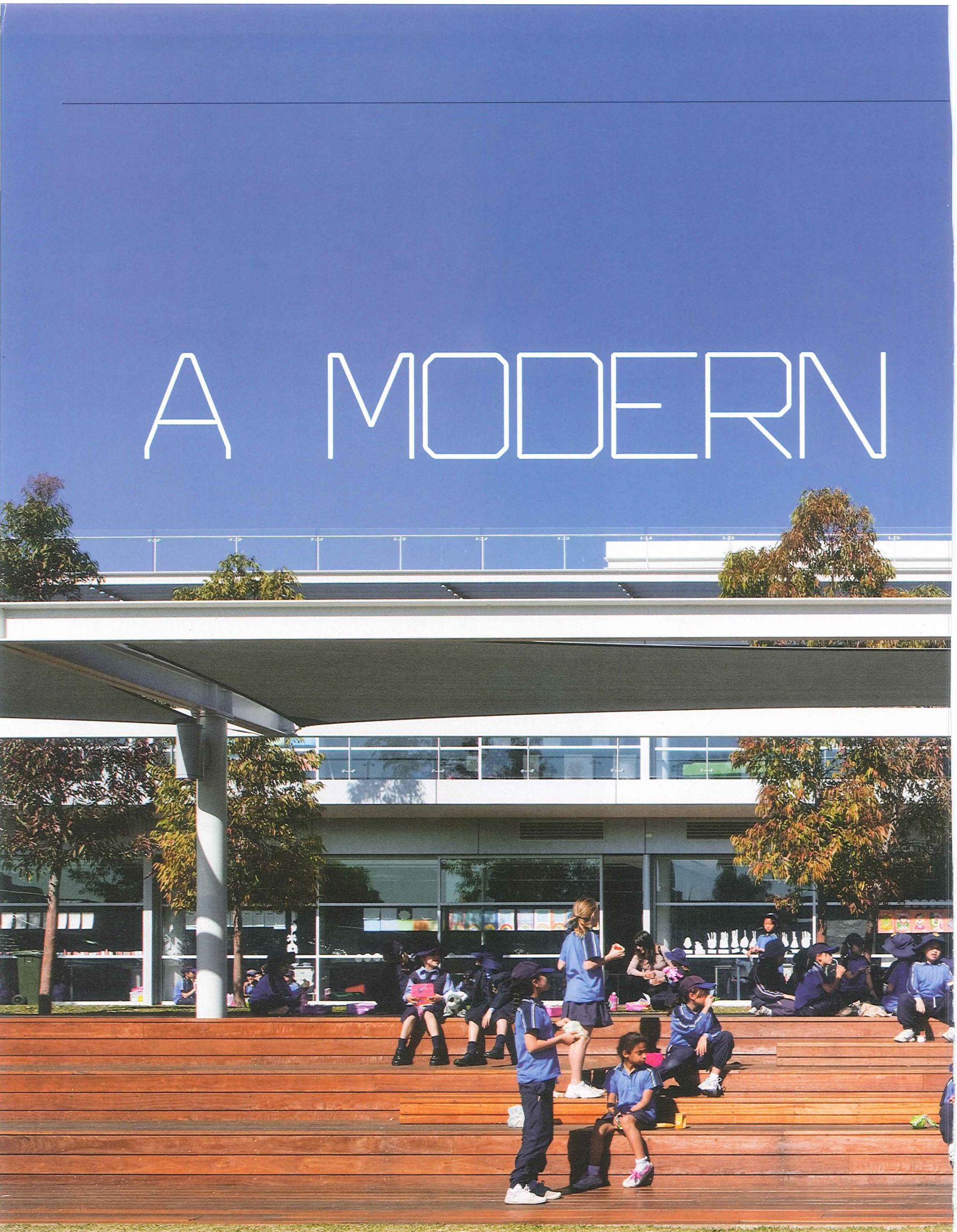
A MODERN



WORDS PHILIP DREW
PHOTOGRAPHY WILLEM RETHMEIER

ARCHITECT LIPPMANN PARTNERSHIP
LOCATION SYDNEY | AUS
CLIENT MLC JUNIOR SCHOOL

EDUCATION

ED LIPPMANN PROVIDES A NEW HOME FOR A NEW EDUCATIONAL APPROACH

A 50% spending boost under Kevin Rudd's Education Revolution, $14.7 billion in state-of-the-art libraries, multi-purpose halls and/or general upgrades, new computers and the launch of the MySchool website have focused public attention on schools and value in education.

Hastily applied outmoded templates and poor implementation have undermined good intentions. Rudd's grand education vision seems tainted and risks a repeat of past failures. All this emphasises the difficulties, diversity of viewpoints and lack of a consensus about goals – what constitutes a good school and a good education.

The completion of the new MLC Junior School at Burwood in January 2010, under the leadership of Principal Barbara Stone, was inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy of early childhood education, as interpreted by Lippmann Partnership. The school offers a contrasting model and possible yardstick for gauging educational and architectural excellence.

A great deal has changed in school design since 1945 when the finger plan dominated. The decisive development came in the early 1960s with the advent of open plan learning spaces which substituted open flexible learning areas for the ubiquitous separate isolated class room. Southern California led the way with the Schools Construction System Development (SCSD) devised by Ezra Ehrenkrantz in 1964 which began as an ambitious attempt to achieve building economies through economies of scale and a systems approach. This was subsequently imitated in Toronto, Canada, by the Study of Educational Facilities programme.In England, in 1957, The Consortium of Local Authorities Special Programme (CLASP), was introduced. CLASP was less about open plan than it was about exploiting expected economies from system building and modular planning.

PREVIOUS PAGES
North-facing learning studios extend into outdoor recreation
ABOVE The education 'village' central piazza and split-level play areas
RIGHT Kindergarten learning, indoor/outdoor

OPPOSITE Typical flexible learning "studio"
OPPOSITE BELOW Level 2/ street level plan
LEFT Glazed operable south façade for maximum controlled natural light and ventilation

MLC JUNIOR SCHOOL

ARCHITECT Lippmann Partnership
PROJECT TEAM Warren Iles, Simon Lea, Ed Lippmann, Mille Milakovic, Michael Morony, Tim O'Sullivan, Vivian Lou
BUILDER Hooker Cockram
ELECTRICAL Webb Australia
MECHANICAL Stevenson & Associates
STRUCTURAL Taylor Thomson Whitting
HYDRAULIC Thomson Kane
QUANTITY SURVEYOR Rider Levett Bucknall
LANDSCAPE McGregor Coxall
TRAFFIC John Coady Consulting
BCA Philip Chun and Associates
ACOUSTICS The Acoustics Group

TOTAL FLOOR AREA 3,800m²
TIME TO COMPLETE 64 weeks (construction)
BUDGET $16 million

LIPPMANN PARTNERSHIP (61 2) 9318 0844 lippmann.com.au

FURNITURE Reception chairs are Herman Miller 'Aeron' from Living Edge. 'Box Coffee Table', 'Box 3' meeting couches, 'Stylus 2/3' meeting room tables and 'Catifa 46' visitors' chairs all from Stylecraft. 'Eureka' student desks, 'Pantoflex' student chairs and teachers' tables from Woods Furniture. 'Bongo' stools and 'Cube' ottomans for casual learning from Stylecraft. 'Piuma' teachers' task chairs from Schiavello. 'Folding Table' and 'Postura' chairs in staff room from Sebel.

LIGHTING Recessed troffers by Moonlighting. Wall washers and track lighting from Erco. Surface-mounted downlights by Versalux. Pole-mounted fittings by Simmes Pierlite. WE-EF In-ground uplights by WE-EF. Wallmounted uplighting 'Lingotto' by iGuzzini. Emergency lighting by Stanilite.

FINISHES Paint by Dulux. Laminates from Abet Laminati and Laminex. 'Wool Cord' carpet by Tretford from Gibbon Group. Vinyl by Forbo. Ceramic tiles from Glennon. Cladding is alpolic composite sheeting from SGI-Architectural. Operable wall from Lotus Folding Walls and Doors.

Abet Laminati (61 2) 9672 7300 abet.com.au Dulux 13 25 25 dulux.com ECC Lighting and Living (61 2) 9380 7922 ecc.com.au Erco Lighting (61 2) 9004 8801 erco.com Forbo 1800 224 471 forbo.com Glennon Tiles (61 2) 9698 2799 glennontiles.com.au Laminex 132 136 laminex.com.au Living Edge (61 2) 8596 8888 livingedge.com.au Lotus Folding Walls and Doors (61 2) 9519 9781 lotusdoors.com.au Moonlighting (61 2) 8306 0999 moonlighting.com.au Pierlite (61 2) 9794 9300 pierlite.com.au Schiavello 1300130 980 schiavello.com Sebel Furniture (61 2) 9780 2222 sebel.com.au SGI-Architectural (61 2) 9620 7988 sgi-architectural.com.au Stanilite/Thomas & Betts 1300 666 595 australia.tnb.com Stylecraft (61 2) 9355 0000 stylecraft.com.au Gibbon Group (61 7) 3881 1777 gibbongroup.com.au Versalux (61 2) 9437 9534 versalux.com.au Woods Educational Furniture woodsfurniture.com.au

The MLC Junior School impresses with its smart, cool, efficient, clinical look

PHILIP DREW

FAR LEFT Typical 'casual learning' format
LEFT Casual learning at the 'hub'
BELOW The 'hub', the intellectual core of the school located centrally above the piazza

In essence, it is about flexibility and choice

PHILIP DREW

Barbara Stone is quick to distance the open learning studios at MLC Junior School from the 1960s open plan experiments. Her starting point is the Reggio Emilia philosophy: "We had philosophical reasons behind the idea. You start to think of a school in a very different way: we wanted to build a learning village, not just a series of class rooms."

She explains Reggio Emilia: "It started post-war; they were trying to build a better world. Instead of treating young people as receptacles that needed to be filled with knowledge, they would treat them as people who were seriously investigating things, who were uncovering things and developing a strong relationship with them, as young scientists, young writers, young painters, and so on. The children were regarded as growing creators of their own meaning."

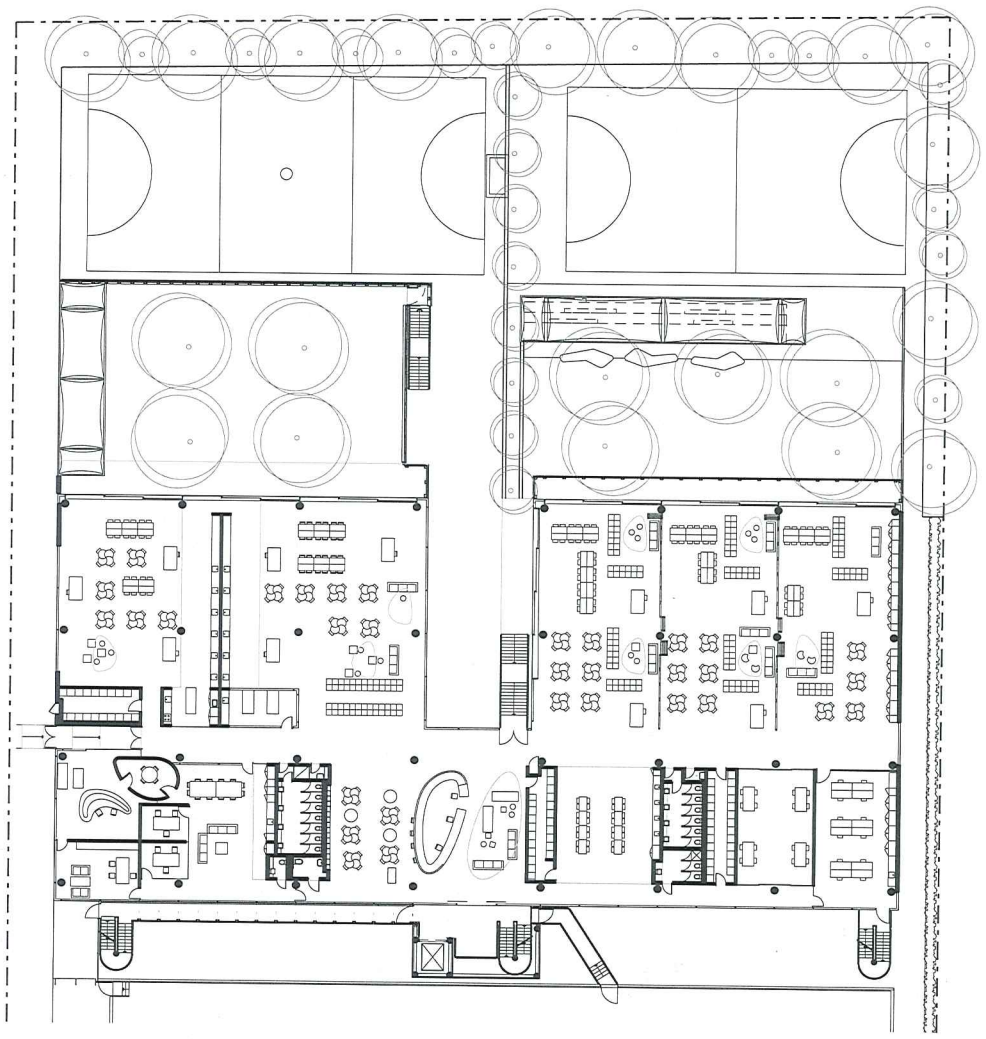
Reggio Emilia provided no guidance as to what such a school should be like architecturally – there was only one school and it was in an existing building.

At first encounter, the MLC Junior School is remarkably similar to a 1960 Californian SCSD building, both in appearance and its structure and subsystems. It has similar anonymous open plan learning areas and glass walls all around that let in floods of daylight. There are some differences – notably the introduction of digital technology – but these are outweighed by the similarities. Both share similar conceptions on flexibility and instructional group sizes; both are provisional and constructed, if required, to enable the open learning spaces to be subdivided should walls be required later.

Underlying Modern architecture was an ethos that assumed visual transparency and universal space. The new school in 1960 became a proving ground for these precepts.

The Junior School has a spreading concrete frame comprising post-tensioned concrete floors in three overlapping horizontal layers, encased in a transparent glass sheath infilled with composite aluminium panels in a Silver Pearl Alpolic enamel. The school is similar to Lippmann's earlier Aquatic Centre, to its south. The two are separated by an open zone for sports on the roof of the car park. Sliding external walls enable studio learning areas to spill out over wide balconies and ground level terraces, rather like Richard Neutra's pioneering 1935 Corona Avenue School in Los Angeles. As does Neutra, Lippmann achieves a precise machine-look that is at once slickly elegant and minimal.

The Reggio philosophy favoured diversity: diverse spaces, heights, materials, textures and colours, as a stimulus to the imagination and to encourage curiosity in children – things encountered fortuitously in a historical Italian city. The Junior School has large regular open learning spaces or studios and flexible walls that can be readily opened to fuse adjacent studio areas, or be subdivided into smaller compartments. This makes it possible to quickly create large group or small individual learning situations. In essence, it is about flexibility and choice. There are also separate Group Space clusters comprised of four individual rooms at the back of the large studios that can be used separately or merged to complement the studios.



The Junior School is designed with a linear zone of services, wet areas, and toilets on the southern edge of the floor plate. This service zone is separated from the studio learning areas by a long internal street leading from the Park Street Entry with Reception, head of Junior School office and Health Centre strategically close by, and a Staff study positioned at the far end. Colour is applied to selected elements, such as the toilets, for greater visibility in an environment of open floors. These coloured elements are transformed into sculptural adjuncts and exciting events in the otherwise anonymous learning studios.

Coloured cylindrical skylights, from Le Corbusier's La Tourette monastery, in the ceiling of the 3rd level terrace mark the line of the internal street below like an airport runway. The suspended ceilings discretely hide an array of projectors and retractable screens, that drop down or retract when not in use.

The 1960s experiments in the design of educational facilities resulted in a diverse range of alternatives to the single isolated classroom. It was all about flexibility, creating alternatives to the self-contained class group. Such experiments were accompanied by a new focus on active individual learning and small groups. Not everything the 1960s attempted in open plan was successful and a backlash followed: some assumptions were found to be faulty, acoustics proved a problem, there was a loss of intimacy, the spaces overwhelmed and failed to match the children. It proved impossible in such large, evenly lit rooms to achieve individuality and an appropriate scale for children.

Open plan proved to be a largely Anglo-Saxon fixation. In Europe, Hans Scharoun, Aldo van Eyck and Herman Hertzberger (Montessori Primary School, Delft, 1966), defied the trend and initiated interesting forms comprised of a variety of room sizes and scales that created a subtle organic alternative to open plan.

Many of the lessons have been forgotten. Glass walls result in high acoustic reflectivity and loss of display space, vital in the Reggio education process. The fundamental conflict between the Modernist infatuation with transparency and good educational planning was not addressed. In later years, schools fell back on well-tried traditional closed plans.

The MLC Junior School impresses with its smart, cool, efficient, clinical look. The studio learning spaces could be confused with a contemporary workplace. Lippmann's building gives the impression of a return to early Modernist values. This machine aesthetic was difficult to achieve in the 1920s, but in the meantime, technology has caught up. The school is a kind of improved retro-Modernism. Modernism reinterpreted by exploiting current methods and techniques to further pursue original aims of transparency and lightness. This is backed by the omniscient presence of digital technology. Walter Gropius or Mies van der Rohe did not design with computers, though they would undoubtedly have approved of them. Ed Lippmann's revised Modernism in the MLC Junior School at Burwood can be seen as a continuation of these earlier ideals of technology, space and humanism.

Philip Drew is an architectural historian and freelance writer on architecture.