

The logo for Wilson Architects, featuring the word "Wilson" in a bold, sans-serif font followed by "Architects" in a lighter, regular weight of the same font.

ISSUE

10

DESIGNING SUSTAINABLY

# Adaptive Re-use



# Why adapt?

There is a richness to the idea of continuous occupation even though the use may change. The fingerprint of time reveals a culture worth remembering. The new work becomes part of longer story about the evolution of place.

When Wilson Architects expanded their premises (right), walls were stripped back to reveal the evidence of an office fire, which severely impacted the Practice in the 1980's, exposing the burnt and charred remnants of the structural stud framework. Careful detailing and articulation of this element takes the prosaic old burnt timber frame and elevates it to become a beautiful screen. A fireplace that once housed the open cooking hearth of the adjoining 1864 terrace house was celebrated as sculptural object with the original connections untreated so that there was an understanding of its original intent.





# Old buildings made new.

Mayne Hall, located at the University of Queensland, played an important role in university life as the venue for graduations, concerts and graduations, however declining public use and insufficient space for graduations provided an opportunity to address the need for a new facility for the Art Museum. Although not heritage listed was an important building designed by Robin Gibson in the 1970's. Wilson Architects recognised the need to create a new distinctive visual identity for the centre, whilst preserving the building's envelope and recognising its cultural history.

The conceptual starting point for the project was to appreciate the core "bones" and logic of the existing fabric so as to reinvigorate and reorientate one's experience of the building with the careful insertion of new spaces and new uses. A bold timber clad form is inserted into the existing volume creating tension around the edges of the hall that greatly enhance the appreciation of Gibson's use of natural light. The inserted two storey 'pod' which houses the gallery space was conceived as a dynamic fluid counterpoint to the orthogonal geometry of the existing building. This concept adapted a ceremonial hall into an art museum and the inserted pod facilitated the controlling of natural light for the artwork exhibitions and delivering services to maintain environmental conditions of the museum spaces.

Adaptive reuse is the process of taking an old building or site, and reusing it for a purpose other than for what it was originally designed.

This practice gives new life to often a decayed or unused asset that is worth modifying to preserve the historic fabric or to sustainably reuse infrastructure.



The University of Queensland Art Museum



## Issues that might arise with adaptive re-use.

Building codes, safety and accessibility are significant challenges in the conversion of old into new use. Even relatively new buildings may not meet current standards and will need to be upgraded when requiring change.

If the building is on any heritage register, it will require additional approvals which can add time to the process of design and construction.

The Griffith Film School (left) before its transformation was a heritage listed building in poor condition, the result of a rushed and insensitive refurbishment at the time of Expo88 followed by years of neglect. A Conservation Management Plan set out a strategy for refurbishment. The listed building comprises 3 significant stages in its development, the last by A.B. Wilson in 1903. The response was to design a 4th stage; identifiably modern in contrast, that would resolve the circulation and servicing problems of the existing layout, and open up the building to the Brisbane River and the north east aspect.

The interior refurbishment is in clear contrast with the original building. Acoustic isolation and control involved extensive on site work to ensure compliance with aesthetic and heritage considerations. Additionally, significant strengthening of the existing structure was required to comply with current earthquake codes.



# Approach to adaptive re-use

There are established heritage frameworks to follow in the modifications to existing buildings. The Burra Charter defines the basic principles and procedures to be followed in the conservation of Australian heritage places. The Burra Charter calls for new work to clearly articulate the older fabric by not replicating the original details. The quality of adaptive re-use projects therefore relies on design research and sensitive interpretation of the heritage fabric.



The University of Queensland Michie Building extension.

The Michie Building refurbishment project located at the University of Queensland substantially re-organises all internal spaces and services and extends three levels of the building. The refurbishment improves the amenity of the building transforming highly partitioned office space and lightless corridors into clear floor plates with better access to light and views, reinforcing the various faculty communities.

The extension, much smaller than Hennessey and Hennessey's original unbuilt plan for Michie, is respectful to the proportions and language of the stone clad high rise building but is clearly distinct in its materiality and scale.

This response is aligned to the Department of Environment and Science DES Heritage objectives and aligns with the Burra Charter.

A lightweight colour anodised screen reduces the heat load to its western facing elevation whilst moderating the impact and scale of the buildings mass.

Our approach to the extension was to avoid replicating the stone clad Michie Building but at the same time set up a language that would still have some relationship to the Michie Building through colour, scale and composition..



## Case Study

# Adderton

house & heart of mercy

Adderton - house & heart of mercy - Brisbane



Built by John Petrie in 1858, Adderton was purchased by Bishop James Quinn for the Sisters of Mercy in 1863. It became their foundation building and the first permanent convent in Queensland. Adderton: house & heart of mercy is a heritage adaptive re-use and conservation project. For the Sisters of Mercy Brisbane, this project represented an opportunity to re-establish Adderton as a place of connection with the community, by exploring social justice issues through the medium and lens of contemporary art. The brief from the client was to make the building accessible and provide a safe and comfortable space for all. Architecturally, we have responded to the brief through a number of new key interventions, heritage conservation, maintenance as well as services upgrades.

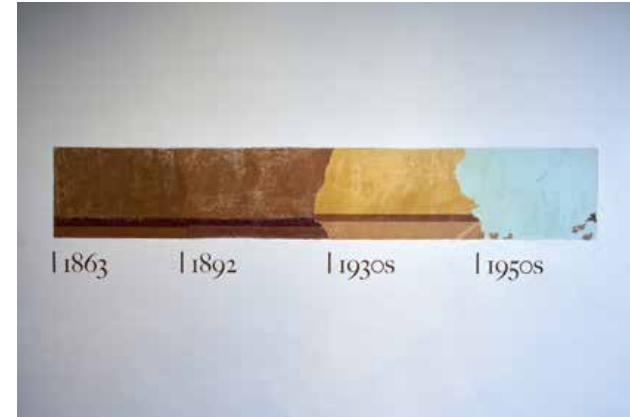
Over the years Adderton has housed many functions and has incrementally been altered. With each extension came different floor levels and verandahs were constructed with cross falls, making the external areas uneven, inaccessible and non-compliant. Raised verandahs have been built over the existing, providing access to all areas of the building allowing the visitor to distinguish the old heritage fabric against the new insertions.

While the design predominantly focuses on accessibility, the maintenance and conservation of the heritage building was a large part of the project scope. The collaboration with specialist consultants and trades was required for the conservation and maintenance. Existing elements of the building that required maintenance were tested or removed as exemplars to be fabricated and match the existing.



'Of light, of rest, of peace' - Neon light installation Meagan Streader 2019





Carefully removed layers of paint reveal changes in interior colour palettes over time

Where materials could not be sourced to match existing, new materials were used to ensure their longevity and traditional methods employed in their construction.

The main architectural gesture occurs within the courtyard between the House of Mercy and Adderton, which was previously uncovered and open to the elements. The design of this space seeks to re-engage the outdoors, by creating a high level canopy over, allowing the outdoor space to become a part of the gallery, and a focal point for reflection and contemplation. We saw this as an opportunity to combine art and architecture with the identity of the courtyard space, by creating a 'hanging curtain' that would be a contemporary interpretation and reference to the culture of craft in the Sisters' history, the making of lacework through tatting.

Other new architectural objects have been introduced to increase the public's ability to experience Adderton; including the Mini Mercy Children's Gallery entry, the

**A new covered courtyard bounded between the House of Mercy and Adderton building.**

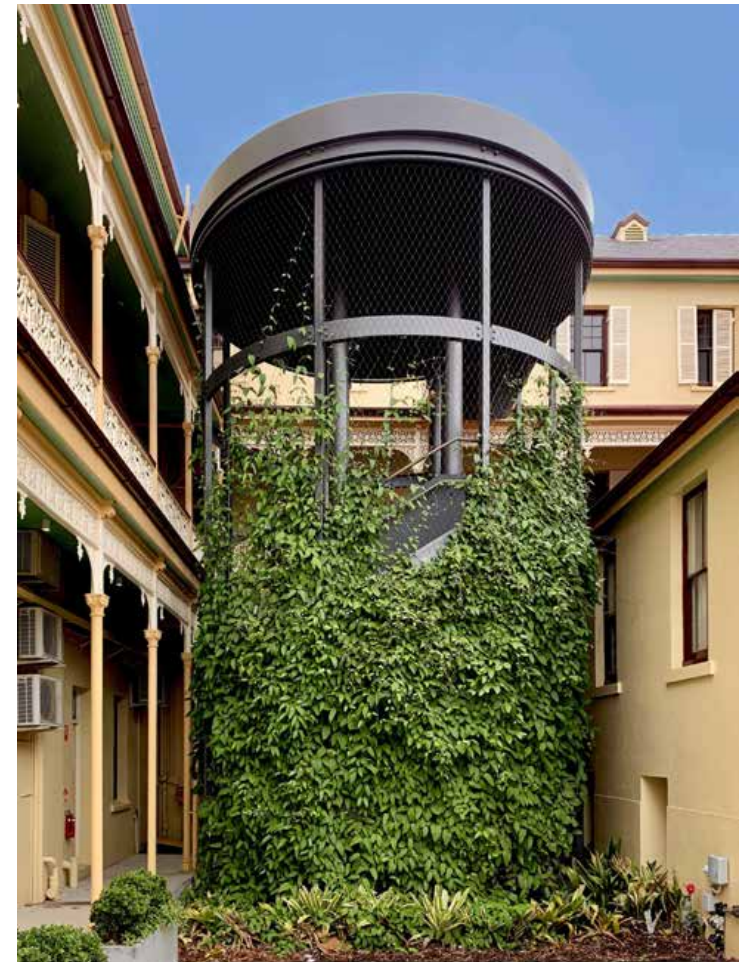
Rope artwork - Sarah Parkes of Smalltown



Round Stair and Courtyard bleacher seating. These elements have been inserted within existing spaces with careful consideration of their connection to heritage fabric. They are fully removeable and made from contrasting materials and colours to the heritage, creating a new distinguishable layer in the Adderton story. Driven by the Sisters of Mercy vision, this project creates a public cultural space where the community can explore one of Brisbane's oldest buildings.



The Mini Mercy Gallery is a space dedicated as a place where the young can engage in artwork. The brightly coloured entry clearly de-marks this space but at the same time solved the challenge of providing compliant access from one level to the next.



A new stair allows patrons to easily navigate the building from the entry level veranda to the upper galleries. The inserted circular vine covered stair form allows for a more coherent legibility of the original building fabric as well as an engaging transition between levels.



The new gallery isolates the art hanging walls off the existing walls to facilitate changing curatorial content without impacting the heritage fabric.



New bathrooms contemporaneously reinterpret the Sister's bathrooms from the 1940's



# Q&A

**Melissa Hughes**

Project Director - Adderton



## **How did Wilson Architects approach the Adderton adaptive re-use project?**

With any Heritage project it is incredibly important to understand the significance of the building, the value of the project within the community and the experience that the client wants to achieve. Researching, documenting the site and talking with the Sisters of Mercy, as well as the Gallery Staff, allowed us to really focus on the areas we could edit to enhance the experience of Adderton.

## **How did the heritage overlay impact the design?**

It pushed us as designers to think about the architectural intervention and really distil ideas, to ensure we were honouring the building's past and at the same time, enabling the building to function now and into the future.

The value of having a project team that understands the heritage of the building, and is committed to achieving an outcome cannot be underestimated. We were very privileged on the Adderton project to have everyone from the client to the carpenters, artists and site foreman, who collaborated on the design with us from the drawing board through to construction, to ensure that the heritage fabric was not adversely effected and the brief was not compromised.

## **If you could sum up the Architectural Idea in one paragraph what would it be?**

The main idea really was to distinguish new work from the existing heritage fabric, in its most simplest form. New interventions and thresholds took on the form of doorways, ramps and stairs, and they were purposely constructed and finished in their structural form with

little to no ornament but at the same time feeling that they belonged to the continuing history of the building.

The internal additions of the gallery walls were designed to fade into the existing heritage background in a sort of camouflage, ensuring that the Art and the volume of the space were the focus. Colour was used in specific areas in a playful way, referencing the previous colour schemes of the building.

## **What is something that you think the team will take away from this project?**

Not only does Adderton have a public presence within the culture of the All Hallows' School, through the adaptive re-use project it now engages with a number of other communities. This is something as a practice we take great pride in, the ability to add a new layer to the story of a building.

During the project we came across a number of Adderton stories, some of these we learnt through research and others were revealed during construction. Sometimes the stories that are the key to unlocking a buildings significance are those you discover when you talk to people. During this project we had the opportunity to talk to the Sisters about their experiences and how their lives interacted with the building, and it's those oral histories that we can't capture within the fabric of a building, that sometimes hold the greatest value.



Wilson Architects has been at the forefront of adaptive re-use architecture with many awarded projects as testament to our approach. The extraordinary heritage of our Practice gives us a sensitivity into the research and design thinking required to breath new life into great old buildings.

564 Boundary Street  
Spring Hill Qld 4000  
Telephone +61 7 3831 2755  
[wa@wilsonarchitects.com.au](mailto:wa@wilsonarchitects.com.au)  
[wilsonarchitects.com.au](http://wilsonarchitects.com.au)

**Wilson**Architects