

Modern 'machine for healing'

ARCHITECTURE

ROYAL CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

Architects: Billard Leece Partnership
and Bates Smart Architects
Joe Rollo Reviewer

NOTHING reveals the advances in children's medical care more powerfully than the new billion-dollar Royal Children's Hospital on Flemington Road.

This tremendous new facility in Parkville, on a scale unprecedented in Australia, will, surely, set a new benchmark in hospital design for children.

If Le Corbusier could call the modern house "a machine for living", this formidable hospital can be described as a machine for healing. An extraordinary interplay between structure and nature characterises its architecture, crammed, as it is, with the latest technology and exquisite surgical facilities and apparatus for intensive and specialised care, sumptuously laid out and admirably serviced.

The Royal Children's belongs to a new generation of public hospital, with none of the stigma of a charity organisation — though it still relies on donations and its yearly appeal for many special projects — in which the building's relationship with natural light and the outdoors plays a crucial role in healing body and mind.

There's an extensive body of research revealing the value of natural light and of nature itself in improving well-being. Given the beauty of Royal Park, into which the hospital is inserted, working with the park became an early design focus for the architects, Billard Leece Partnership and Bates Smart, because it could provide therapeutic benefits to those in the hospital.

And it is the connection with the park that is most striking about the experience of visiting the hospital for the first time. Light and sun flood into its deepest recesses and your eye is constantly drawn to pleasant views into and through the park. What's been produced here is as close to an evocation of nature in a building as I can think of.



The statistics are staggering: 160,000 square metres of buildings, over 5000 rooms, 240,000 patients a year, 230 emergency patients a day, 4000 staff, additional patient capacity of 35,000 a year, and more.

But it is the architecture and its concern for the children, their families and staff that truly impresses. Deftly detailed and luxuriously finished, it is clear that priority in the design has been given to their experience of the building.

Essentially a cluster of five buildings linked by a six-storey atrium and main street, the designers have taken every opportunity to either have the buildings spill out into the park or be surrounded by safe and protected playgrounds and gardens. The inpatient unit, two star-shaped buildings for long-stay patients, pushes deepest into the park and affords tree-top views from every room. With their sunshade system of laminated translucent glass

panels, in shades of green to replicate a tree canopy, these buildings harmonise most with the park; their external appearance of green-fritted glass sunshades, dirty-white and grey concrete panels working in concert as a camouflage.

Main Street, the 100-metre-long orientation space from which you access all areas of the hospital, has two super-scaled installations: one, a "creature" with fluttering butterfly by Melbourne artist Alexander



Art and nature motifs adorn the Royal Children's Hospital on Flemington Road.

PICTURES:
JOHN GOLLINGS,
WAYNE TAYLOR

Knox; the other a leafy grand mobile sculpture by Jade Oakley. Impressive, too, is its network of ramps and bridges and stairs criss-crossing the space, clad in timber veneers to recall the branch structure of trees.

Much has been made of the two-storey aquarium in the emergency department and the utterly charming meerkat enclosure, but just as impressive are the playgrounds and gardens. An enclosed playground near the meerkat display in the outpatients area, completely enclosed and safe, open to the sky, appears to work as a great place for distraction while waiting to be attended by hospital staff.

Remarkable, too, is the facade fronting Flemington Road with its skin of C-shaped glass panels transitioning from white to green to red and pink, like shimmering leaves, as they spread along the face of the building.

The Royal Children's is a fusion of interior and exterior spaces designed to create a hospital experience like no other. As a place of last resort for children, I can think of no better place.