

# The Commercial Project

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by And And And Studio • Darebin Intercultural Centre by Sibling Architecture • Light Years Asian Bar and Diner  
by Studio Plenty • Firbank Sandringham Curiosity Centre by Studio Bright—and more



In the beachy south-east Melbourne suburb of Sandringham, on the lands of the Boonwurrung people, Firbank Grammar School's Sandringham Junior School campus is growing its transdisciplinary STEAM program through the development of a playful new Curiosity Centre. Studio Bright has taken a series of disparate existing buildings surrounding a garden and unified them under a striking architectural canopy, exemplifying sustainable design that students can learn from.

# Firbank Sandringham Curiosity Centre by Studio Bright

Sandringham, Victoria, Australia

Words by Aaron Grinter • Photography by Rory Gardiner

Bringing together specialist classes such as technology, music, art and gardening into one precinct, the design seeks to engage and inspire the young minds of this Sandringham primary school. Rather than demolishing and building anew, the Curiosity Centre engages adaptive re-use of two early-2000s brick buildings adjoining a triangular garden, maintaining the structures but reshuffling the internal arrangements to allow movement, diversify spaces, increase storage and offer the flexibility to rearrange rooms. Changes to the buildings themselves were modest to meet tight budgetary constraints, but some major alterations were necessary, such as demolishing the external toilet block, creating new group activity rooms, adding acoustic panelling and swapping apertures for cement sheeting to improve the building's thermal efficiency.

The most noticeable change is the addition of the translucent blue, origami-like canopy that unfolds around the perimeter of the two buildings. The multi-cell polycarbonate cladding offers protection from the elements, permits diffused natural light and is considered superior to glass as it offers greater impact resistance and improved thermal insulation. The repeating wave pattern offers visual interest and channels the flow of rainwater into the exposed gutters to be directed either

into educational rainwater tanks or via trickle-down rain chains into the colonnade of small water tanks that follows the edge of the canopy.

At the core of the canopy and its utility is the idea of a 'living laboratory', educating and inspiring students through the everyday activation of the design. Students can watch the journey of the water from the roof to the water tanks and interact with it, collecting the water themselves to use in the vegetable and citrus garden or for washing art tools in the outdoor sinks. The larger water tanks have highly visible gauges, so students can observe the seasonal dynamics of rainfall throughout the year and how their use impacts the availability of this important resource. At a project-wide scale, students are exposed to the principles of sustainable design in practice, providing the tools and inspiration to become the next generation of leaders in sustainability.

Through a series of modest interventions, the redesign and re-utilisation of existing buildings sees Firbank Sandringham Curiosity Centre become a pedagogical tool in itself. Despite its small scale and tight budgetary constraints, the project delivers a big impact, illustrating a sustainable approach through re-using abundant existing stock, showing that it is possible to do more with less.

