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Adaptable childcare hub designed for 100-year cycle

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Referred to as the Sunflower, the Bayswater Early Years Hub also tracks the sun as it moves from east to west.

Like the flower's petals, this award-winning building by K20 Architecture is orientated to the north to maximise sunlight and frame two impressive gum trees.



K20 Architecture broke down the scale of the buildings. PETER BENNETTS

Recipient of a sustainability award from the Australian Institute of Architects (Victorian Chapter) this hub, commissioned by the City of Knox, also provides a strong shift in the delivery of early childhood services.

"There's a move to creating 15-minute cities, providing a short 15-minute drive for people using these hubs," says architect Theo Kerlidis, Director of K20 Architecture, who worked closely with co-director Anthony Uahwatanasakul, also project director.

Fronting Phyllis Street, the Bayswater Early Years Hub replaces a number of smaller, and less well-endowed, centres dotted through the municipality.



The award-winning hub is orientated to the north to maximise sunlight. PETER BENNETTS

"I think it was originally built as a house in the late 1950s/early 1960s and morphed into a childcare centre," says Uahwatanasakul, who also points out the under-utilisation of the site.

"There was a large front yard that wasn't used and the back of the place was concreted over for car parking."

K20 Architecture's design takes a backflip on this arrangement, providing car parking spaces on the periphery.

What was previously endless concrete for cars is now a large play area for the approximately 200 children up to the age of five.

An internal courtyard joining the front pavilion, and the U-shaped children's learning spaces not only allow for natural light to permeate, but as importantly for the functions to be delineated: including maternal child health consulting rooms, rooms for parents to meet and early child facilities.

"The idea was that this place would have a 100-year cycle, capable of being adapted for other uses as the needs of the community change," says Kerlidis, who was keen to ensure many of the open-plan spaces remained as flexible as possible, resulting in column-free areas.

Although this is a large hub, K20 Architecture broke down the scale of the buildings.

The front pavilion constructed in recycled brick, for example, has a timber-lined portico set into a coloured glass window.

"It's important to create that sense of magic, as well as intimacy for smaller children who may be hesitant to come here the first time," says Kerlidis, pointing out the orange and red glass reflected on the floor of the main lobby/arrival point.

The form of the buildings, with their brick walls and pitched steel roofs covered in solar panels, also creates a sense of domesticity while capturing the predominantly residential environment.

Having many of the spaces one room wide also allows for cross-ventilation and importantly, passive surveillance of the children whether they are indoors or outside (the landscape is by Hanson Partnership).

Generous skylights and celestial windows also create light filled spaces.

And to the west, deep steel-framed portals frame the windows to reduce the afternoon glare.

Unlike childcare centres of the past, Sunflower was conceived for use by the broader community, whether that's for parent meetings, wider training opportunities for the community or individual rooms that can be booked out via the council.

"This strengthens community links and relationships, while offering added facilities the community requires," says Kerlidis, who sees its use after the children have left and on weekends.

While the use of this facility has now been considerably broadened, the selection of materials and techniques has become more focused to achieve the sustainability award it received: recycled bricks (from a nearby factory that was demolished), generating power off the grid and using magnesium oxide board panels that offer a cement-free solution and are capable of decomposing rather than adding to landfill.

"Our objective was to create a 100-year lifespan for this hub.

That means not only thinking carefully about each material, but also the spaces and their adaptive re-use at some point in time," says Kerlidis.

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