

What do changes in how schools are designed say about our approach to education?

By [Henrietta Cook](#) and Education Editor September 10, 2016 — 10.54am

If the walls of schools could talk, they would tell a fascinating tale about the way we treat children.

At the turn of the century, Australian students sat at fixed wooden desks like the ones below with all eyes on the teacher, who stood next to a blackboard at the front of the class. Look at their faces – children were to be seen and not heard.



Brunswick North West Primary School, 1973. CREDIT:JOHN LAMB

Today, children are "active learners" who navigate their way through open-plan classrooms with the latest technology and plush couches.

For the first time, researchers from the University of Melbourne have examined how government policy, curriculum changes and community

expectations have shaped Australian school designs. This is what they discovered.



Teacher and children in a classroom. c.1890-1900: Male teacher standing next to a blackboard in front of a class, children seated along long bench with desks; maps and papers on wall in background. Probably shows the interior of Beaconsfield school (No. 3033). PHOTOGRAPHER: Michael J Drew Country school / rural school; Classroom; school children; students; *** MUST CREDIT: State Library of Victoria *** Copyright status: This work is out of copyright Terms of use: No copyright restrictions apply. ID: mls CREDIT:STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA

1950s: The school as the factory

Schools designed during the post-war baby boom period were built quickly, and had to process large numbers of students.

Bricks and concrete were scarce, giving rise to the Light Timber Construction schools. They had long corridors, with classrooms on either side and zig-zag steel rafters. Governments wanted to create well-lit spaces and move away from the shadowy schools of yesteryear.

Think lots of windows such as the ones installed here at Trinity Grammar's science and administrative building. Schools also started to shift from fixed desks to tables and chairs, according to the University of Melbourne's Professor Julie Willis. Art rooms and other specialist spaces also appeared.. This coincided with the emergence of "the teenager" and the evolution of students as individual learners rather than rote learners.



Trinity Grammar, Kew, 1959: Opening the new Science and Administrative building. PICTURE: Fairfax Photographic Victorian secondary school / portable classrooms File (Melb): AUST: EDUCATION: SCHOOLS: SECONDARY: TRINITY GRAMMAR Date filed: 24-08-1959 Neg no: ? ID: mls CREDIT: FAIRFAX PHOTOGRAPHIC

1960s: School as the town

More and more portables were rolled out across the country to accommodate the baby boom.

It must have been a hot day when these portables were installed near the new Caulfield High School in 1961. The shirtless builder leans against one of the classrooms and chats to a man in a tie (perhaps the principal?) as the sun beats down.



Portable classrooms are being put into position in Booran Road, Caulfield, opposite the site for the new Caulfield High School. The classrooms will be used until the new school is built. Victorian secondary school / portable classrooms File (Melb): AUST: EDUCATION: SCHOOLS: ?PORTABLE CLASSROOMS Date filed: 02-02-1961 Neg no: ? ID: mls CREDIT: FAIRFAX PHOTOGRAPHIC

Schools became more flexible, with walls and furniture that could be easily moved. The teacher's desk was relocated from the centre of the room to the side and schools created spaces for children to socialise inside and outside. "Students were cast as proto-citizens of the world," Professor Willis says. "The child was seen as more of a person."

1970s: Brutal buildings for boisterous kids

Schools looked harsh, built to withstand a battering from more boisterous, less repressed students. Princes Hill Secondary in North Carlton is a good example of the Brutalist architecture popular during this decade.



Princes Hill High School, 1973: Victorian secondary school. PICTURE: Fairfax Photographic File (Melb): AUST: EDUCATION: SCHOOLS: SECONDARY: PRINCES HILL H.S. Date filed: 17-07-1973 Neg no: D 13054 /63 ID: mlsCREDIT: FAIRFAX PHOTOGRAPHIC

Students were moved around in the classroom, with their desks often arranged in a square so they looked at each other rather than facing the front of the room. Schools began to experiment more with the open-plan classrooms common today.

Portables continued to be rolled out such as the one below at Brunswick North West Primary. In a scene reminiscent of the Australian classic *I Can Jump Puddles*, a boy in leather lace-ups strides across the wet concrete.



Brunswick North West Primary School, 1973. Portable classrooms erected in the playground to house the students of Brunswick Central Primary School during construction works at Brunswick Central. PICTURE: John Lamb Victorian primaryschool / portable classrooms File (Melb): AUST: EDUCATION: SCHOOLS:PORTABLES Date filed: 03-04-1973 Neg no: D 6010 / 2 ID: mls CREDIT: JOHN LAMB

1980s and 1990s: perms and the Kennett cuts

There weren't a lot of schools built during this era. The Kennett government which held power from 1992 to 1999 shut 300 schools. "Architecturally, it feels like it's staying still for a while," Professor Willis says. "There was not a lot of experimentation."

But big perms and oversized denim jackets were clearly in fashion, according to this photo of Heidelberg High students in a peace studies class in 1986. "What's the use of worrying about what happens after the bomb drops? We should be worrying about what happens now," one student told *The Age* at the time.



Teacher Rod Marsh [standing] with his Year 11 peace studies class at Heidelberg High. Peace studies concentrates on peaceful resolution to conflict, combatting racism (accepting people of other cultures), and studying the arms race and Third World development. Victorian secondary school. PICTURE: Mark Wislon File (Melb): AUST: EDUCATION: SECONDARY Date filed: 26-09-1986 Neg no: 86-28037 / g ID: mls Spikey gelled hair / 1980s fashion / 1980s fashions / students CREDIT: MARK WILSON

The Public Works Department – which was responsible for the design, construction and maintenance of schools – was abolished in 1987. This meant the design of state schools was outsourced to different architecture firms, leading to more diversity.

Schools also started using computers in the '90s, with the clunky machines stored in designated classrooms that were locked up at night.

Noughties and today: Schools reach new heights

Think colour, lots of it. Schools are not so worried about getting battered, and there is a lot more soft furniture. "They no longer design interiors as though the worst is going to happen," Willis says. "There is an attempt to delight and interest children without talking down to them."

Open-plan classrooms and "flexible learning spaces" are back in fashion, creating noise and concentration issues for some students.

Concerns about children being exposed to UV light prompt schools to create external covered spaces.

Victoria needs 220 new schools over the next decade to cope with an explosion in student numbers, according to an analysis by the Grattan Institute. And as inner-city land becomes scarce and more expensive, vertical schools will become more common. Haileybury has already opened a vertical campus in Melbourne's CBD and in 2018, the first vertical state school will open in South Melbourne.



An artist's impression of the new Ferrars Street school in South Melbourne.