

Commercial Property

School inspired by Maori concept

Designers sought a village feel, writes **Stephen Crafti**.

DANDENONG High School is a mix of three schools: the present name, Cleeland Secondary College and Doveton Secondary College.

All three were culturally distinctive (collectively at Dandenong, 65 languages were spoken at home) and all differed in their "educational health".

Dandenong High's intake was stable with about 1600 students, while Doveton's was declining, hovering at about 170. One thing the three schools shared was being in a poor urban area, with 25 per cent of the youth neither in education nor employment.

"We wanted to help change this statistic, as well as creating one new campus for the three schools," says architect Richard Leonard, director in charge of Education at Hayball.

For Hayball, who worked closely with designer Mary Featherston and Dr Julia Atkin, educational



The southern facades are finished in black steel, while the northern ones are clad in white.

specialists, their role was to help create a model that would better engage students from years 7 to 12.

"It comes down to understanding how the teachers operate and providing them with the spaces that will support a broader educational vision," says Leonard.

As important in the brief

was creating a "marriage of convenience" between the three schools, involving two of the smaller schools closing. With the existing Dandenong High being the most appropriate site in terms of location, demographics, site analysis (this school included substantial buildings from the early 20th century), it was

earmarked for redevelopment.

One of the educational models deemed to be closest to the vision sought for this project is a school in Auckland, loosely based on the Maori house model.

"That model fosters social relationship between students, as well as staff, where there's a high level of

interaction," says Leonard.

The Dandenong High School model is also aligned to the SWIS model, a "school within a school", with the agora at the core of the site, on Princes Highway, forming the social heart.

Rather than designing one monumental building for 2100 students, Hayball created a village of seven

buildings, each accommodating about 300 students. And rather than students roving the campus from building to building, they are assigned to the one "house" (senior levels at ground level, with junior levels on the upper level).

Like the house system, common in many schools, each building is colour coded, capturing the Australian flora. Bands of colours, such as banksia, darwinia and fern, act as signposts to the otherwise monochrome steel building clad in black-and-white steel.

Inside, as well as creating unimpeded sight lines, the architects ensured a high degree of flexibility for learning situations. As well as more traditional-style classrooms (desks and whiteboard), there are spaces for student teams to work independently. And while the old-school model had an isolated "time out" space, there's a nook to one side of an open space to allow for individual interaction with more problematic students.

"We wanted to create a paradigm shift in education, not just architectural statements," says Leonard.

Dandenong High School has been entered in the Architectural Awards (Victorian Chapter).

