

TINTERN SCHOOLS MIDDLE SCHOOLS

REVIEW Nigel Bertram

PHOTOGRAPHY Brendan Finn

In response to this Victorian school's pedagogical model for parallel learning, Architectus realizes a confident pair of buildings that counters formal separation with social connection.



learn on the drive out to Ringwood East that boys and girls operate best at different air temperatures – 19 and 21 degrees respectively, to be exact – according to Tintern Schools’ particular philosophy of “parallel learning,” which runs from the start of primary school until the end of Year 9. Throughout this time, the two sexes are taught in completely separate and customized classes that are kept spatially adjacent to allow for sharing and socializing during breaks. The new Middle Schools complex designed by Architectus accommodates and expresses this pedagogical construct through a pair of linear forms that converge and diverge from each other with independent entrances and internal organization, while also setting up a series of subtle new relationships and mixing possibilities through a careful approach to landscape and site-scale planning.

The Tintern Schools campus is nestled deep in the densely treed and undulating landscape of Melbourne’s outer eastern suburbs. The school’s territory, which includes an area of bushland reserve and a small working farm, is embedded within this terrain and from the outside does not appear as a single entity, but rather is experienced in fragments via a series of separate road frontages. Once within the campus space, however, there is a strong sense of unity and spatial sequence between the different sections of the school, with each section – from the early learning centre to the senior college –

legible and visible from all the others. The middle school is, appropriately, in the centre of this network and opens up visual and spatial connections.

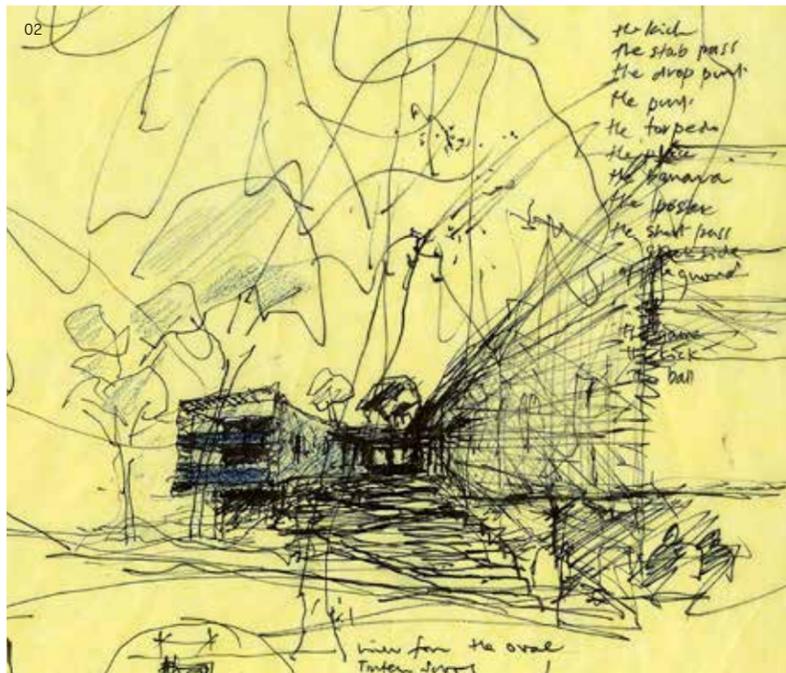
For the Middle Schools, the first architectural move was to turn the lines of the two buildings against the slope of the land, deliberately breaking the established pattern of continuous buildings that follow the site’s contours and establishing a new *parti*, which now seems so natural it is hard to imagine the site in the previous arrangement. By raising the buildings slightly off the ground at the higher side of the site, a space is made underneath that opens up connections both transverse and linear. Existing mature trees have been worked carefully into the composition, at points coming extremely close to the new structures, and serve to both anchor the new spaces and give the impression that they have always been here. A rocky edge has been created on the escarpment, continuing under the buildings, and this undercroft landscape immediately grabs my attention.

In the ravine-like space underneath there is a landscape of exploration, carefully designed without barriers or railings, allowing and encouraging students to jump over the rocks of the rain garden, which is allowed to periodically flood and absorb stormwater. The buildings are raised over this space on thick concrete piloti and their undersides are lined in plywood, emphasizing the interior-like →

01 The Middle Schools complex at Tintern Schools in Ringwood East, Melbourne is shaped by a careful approach to landscape and site-scale planning.

02 Sketches show the development of a scheme for a pair of floating buildings, with a sheltered space underneath, projecting out towards the landscape.

03 The Middle Schools accommodate Tintern Schools’ “parallel learning” education model: separate but adjacent learning zones for boys and girls.



04

The undercroft is an unstructured social zone, inviting different types of occupation between classes.

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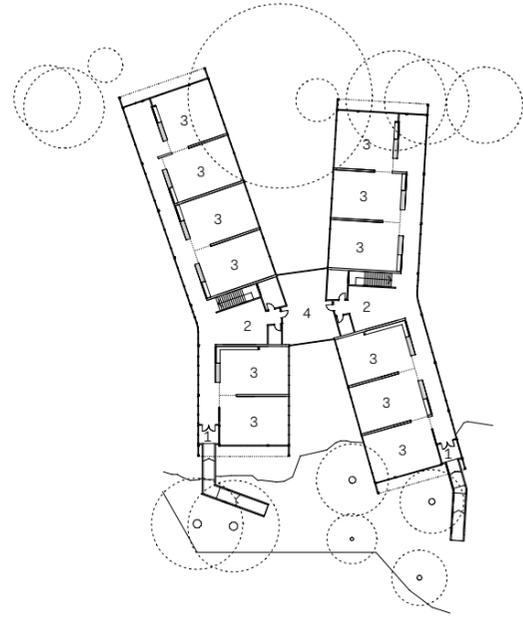
A concrete stair at the centre of each building wing lends the structure a tough, almost infrastructure-like feel.

qualities of the covered external undercroft. There is a suggestive and unstructured freedom to this zone, as evidenced by the students hanging around loosely on the timber bridges, the group of girls sitting and talking in a secret grotto space against the rocky hill, and the felt-covered billiards table that had been moved aside to make space for a recent night market occupying the entire covered area. This is space that the school didn't even know it had.

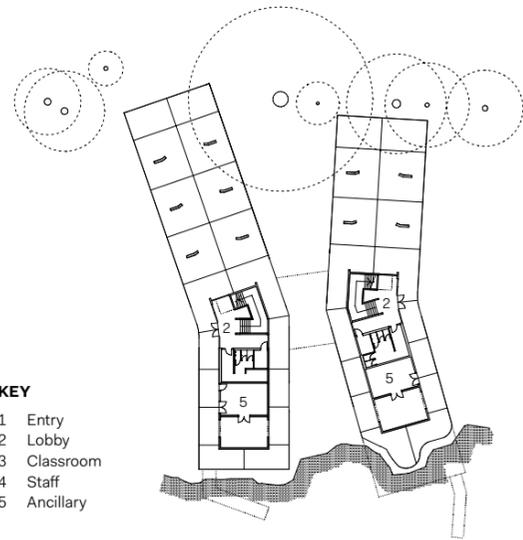
The undercroft is also a social mixing chamber for girls and boys so neatly separated above. Kids hang out and casually mix in this loose zone (but are passively supervised by teachers on the connecting bridge above). The concrete stairs from each wing open out on the buildings' external edges and face in opposite directions, making this landscaped centre space feel like the "back" and somehow allowing it to become more flexible and ambiguous in its role. It feels like infrastructure and has a pleasant type of toughness.

The edges of this covered external space are formed by a robust series of steps and smooth concrete path connections that link to adjacent spaces. At the upper entrances, exposed ramps with concrete balustrades join the raised buildings to the ground, marking the entrances in the manner of a brutalist 1970s public building (or evoking memories of a CAE campus, remarks design principal James Jones). These ramps and the surrounding landscape treatment blend into the material palette of the extended school environs, which has been formed over time and which also shows the influence of the concrete panel and timber-lined Early Learning Centre building (2010), also by Architectus.

The elevated ramps lead to separate entrances for the two wings, each with a generous covered threshold over a steel plank boot-scraping area. The buildings are constructed like large industrial sheds on their raised concrete platforms, but a Vierendeel truss structure inside allows deep cantilevers at the ends. Taken at face value, it is a heroic composition, hovering in section and gestural in plan, but it is also gentle, it fits in, and from a distance its slim horizontality allows it to disappear among the trees. There is great attention to detail and simple efficiency in the way things have been put together. A translucent composite fibreglass wall panel cladding spans full height and allows a beautiful soft light to enter the interior, while achieving R-values well in excess of conventional framed construction. The concrete stair core is bluntly powerful and unfussy but executed with care. The undercroft spaces have warmth from their ply ceilings, which are uninterrupted by the usual cacophony of services. Classroom interiors are thoughtfully planned and proportioned, with continuous strip windows allowing views across the central gap from girls' to boys' wings, yet set just above the eye height of seated students to avoid distraction. →

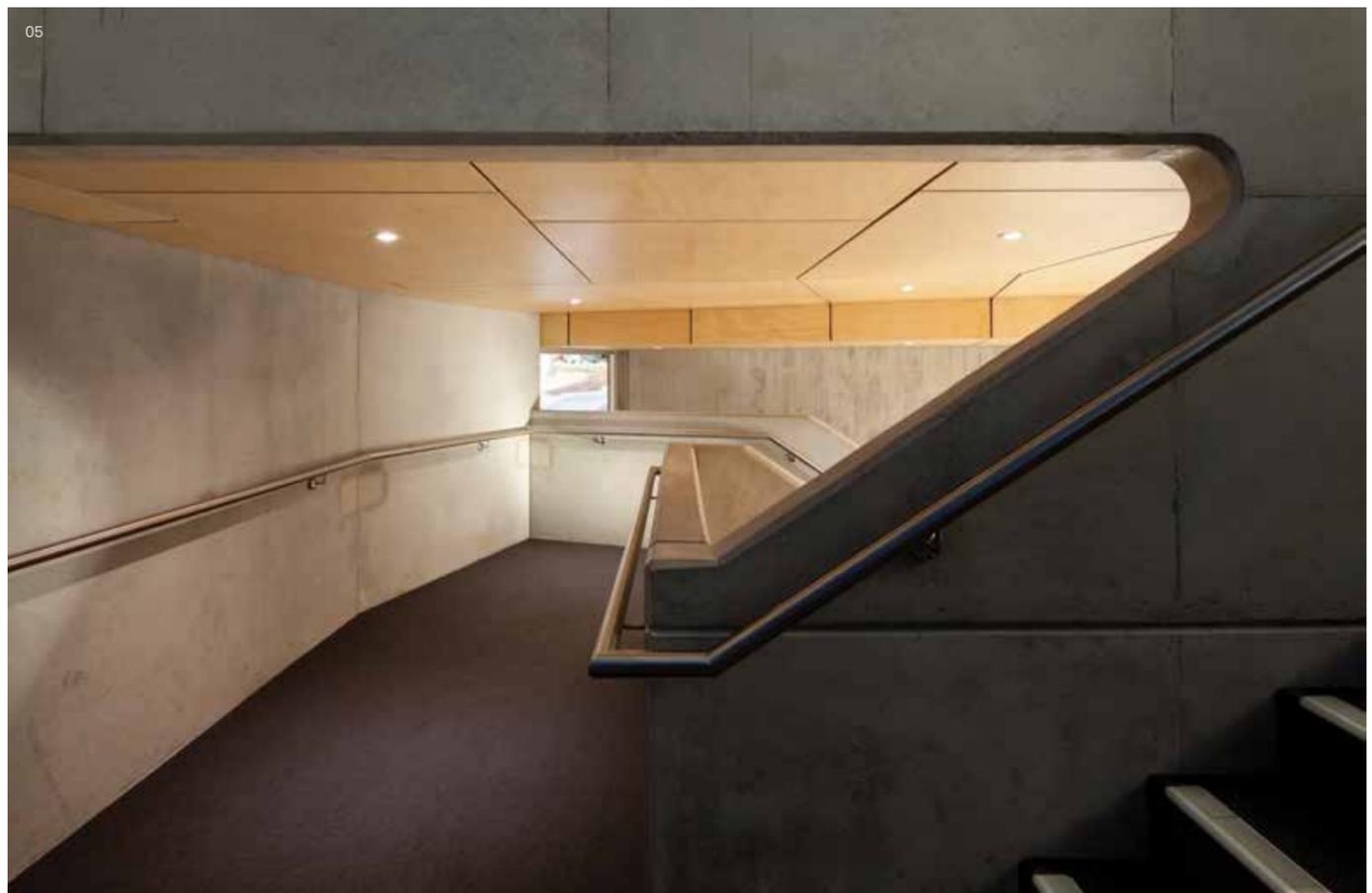
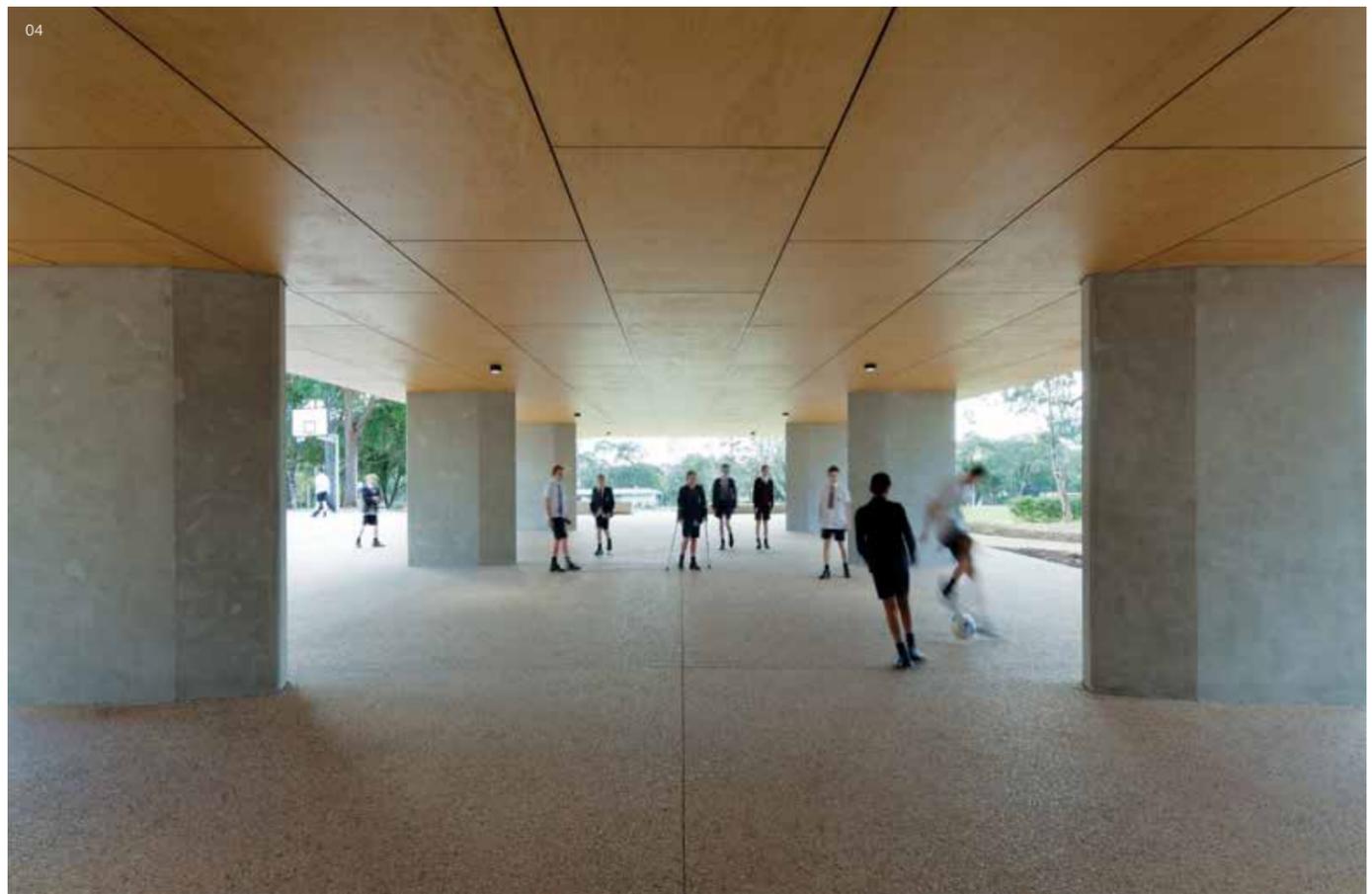
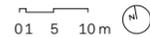


FIRST FLOOR PLAN
1:1000



KEY
1 Entry
2 Lobby
3 Classroom
4 Staff
5 Ancillary

GROUND FLOOR PLAN
1:1000





This ensemble of buildings and external spaces shows the power of a simple but site-specific idea carefully worked out and followed through with maturity – but also with whimsy, poetry and delight. In an era in which wealthy private schools collect architect-designed buildings like trophies and compete for students on the basis of ever more elaborate facilities, it is refreshing to see quality buildings delivered in an unapologetic yet gentle way, and with such a strong emphasis on landscape, stitching together the composite sense of the campus to be experienced as a sequence over time. **AA**

Nigel Bertram is a director of NMBW Architecture Studio and Practice Professor of Architecture at Monash University in Melbourne.

06
Composite fibreglass wall panels and strip windows allow light into the classrooms and corridors.

TINTERN SCHOOLS MIDDLE SCHOOLS

ARCHITECT
Architectus

Project team: Mark Wilde (director); James Jones (design principal); Jennifer Rodezno (project principal); Simon Smith (project leader); Mark Gifford, Paulo Sampaio (project team); Amy Cantwell (interior designer); Frank Hanson (landscape architect)

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