

Progressive Pedagogies and Community Connections: Fifty Years of Urban Planning and Architectural Design



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Abstract This chapter reflects on fifty years of design industry experience working with schools to create better learning environments and community connections. It draws on the work of ClarkeHopkinsClarke Architects to explore changes over time with a focus on schools in Victoria, Australia. Starting with the work of co-founder, the late Les Clarke AM on Eltham College in the early 1970s, the chapter traces developments in school as community hub planning and design since that time and concludes with lessons learned about ‘Impacting Tomorrow’ through design that is sustainable socially, environmentally and financially. With a view towards scaling the concept, it is suggested that research-based evidence is needed to establish policies and practices that will enable schools to be developed as community hubs through joined-up approaches that involve enduring partnerships between educators, governments, and communities.

Keywords Schools · Communities · Community hub planning

Introduction

When reflecting with colleagues from ClarkeHopkinsClarke Architects (CHC), both past and present, on nearly 50 years of masterplanning and designing Australian schools to embody contemporary pedagogies and connect communities, what emerges are three constants critical to success: purpose, vision and partnerships.

Purpose has been at the heart of the better schools movement from the very beginning; not just within our practice but for our project partners too. Over the years our partners have grown to include school communities; local, state and federal governments; planners; engineers; landscape designers; community groups; sporting clubs; arts organisations; educational institutions, from early learning centres to vocational education providers and universities; and local businesses, from restaurants to swim

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schools. Collectively understanding ‘why’ we are designing a new building or facility leads to the ‘what’ and the ‘how’.

Vision has been pivotal too. It is the energy and evidence of advocates in the form of success stories that capture imaginations, allow partnerships to form, and encourage organisations and individuals to invest financially and emotionally in a project. Shared vision is important in mobilising a community and keeping focus when problems arise.

So, what has changed since our practice helped pioneer schools as community hubs in Australia nearly 50 years ago? Well, quite a lot!

Back in 1973 when our co-founder Les Clarke started Eltham College—one of Victoria’s first schools designed from scratch as a community hub—the educational design landscape in Australia was very different to that of today. Chalk, talk and tests ruled in schools, and facilities were standardised one-size-fits-all designs; created for swift, easy volume building during the post-war baby boom to meet the demands of rapidly growing populations. Rows of cellular classrooms lined central corridors, rows of desks faced the front, and rows of eyes followed teachers as they instructed, and students listened. In Victoria, design principles for community integration and conceiving schools as community hubs were virtually non-existent.

The Public Works Department allocated budgets and designs based on projected enrolments rather than commission bespoke designs responding to the school’s site, educational vision, or community needs.

Catholic schools¹ of the time were often conceived as an extension of their parish, offering a glimpse into the possibilities of schools conceived as community assets. School halls were often used outside school hours for parish meetings and events, and had strong connections to the parish community, if not the broader neighbourhood.

Wealthy independent schools appointed architects to design performing arts centres and sporting facilities, but these facilities were conceived as assets for school use. There was no financial incentive or overarching net benefit perceived within the school or its community to open facilities up for broader community use.

In this era, schools were generally narrowly defined places. People accepted schools to be largely vacant outside of school hours, aside from playgrounds.

Over the past 50 years, school designs have evolved to be bespoke, inclusive, learner-centred environments within a community context. They are a product of governments, communities and organisations that regard schools as important pieces of our urban and community fabric. State building authorities in Australia are increasingly conceptualising schools as community hubs.

¹ Australia has a large Catholic school network comprising over 1750 schools in 2021.

The Co-evolution of Pedagogical and Community-Oriented Design

The evolution towards developing community-facing schools mirrors progress in pedagogical practice and related school facility design. During the 1970s and 1980s, education gradually changed from an instructional, chalk-and-talk, one-size-fits-all model to a more nuanced, personalised approach that recognised learners of all abilities learn in different ways and benefit from different learning experiences and settings.

Learning from best international practice, progressive architects alongside progressive principals created local exemplars that explored the value of designs that responded to the specific needs of schools and communities. For example, co-locating and sharing facilities, like early learning centres and performing arts centres, within schools, can connect and enrich communities.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, pedagogy and curriculum responded to a growing body of evidence on the benefits of differentiated student-centred learning. Schools embraced diverse learning modes and settings, collaborative learning with peers and inquiry-based learning, and architects designed environments to support these approaches. Architects led stakeholder conversations about schools' pedagogies and the aspirations of the communities served. Architects and landscape designers worked together on connecting indoor and outdoor learning environments that delivered greater flexibility and tactility. Once a project was completed, practices like ours took time to work with educators to understand the affordances of the design rather than simply use new spaces in old ways.

Over the past decade, pedagogy and curriculum have responded to rapidly changing technologies too. Educational design has responded with inter-disciplinary learning hubs that integrate diverse disciplines, learning modes and settings. As a result, community partnerships and shared facilities have become more diverse too. School community hubs can include everything from adaptable indoor/outdoor event and exhibition spaces to specialised maker spaces, recording studios and high-grade sporting facilities.

At the same time, inclusive design has moved from a niche issue focused on students with disabilities to a mainstream concern encompassing gender, sexuality, culture and ethnicity. Schools and designers now understand they need to create learning and community environments that actively dismantle physical and cultural barriers to participation, normalising diversity of all kinds.

As pedagogy and school design has evolved, so too has the concept of schools as community hubs, including their design and operational potential. Schools leading the way in contemporary educational design are increasingly proactive in partnering with community groups to create and program shared spaces in ways that encourage learning, recreation, and wellbeing. This has evolved from simple co-locations of related community facilities that operate independently, to exploring more integrated and shared models of community use.

Simple steps have proved effective in achieving many of these partnerships. For example, at Mernda Central P-12 College, one of 15 schools CHC designed for the Victorian School Building Authority as a Public Private Partnership (PPP), the principal activated a shared public forecourt by inviting local food producers to trial a mid-week farmers' market (see Fig. 1). By offering to buy any unsold produce for use by the school's Food Technology program she made participation attractive for producers and for students. What better way to make learning about food production, economics and menu planning than by inviting local farmers into their school? The market was so popular that no leftover produce was available for the school to buy—but it contributed enormously to embedding the new school in locals' minds and lives. The Victorian School Building Authority New Schools PPP was a large multi-school project that focused heavily on integrating community partnerships into the social and spatial fabric of each school.

Leading architects remain impact-minded and future focused. The opportunities for creating partnerships with local councils and community organisations have progressed as the collective benefits have become better understood and more widely embraced.

The challenge is finding ways to collectively move beyond exemplars of schools as community hubs towards a system-wide approach to schools operating as the hearts of their communities. Just as design for inclusivity is becoming the norm through the widespread adoption of Universal Design Principles, we want to see schools for the future master planned and designed for contemporary pedagogies and communities as a matter of course.



Fig. 1 Farmers market at Mernda Central P-12 College (Photography by Rhiannon Slatter)

Key Projects That Embody Shifts Over Time

Spanning from the 1970s to the 2020s, the four selected projects reflect shifts in ideas of community, pedagogical approaches, and the enabling role of design.

1970s: Eltham College

In 1973 Eltham College, designed by CHC co-founder Les Clarke, became one of Victoria's first schools designed from inception as a true community hub. It was independent, secular and parent funded as a cooperative over many years of building works. Les recalls the school eventually bought back parents' shares, which initially cost around \$60 each.

The community ethos of Eltham College was typified by its multi-award winning ECCA Centre (which stands for Eltham College Community Association Centre). Built in just six months, it comprised a games hall, gymnasium, swim centre, squash court, licensed restaurant and one of the first commercial childcare centres in Victoria (Fig. 2). The combination was unlike anything being produced by design templates at the time.

In 1973, Les Clarke was a young dad living in Eltham who spotted a need in his community for a progressive local school. Twenty years later, Les received an Order of Australia for service to the community through the design of schools that incorporate community facilities. Eltham College became his most celebrated and influential project. It inspired then State Education Minister Lindsay Thompson to challenge Les and (unbeknownst to him) another designer to deliver an exemplar of contemporary educational design in just six months.

Using Les's design, Gladstone Views Primary School (Fig. 3) became the first new government school to be designed by a private architect and not the public works department. It cemented change with its then-radical open plan learning environment, delivered below the standard cost using a classic factory structure of steel frame, concrete floor and sawtooth roof. This project proved to be transformational in demonstrating the benefits of affordable bespoke design in meeting community needs.

As a result, the Minister changed policy and resource allocation to allow schools to work directly with architects to design bespoke schools based on their vision and community needs. His successor, Norman Lacey, co-opted the ECCA Centre concept, which he dubbed ECA Centres, and declared every school in the state should include one. This opened design possibilities for both local architects and schools keen to incorporate community focused facilities.

CHC went on to create co-op-funded ECCA Centres at eight more schools across Melbourne and Les evolved the concept further. With support from the Whitlam government, he undertook a six-month study tour of independent and government schools across Australia with the retired principal of Canberra High School and a



Fig. 2 Eltham College ECCA Centre 1973

quantity surveyor. “We took photographs and measurements, compared finishes and costs and sizes and all the rest, and ended up with ... the space schedule you still work to,” he recalls. This work created an average cost structure for schools and helped inform architects as they developed bespoke designs throughout Victoria.

Nearly 50 years later, CHC is still designing facilities at Eltham College. Designing schools as community hubs requires collaboration and long-term thinking, aiding design that embodies the changing needs and aspirations of schools.

Central to Les’s success was vision, collaboration, and good economic sense born of detailed research. Les visited international exemplars of contemporary educational design in the United States, United Kingdom and Europe and was inspired by early learning centres based in some US schools, open plan classrooms for team teaching he saw working well across England, and schools like one in Nottingham that warmly welcomed its community by co-locating everything from a kindergarten to a theatre, restaurant, golf range and ski slope. Looking back, Les told me research gave him the vision, passion and confidence that got parents and politicians behind progressive

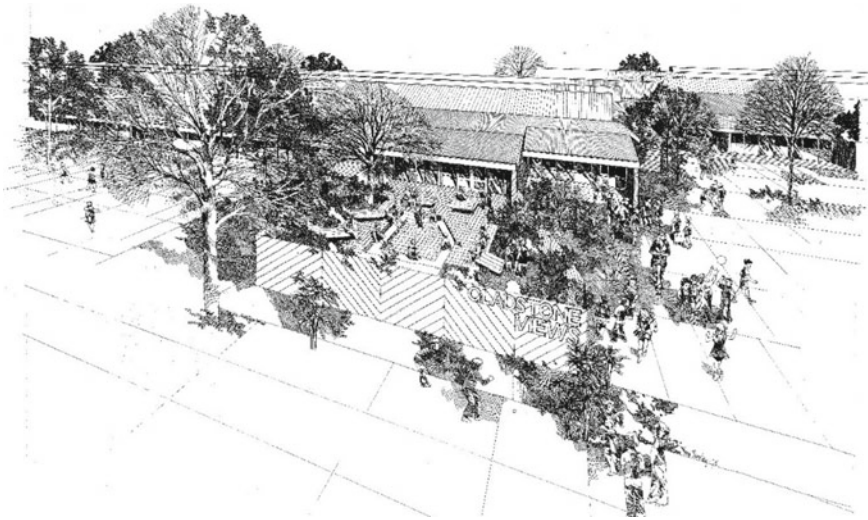


Fig. 3 Concept perspective of Gladstone Views Primary School

ideas. “Research makes a champion,” he said. “You’ve got to do the research to find out where we can head. If you do the research, you can push yourself to the forefront, because you’re coming up with ideas based on good evidence.”

1980s: Yarra Valley Grammar

In the decade that followed, performing arts centres were embraced by government and independent schools alike as valuable facilities to share with their communities. Jack Clarke (no relation to Les), another CHC co-founder, pioneered an economical approach that enabled schools to combine games halls, theatres and multi-purpose spaces in one facility.

Like Les’s ECCA Centre model, Jack’s model was informed by an international study tour of exemplars. On his return, Jack researched compatible dimensions for combined sporting and arts facilities, which worked well for students while also meeting the requirements of various sporting codes and their community competitions. Performing arts centres established at schools like Nunawading High School and Doncaster High School have operated successfully to their communities for decades.

In the late 1980s at Yarra Valley Grammar another former partner, Robert Goodliffe (then a young project architect), designed a facility featuring permanent seating for 890 people (temporary for 1000), making it the largest performing arts centre at an Australian school at the time (see Fig. 4). It attracted performances by



Fig. 4 Perspective image of Yarra Valley Grammar Performing Arts Centre

major companies including The Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, who added it to their regional touring itinerary.

Access to artists of this calibre is invaluable for both for the school and the broader Yarra Valley community. But this facility was also designed as a teaching tool. An essential requirement of the design was to provide students with the opportunity to perform on stage and manage and operate all the technical components in the centre, including lighting, audio, back-of-house functions and front-of-house-operations. Once again, vision was the key to creating this key piece of shared school and community infrastructure.

2000s: Officer Education Precinct

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, the conversations that drove Victoria's best educational design outcomes had expanded significantly. In the early days, it was visionary principals who helped architects develop project briefs. Stakeholder engagement often involved just the principal and a handful of others (not necessarily teachers). Consultations were sometimes just the school's principal and business manager. One of our former partners, Ezio Costa, quipped, "Thirty or forty years ago, stakeholder engagement went something like this: The business manager would ask, 'How much will it cost?' and the principal would ask, 'How soon is it going to be finished?'".

The process of master planning and designing the Officer Education Precinct in Melbourne's rapidly growing outer south-east was far more collaborative. This project combined a secondary college, specialist school for students with disabilities,



Fig. 5 Officer Education Precinct Masterplan 2016

primary school, community hub, and early learning centre, and was the product of three years of consultation with organisations including the Department of Education, surrounding primary and secondary schools, community groups, local families, the Australian Education Union and the Cardinia Shire Council (see Fig. 5).

Early and widespread consultations in 2011 were key to the success of the project, helping to establish everyone’s overlapping needs and aspirations. This was critical because two years later when the precinct began to develop Officer Secondary College, federal, state and local funding streams were all attracted in the same financial year based on the early engagement around a shared vision for what the community needed. That’s a rare feat, even today, and one of the great challenges of creating schools as community hubs.

Consulting early and widely also generated great buy-in from stakeholders once funding was secured. By then Cardinia Council had undertaken a strategic review of community infrastructure and identified a shortage of local indoor sports facilities. The council proposed a shared indoor multipurpose complex for sports like futsal, European handball and volleyball, and the Officer Secondary College Community Hub was born (see Figs. 6 and 7).

The result is a multi-purpose community hub incorporating a three-court indoor sports stadium, a performing arts space, community meeting areas, sporting administration space and a commercial kitchen with barista facilities used by the college and specialist school during class time and opened for community use after school and on weekends. While various funding streams and diverse stakeholder partnerships were time-consuming and sometimes tricky to manage, the school and its community now enjoys better amenity due to economies of scale.



Fig. 6 Officer Education Precinct multipurpose sporting facilities (Photo by Rhiannon Slatter)



Fig. 7 Officer Education Precinct community hub (Photo by Rhiannon Slatter)

2020: Beaumaris Secondary College

For the past two decades my colleague Wayne Stephens, Education Partner at CHC, has been part of the progressive global movement that has placed learners at the heart of school design. Learner-centred design has transformed learning environments worldwide, shifting the focus to designing flexibly around the changing needs of diverse communities of learners. Wayne talks about the need for learners to inhabit space that intuitively ‘gets’ them. Officer was an early example of this approach.

Beaumaris Secondary College is another example that shows how stakeholder engagement can deliver facilities that reflect community aspirations.

The new college was built on the former site of Sandringham College's Beaumaris Campus. This had recently closed yet had strong community support and advocacy for a government secondary college of the Beaumaris community. We began master planning Beaumaris Secondary College in 2015 and worked with a diverse New School Planning Group that included representatives from the Department of Education and Training, Bayside City Council, Melbourne Cricket Club, principals from local primary and secondary schools, community groups and future parents. "In developing the school's pedagogical vision, it was clear this strong focus on community connectedness, the local environment and health needed to be embedded in the design," Wayne recalls.

Through a partnership between the Victorian School Building Authority and Melbourne Cricket Club, we explored opportunities for shared sporting facilities. As a broader group we undertook multiple stakeholder visioning workshops and site visits to new vertical schools. Achieving the shared community vision for an exemplar community sports precinct required the school to minimise the land area occupied, hence the multi-storey solution. The main building is a multi-level learning hub that creates a civic presence on a prominent corner and incorporates a double-height administration and resource centre, specialist program facilities at ground level, and general learning spaces over two levels above. The adjacent single-storey activity centre (Fig. 8) is designed for shared school and community use. It comprises a games hall, canteen, performance centre and food technology spaces, and is connected to the learning hub via a central plaza. Extensive recreation facilities include two specialist high performance ovals for cricket and Australian rules football, a multi-purpose pitch incorporating a FIFA grade 1 soccer pitch, and a sports pavilion designed to be utilised by the school and community sporting groups.

As described by Wayne:

The campus is designed to foster a strong sense of belonging within the school community. Hence the welcoming public plaza, clear physical and visual connections between circulation and gathering spaces and school and community facilities. Learning communities (general learning areas) include gathering areas, seating nooks and work benches within the central circulation zone to promote interaction, engagement and activation of the spaces for socialisation and learning... It can be hard work for all involved to create shared facilities of high enough quality to meet the needs of amateur and professional sporting codes. But it's worth it in communities where there's high demand for after-hours use of facilities of this calibre.

The new facilities at Beaumaris Secondary College bring the community together. High performance cricket facilities are used throughout the week, including during school hours, and the sports stadium, sports pavilion, ovals and multipurpose pitch are used every night of the week and every weekend.

A clear and robust joint-use agreement is central to the success of strong community partnerships. This should lay out shared understandings about how best to work together and navigate the sometimes-competing needs of all partners. Doing so can help create a successful, symbiotic relationship between a school and its community, enabling it to function effectively long into the future.



Fig. 8 Beaumaris Secondary College activity centre 2020 (Photo by Rhiannon Slatter)

Key Lessons About Master Planning and Designing Schools with Community in Mind

These pivotal projects, and others created throughout CHC's history, have provided key learnings that have informed the development of our work in connecting schools to their communities. Evaluating what has worked well and what hasn't at the end of a project is a priority, allowing our practice to continually build and adapt our approach to working with communities as their needs evolve. Here are some key themes and takeaways, based on our collective experience.

The Role of Schools in Communities Has Changed

At CHC we talk about creating vibrant communities and have developed a methodology that guides our projects by identifying the key tangible and intangible elements of great placemaking and incorporating them into every project. We see every school project as an opportunity to enrich community life, with the school at the heart of every community.

Schools need focal points for bringing people together, connecting populations and creating a sense of belonging beyond just the families that attend the school. We no longer build the town halls, the churches and the community health centres that we once did, so schools must play enhanced roles as hubs for community.

Understanding of this concept has developed from the early days of our work at Eltham College, to the recent Beaumaris Secondary College. More communities are now demanding this level of community connectivity. Ideas that were once seen as trail blazing are now part of the general design discourse.

The role of schools will continue to change as they embrace community needs. Designers need to continue to anticipate, meet and exceed these aspirations to enable schools to flourish at the heart of their communities.

Staying True to the Community Vision to Overcome Inevitable Obstacles

A strong, shared vision is vital to the success of projects and is developed through broad consultation and engagement with representatives of the entire community. Engaging deeply in these processes takes time to do well, but the downstream benefits to the masterplan and design of a project are often significant.

The creation of such a vision at Officer Education Hub, for example, laid the foundation for the strong partnerships that followed. This can be a challenge and a risk when design deadlines are set, funding is committed, and outcomes need to be met. However, it is through the creation of a strong vision that hurdles can be overcome. When joint use agreements start to get complicated, or the technical or operational elements of sharing facilities create concerns, it is coming back to this shared vision that provides direction.

For example, the challenges associated with safety and security, operational overheads and ongoing facilities management can sow doubt in partners' minds. If creating a school as a community hub is appearing too difficult, returning to the aspirations of the shared vision often provides the necessary focus to overcome obstacles to realising long term objectives.

Community Hubs Need Champions, But They Can't Do It Alone

The importance of a champion in visualising, realising, and activating a school as a community hub cannot be underestimated. This might be one or more people—a school principal, architect, community broker or organiser.

In the early years of Eltham College, Les Clarke learned to become a visionary champion who can inspire others and lead the way for that community to achieve its aspirations for the school. Quite often this role is taken up by a visionary principal or school leader with foresight and conviction. The champion needs to be an articulate advocate who can get others excited and shape strong partnerships between the school and its community.

The challenge and risk is the vacuum that can be left if the champion(s) leaves and the strength of the community partnerships leaves with them. This is where a shared school vision and support structures help ensure longevity. This includes having the operational support, policies and resources required to ensure success, both within the school and within government. Even at Eltham College ECCA Centre, which was a celebrated community hub, the commercial restaurant and childcare facilities were forced to close after a decade when the government ended incentives that were crucial to their success.

Aligning Design Responses to the Community

Part of our responsibility as educational designers is to align our design response to the meet the needs of the school today, while allowing for future growth. This means understanding where a school is currently and where it wants to go and using design to help bridge that gap.

The same principle applies to design for community partnerships. If the aspiration is too far from the current reality, then design will not be able to bridge the gap. Careful analysis and consideration of all potential community partnership options at the early stages is vital to ensure that nothing is master planned out and that there is room for the community to grow with the school. At the Officer Education Hub some of the community partnership opportunities did not come into play for several years after precinct development began. However, the masterplan had flexibility to allow these partnerships to grow with the precincts development. Elements of the Officer Education Precinct Masterplan can still be realised should the community require it.

At the heart of aligning the design response to the community is the principle of creating shared value for both the school and the community. There are tangible learning opportunities through community partnerships and obvious benefits for the community to access more integrated facilities. The key from a design perspective is balancing the needs of both.

The Future for Schools as Community Hubs

At CHC we aim to use our expertise as architects, interior designers and urban designers to build environments that meet communities' needs today and positively impact tomorrow. We have used this approach throughout our 60-year history to impact school communities throughout Victoria and beyond. The evolution of schools as community hubs during this time makes us optimistic about how the concept will continue to develop.

In the early years, visionary leadership, a pioneering spirit, dedication and even luck was required to establish community partnerships in a school and help them

flourish. Now, partnerships are more commonplace and better supported by policy and the wider community.

Maintaining the strength of partnerships beyond master planning and design remains a challenge. A future focus on operational and management support for schools as community hubs is needed to support schools and community organisations to work together. Visionary aspirations can only be delivered if there is operational funding and management support to allow school communities to work together in the longer term.

Education systems, different levels of government, community organisations and communities need to work collaboratively to create holistic policies, systems and operational models for how schools as community hubs function. Moving from the current model of ad hoc exemplar schools showing what is possible, to a system-wide approach of designing and operating all schools as community hubs is where the future lies.

Further research and evidence are needed to guide productive decision making. At CHC, we have always underpinned our design responses with research. From Les Clarke's study tours in the 1970s to inform approaches to designing schools, to my current business Partner Dean Landy's placemaking research and resulting book *Creating Vibrant Communities*, we've found the best design solutions stem from rigorous, evidence-based research. Likewise, the Building Connections: Schools as Community Hubs ARC Linkage project is building an evidence base to illustrate how schools can become community hubs and the value of creating enduring partnerships that put schools at the heart of communities. This is a vital step in the evolution of schools as community hubs, helping to unlock system-wide approaches to impacting tomorrow with greater speed and at greater scale.

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