

Reaching for Higher Places

Wavell Heights State High School Stairs and Australian Postwar School Buildings

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Reaching for Higher Places

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The Wavell Heights State High School was established in 1959 in Brisbane's northern suburbs to meet the needs of a growing population.¹ Eight new buildings were constructed on the 21-acre site between 1960 and 1966, coinciding with legislative changes in Queensland that raised the minimum school leaving age from fourteen to fifteen in 1964.² This paper is framed by a discussion about how the design of schools was influenced by broader social factors in the postwar era – especially the concept of the teenager, which emerged in the 1950s. In recognition of this newly identified group of youth aged between thirteen and eighteen, who were transitioning between child and adult, the architecture for high schools aimed to support their transformation toward engaged members of society.³ There were several student-centred design approaches employed in the development of the Wavell Heights State School. The open-air master plan organised the buildings around a central axis, generating courtyard spaces between each block. The longest edge of the buildings faced north and were flanked with operable windows and fanlights. These north-facing facades were shaded by verandahs that provided circulation to the upper floor, which was punctuated by expressive glass-encased external stairs.

Each classroom had ample access to natural daylight and ventilation.⁴

Both primary and secondary schools in postwar Australia shared similar approaches to master planning with sprawling horizontal campuses that co-located buildings as individual islands in the landscape, connected by extensive pathways. Primary schools tended to have single-storey buildings to replicate a domestic scale, while high schools consisted of two- and three-storey buildings to emulate the built environment of workplaces, such as the office, the factory and so on.⁵ The scale of buildings was used as a transitional device for students as they progressed from childhood to adulthood. It was also an opportunity for Australian architects to experiment with vertical elements in school design. An example of this experimentation is the design of the stairs on Blocks D and G (1960) and E and F (1966) (all extant) at Wavell Heights State High School, which anchor one end of the verandahed facade for each of these buildings. The stairs are distinct for their raw use of concrete and steel pipe balustrade, and some that are enclosed in wired glass. The articulation of these external stairs contributes formal expression to the building envelopes, situating the design amongst international

1.

"Wavell State High School," Queensland State Heritage Register, last updated February 20, 2022, <https://apps.des.qld.gov.au/heritage-register/detail/?id=650067>

2.

"Chronology of education in Queensland," Education Queensland, last updated January 25, 2023, <https://education.qld.gov.au/about-us/history/chronology-of-education-in-queensland>

3.

Julie Willis, "Architecture and the School in the Twentieth Century," in *Designing Schools: Space, Place and Pedagogy*, ed. Kate Darian-Smith and Julie Willis (Routledge, 2016).

4.

"Wavell State High School," Queensland State Heritage Register.

5.

Julie Willis, "Architecture and the School in the Twentieth Century,"



Figure 1:
Wavell Heights State High School F Block (1966).
(Image source: Queensland State Archives, Item
Representation ID DR15904)

education works including Maxwell Fry's design for University of Liverpool (1955–1960).

Postwar schools were generally designed with the intention to inspire children.⁶ International examples of this intention are found in the work of European architects Giancarlo De Carlo and Aldo van Eyck, especially in their design of circulation and interstitial spaces within schools.⁷ Inspiration existed not only in the classroom but also on the journey in between, the hallway, the walkway, the verandah, and the stairway. Verticality in education buildings is associated with ascension, a reaching up for higher-order thinking and self-actualisation. The vertical dimensions exist in teaching spaces such as lecture theatres and great halls as well as atria that organise ancillary spaces for circulation between classrooms, emphasising the presence of stairs. On the ascent to higher places, a stair is essential. In John Templar's tome to stairs, *The Staircase: History and Theories* (1995), he wrote that "the stair has always been used to represent human spiritual aspiration and cosmography; to demonstrate secular power and authority, prestige and status."⁸ The aspirational gesture of stairs in educational buildings is exemplified in projects such as *Maison de la Culture*

(1965) (Youth and Cultural Centre), by Le Corbusier in Firminy, France. This is an educational building where form, planning, and expression are all informed by concentrations of stairs, with both plan and section entirely organised around vertical circulation.⁹

The distinguishing factor of the stairs at the Wavell Heights State High School is in the way that they punctuate the long horizontal edges of the north-facing verandahs on each block. They generate visual focus for the facade and spatial connection, both as a distinct entry point and for functional vertical circulation. The juxtaposition of the diagonal elements expressed in the design of the stairs, placed perpendicular to the horizontal lines on the facade, contributes a dynamic sense of movement to each building. The aim of this paper is to analyse archival drawings and documentation for the Wavell Heights State High School, and to discuss how the design of these stairs was part of a broader modernist educational architecture movement to create aspirational learning environments for adolescents.

6.

Julie Willis, "Architecture and the School in the Twentieth Century."

7.

Adam Wood, "City Schools as Meeting Places," *Architecture and Education*, published June 10, 2019, <https://architectureandeducation.org/2019/06/10/city-schools-as-meeting-places/>

8.

John Templar, *The Staircase: History and Theories* (MIT Press, 1995).

9.

Russell Walden and Martin Purdy, "Le Corbusier and the Theological Program," in *The Open Hand: Essays on Le Corbusier*, ed. Russell Walden (MIT Press, 2021).