

MARY FEATHERSTON

STEADY, UNASSUMING BUT RESOLUTE

Designer Mary Featherston “brooks no passengers or pessimists”, writes Richard Leonard, who examines how she has enhanced the value placed on design in making educational spaces purposeful.

The one person I keep referencing in education design is Mary Featherston. She is considered to be one of Australia’s leading thinkers and designers of educational and play spaces for children. In 2020 she was awarded an Order of Australia for her significant contribution to the arts, particularly interior design and industrial design.

As so often is the case, the award was deserved recognition for many decades of committed work in her chosen field. Since the early ‘70s, Mary’s steady development of design approaches, her thought-leadership and generous contribution to passionate debate in education design remains unmatched in Australia.

The Reggio model

In the early years, her interest in children and creativity led her into play-based learning and, inevitably, to the Reggio Emilia education movement.

This movement advocates children’s need for engaging and sensory environmental experiences that support their natural inclination for inquiry and discovery.

The Reggio model, promoting the importance of considered design in shaping child-driven learning, provides the pedagogical template that drives her work still. Her term is “inside-out” design – or form follows function in Miesian terms.

Wooranna transformed

Her project that changed everything for us as designers (and for many educators) in understanding her work, was a small internal refurbishment of a run-down school in a modest outer suburb of Melbourne.

The refurbishment of the Wooranna Park Primary

School started in 2003. It was a passion project for Mary and a meeting of minds with innovative educators at the school, demonstrating what the collaboration of creative designer and courageous educator could achieve.

Most importantly, for the kids in this impoverished suburb, it engaged them with a learning landscape that they found functional – one that was fun, was responding to their inter-connected activities, was experiential and supported the flow of learning. It was a student-centred environment.

For other designers, like me, it moved the dial. We had neither seen nor experienced spaces so finely tuned to kids, to the way they learned, and to the education pedagogy that underpinned the design. These were purposeful spaces developed with an acute understanding of the learners, of education, of creativity.

Dandenong radically revitalised

A few years later, my practice, Hayball, was commissioned in 2007 to redevelop the Dandenong High School, just a stone’s throw from Wooranna. Similar to Wooranna, the school wanted radical change to meet the challenging needs of its students and its community.

So we “coerced” Mary into her first foray into secondary education design; coerced because Mary, bearing in mind the purity of her passion, only engages if the outcomes can be achieved for the students.

Her commitment to the need for radical change in education brooks no passengers or pessimists.



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Collaborating also with Dr Julia Atkin, the education and learning consultant, and a courageous leadership team at the school, the redevelopment of the Dandenong High School extended Mary’s development of purposeful, student-centred spaces into the secondary school context.

For me, the experience again demonstrated the power of creative designers and courageous educators working together to develop innovative solutions to the challenges of contemporary teaching and learning. It was a fork in the road, redirecting our journey in the design of purposeful education spaces.

In the dynamic and exciting world of contemporary education we are blessed with many leading lights that

inspire us and provide the vision to lead us away from our industrial era mindsets.

But in my context, Mary Featherston is the visionary that most inspires my work in education design. In her steady, unassuming but resolute way, she shines a light for us all on the value of design and its role within education in shaping the future of children’s lives.

She continues to shine a light for me in my work in designing schools for their future. She continues to influence my work when designing schools for future generations.

Richard Leonard is an architect and Director of Hayball, one of Australia’s largest practices.