



A design inspired by country: Canberra's newest public high school Canberra, Australia

Located north of Canberra in the emerging North Gungahlin suburb of Taylor, Aunty Agnes Shea High School is the Australian Capital Territory's newest public high school serving Years 7-10. Named after the late Ngunnawal Elder, Aunty Agnes Shea was a fierce advocate for education and inclusion, and the school has been designed to reflect a strong connection to Country.

General and specialist learning areas to support all needs

A key design feature of Aunty Agnes Shea High School is the integration of staff and student spaces. A cohesive design approach was taken by ck architecture across the entire project, maintaining aesthetics, function and performance in staff and student focused areas.

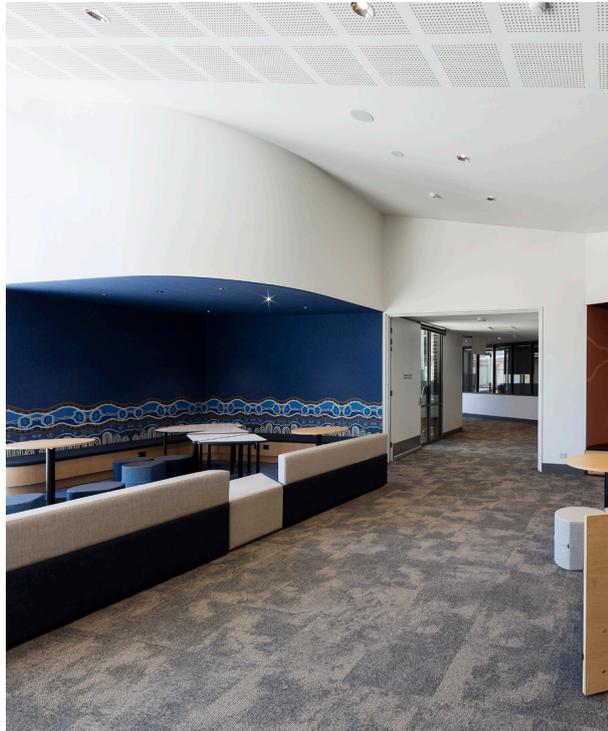
The new high school offers a diverse mix of general and specialist learning environments, incorporating both indoor and outdoor learning areas, as well as integrated spaces to support the individual needs of all students.

The specialist learning areas include Visual Arts, Performing Arts, Technology and Science, while the General Learning Settings (GLS) include open collaborative and explicit teaching spaces, private meeting rooms and staff workspaces. These have each been designed to adapt to the needs of both educators and students, with sliding doors and flexible furniture solutions allowing easy reconfiguration of spaces.

The Administration and Student Wellbeing areas form the operational heart of the school, enabling smooth daily function and providing critical support services. The Administration area includes a main public foyer which offers visitors a comfortable place to wait, while the supporting administration offices provide functional and ergonomic workspaces. The staff lounge delivers a central space for all staff to gather, fostering a whole-school culture with café dining and lounge style settings.

When it comes to designing education spaces, Cassandra Keller, co-owner of ck architecture explains - *“The functional requirements of workplace and education align across multiple aspects; however, the greatest difference is the consideration of circulation and movement. Workplaces tend to have a steady flow between spaces throughout the day, whereas education spaces experience high traffic movement at specific times of the day (before and after school, between lessons and during assemblies). This requires a different consideration to flexibility requirements, furniture configuration, and durability.”*

“Education spaces also need to be engaging for students of multiple ages, as well as being highly functional for all stakeholders in the school environment, so a differing look and feel approach might be employed.”



Tapping into the colours of Country

In collaboration with Richie Allan, a Ngunnawal Kamilaroi custodian and Cultural Director at the Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation (TOAC), the architecture was guided by the principles of the Ngunnawal six-season calendar when developing the look and feel of the school.

The spaces bring the stories of the seasons to life, drawing inspiration from the inter-relationship between flora and fauna as the indicators of each season. Carefully selected imagery, materials, textures, and finishes are woven together to create a space that respects and honours a connection to Country, guided by the wisdom and traditions of First Nations peoples.

“The fundamental goal of schools is to educate and engage students. By embedding First Nations culture as an integral part of our architectural and design approach, we’re creating a platform to share their stories for generations to come,” explains Cassandra.

Five local First Nations artists were commissioned to create original artworks for the project, with each artwork displayed in the school library’s **“Seasons Room”**.

With an emphasis on environmentally sustainable design, sustainable materials and solutions were also used throughout the project, in line with the ACT Government’s commitment to act on climate change.

Offering a single point of contact

Schiavello were engaged by Hindmarsh Construction to be a single point of contact for furniture across the campus, delivering solutions that were not only functional and visually appealing but also met key education standards.

Height-adjustable Neo Workstations with desk-mount Vide Panels were installed throughout the Administration building and staff workplaces, providing sit-stand ergonomic support to staff and teachers.

Aire Fold Tables feature in the Conference Room, whilst additional tables, loose and auditorium seating, bespoke couches, work and student benches and desks were also supplied.

“The furniture used throughout the school ensures functionality through flexible settings, with specific selections tailored to each space and its intended use,” Cassandra says.

“Additionally, the furniture contributes to the success of the design narrative by reinforcing each season’s colour and defining each space’s activity. This has helped to foster a cohesive learning environment connected through material choices and colour palettes, grounded in Country.”

Photography by Adam McGrath for Hindmarsh.

