly functions as both an outdoor learning environment and a behavioural support setting. The design allows for flexibility in teaching and student engagement, while also providing spaces for restoration and regulation that support the diverse learning and behavioural needs of its secondary students.

Full Citation

This project has intertwined the educational, wellbeing and behavioural needs of the students at Croydon Community School. The unique design embodies the school's educational philosophy, positioning the landscape as an innovative and responsive framework that nurtures wellbeing, fosters engagement, and enables access to learning. The partnership between RB Landscapes and CrosierScott Architects has ensured that the outdoor environment accommodates a rich variety of teaching and learning spaces within a compact campus, achieving both functionality and spatial generosity through thoughtful design. The project's success shows that teaching, learning and restorative settings can work together harmoniously.

Teacher voice and student needs are clearly anchored in the design and have shaped the holistic landscape. Through thoughtful consideration of student needs, the design achieves an innovative, functional and purposeful outdoor environment that still provides intimate, reflective spaces. Distinct spaces for learning, each serving different purposes, have been seamlessly integrated, allowing the many areas to come together as a cohesive whole.

This sensory-rich learning landscape delivers behavioural support through spatial design and restorative principles. In particular, the project is to be commended for the creative use of environmental infrastructure and intentionally exposing stormwater systems to create wetlands and a constructed creek. The flowing creek is used as a circulation path and weaves across the site defining purposeful learning zones, offering calming sensory and interactive experiences while establishing restorative environments that support emotional regulation.

The outdoor spaces serve as natural extensions of the classrooms and provide students with accessible areas to safely withdraw from the main classroom setting, supporting emotional regulation and restoration. These restorative spaces are intentionally crafted to promote wellbeing and foster a sense of belonging, aligning with the school's vision for flexible, supportive educational environments.

Anchoring features of the landscape include textual natural elements incorporating weathered logs, rocks, native plants and mature trees creating a layered environment. Natural landforms have been used for informal seating and pathways thread through the landscape connecting purposeful spaces. Running water introduces sensory experiences that support emotional regulation. Shelter and shade have been intentionally provided to ensure a comfortable and conducive learning environment.

The team are to be commended for creating a range of learning environments and zones that simultaneously support teacher instruction, curriculum delivery and the wellbeing of the students. The distributed landscape allows for practical learning opportunities, responsibility, agency and choice in participation. The design supports the philosophy of the school, teaching pedagogy and learning needs of the students. It offers opportunities for reflection, renewal, and re-engagement in a safe and restorative environment. This design is innovative, practical and an aesthetically refined landscape that enhances the overall experience of school.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

COMMENDATION: LANDSCAPING/OUTDOOR LEARNING AREA (Category 8)

Designed to showcase outdoor learning environments or landscapes targeted at improving educational outcomes.

Our Lady Star of the Sea Outdoor Learning Areas
26 Cowes-Rhyll Road, Cowes
Victoria, Australia

Landscape Architect: RB Landscapes and Crosier Scott Architects

Summary Citation

This project, Our Lady Star of the Sea Outdoor Learning Areas, harmonises the pedagogical, ecological, and play-based ambitions of the educational brief. Designed by RB Landscapes, it is to be commended for delivering an innovative, sustainable, and educational environment that celebrates the unique ecology of Phillip Island. The outdoor learning areas foster curiosity and environmental responsibility, operating as an immersive extension of the classroom.

Full Citation

This design seamlessly unites functionality, sustainability and learning, embodying the school's spiritual and educational ethos of environmental stewardship. RB Landscapes together with Crosier Scott Architects, have re-imagined a challenging low-lying paddock on Victoria's Phillip Island into a natural landscape rich with biodiversity and ecology. This is an outdoor learning environment that inspires exploration and play, incorporates a range of areas for structured teaching, and allows spaces for reflection and restoration.

The project was driven by the principle of collective ownership, involving school leaders, educators, parents, and members of the broader community. Its success lies in the achievement of the four key goals: Stormwater Management, Learning Environments, Connection to Place, and Active and Passive Play areas, culminating in rich and engaging environments for place-based learning.

A defining feature of the design is the conversion of the greenfield site and its stormwater infrastructure into wetlands, infiltration gardens, and an ephemeral creek. This innovative approach redefines functionality, offering a creative and responsive solution to the constraints of the low-lying landscape. The transformation of the landscape establishes a living curriculum that enriches students' experiences. The wetlands and natural habitats honour the ecology of Phillip Island, providing immersive hands-on learning whilst fostering connection to place.

The spatial organisation of the design creates flexible spaces, including various learning zones such as an outdoor kitchen, permaculture gardens, and hybrid areas allowing for small group work, whole class discussions and community gatherings. These spaces support both structured and imaginative play, as well as active and passive learning opportunities. Inclusions of boardwalks, bird hides, a fort

and adventure playgrounds promote active exploration and physical play coinciding with reflective nooks and restorative spaces. This purpose-driven design caters for a range of learning needs, styles and teaching practices ensuring educational and wellbeing outcomes are met.

Sustainability is central to this project, with a strong emphasis on the use of local resources and the reclamation and reuse of natural materials to construct adventure playgrounds and equipment. The resulting landscape is natural and layered, offering tactile, sensory, and restorative experiences. Mature trees and considered planting create shaded retreats and calm, restorative spaces that support both play and reflection. A defining feature is the rammed earth signage marking Our Lady Star of the Sea's entrance—an expression of the school's identity and its commitment to environmental stewardship and place.

This innovative project not only delivers on, but exceeds, its four articulated goals and outcomes. At the heart of the design is a highly functional, multi-purpose outdoor learning environment that supports diverse uses: enabling active play, fostering curiosity and inquiry, encouraging moments of restoration, and enriching curriculum delivery. The project is to be commended for its seamless integration of functionality, sustainability, aesthetic cohesion and learning, resulting in a cohesive and inspiring educational landscape.

2026 LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AUSTRALASIA DESIGN AWARDS

COMMENDATION: LANDSCAPING/OUTDOOR LEARNING AREA (Category 8)

Designed to showcase outdoor learning environments or landscapes targeted at improving educational outcomes.

Inaburra School Playground
75-85 Billa Road, Bangor
New South Wales, Australia

Landscape Architect: NBRS

Summary Citation

A project defined by seemingly spatial gymnastics, this design choreographs a constrained site into a high-energy, inclusive landscape that acknowledges both land, people and country. It is a commendable example of how innovation can transform an awkward site into a cohesive and intuitive, meaningful, flexible, and inclusive learning environment.

Full Citation

From the outset, we were struck by the design's commitment to acknowledge place and Country within the scope of a tricky site - not merely as a formal gesture, but as the foundation for field work and site understanding. By choosing to 'choreograph the land' and its stories before drawing a single line, the design team has demonstrated a commendable trust in both the process and the voices of the students and stakeholders.

This project stands out as a sophisticated response to an incredibly challenging and constrained site. The spatial gymnastics required to fit such a diverse program is in itself, a feat of innovation. The result is a dynamic environment that feels both functional and intuitive. The jury particularly noted the continuous loop circuit, which provides a path that cleverly ties the disparate 'active' zones together and integrates with the rest of the school.

The design excels in providing a fun and dynamic atmosphere, offering a rich variety of play and designated spaces. The ability for students to move fluidly between different areas allows for a high degree of agency in how they occupy the school grounds and flexibly opens up new possibilities for the school as a high energy hub.

While the jury looks forward to the future maturity of the planting (which will eventually provide the necessary shade and planted rooms for quiet reflection) the current achievement is to be celebrated. The project manages to evolve a complex site into a cohesive landscape of land, people, and country. It is a project that does an awesome job with what it has available, proving that even the most constrained spaces can be transformed into meaningful, flexible, and inclusive learning environments.