

# Developing a School and Community Learning Hub: A Case Study from Regional Australia



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**Abstract** This chapter chronicles a merging of previously separate community, school, cultural, wellbeing, and tertiary facilities within a new hub in the regional centre of Young, New South Wales (NSW), Australia. It describes the collaboration required between state and local government, architects, educators and community representatives from the conception of the facility within the community, to engaging with multiple stakeholders and policies and the architectural response to a complex brief on a fortuitous multilayered historical site within a diverse cultural context. Australia wide, governments are searching for more effective and efficient use of public infrastructure. In NSW schools have long been encouraged to make their facilities available for community use and consequently ‘shared’ use of school owned facilities is relatively common. It is only recently that ‘joint use’ projects have been promoted in NSW. ‘Joint use’ involves significant capital investments of land and/or facilities by two or more parties. ‘Joint use’ projects have the potential to open myriad learning opportunities for a community. In Young, the concurrent need to upgrade and extend the community library facilities and the community’s high school facilities provided an opportunity to develop a ‘joint use’ community hub not only to service the town but for *‘supporting whole of life learning for Hilltops’*—the local government area. With new opportunities inevitably come challenges. The chapter discusses challenges around the governance and management that joint use projects present and how this community is designing its way forward.

**Keywords** Joint use · Shared use library · Community hub · School and community partnerships · Regional school hub · Designing with country

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## Introduction

For communities, the information and resources their public libraries contain, the events they host, and the spaces for hire are intrinsically tied to the culture of the local community. In secondary schools, contemporary libraries are at the heart of learning. They are places where students inevitably gravitate to as a space for quiet study, collaborative project work, social interaction, meetings, and events. In regional towns the importance of both types of libraries are magnified. These library aspirations both complement and compete, while opening opportunities for use of a wide variety of school learning facilities by the community and re-integrating school with the broader community.

### *Defining Terms*

The terms ‘community hub’, ‘shared use’, and ‘joint use’ conjure various meanings for different people. For the term ‘community hub’, Clandfield (2010) proposes a ‘five-point continuum extending from the community use of schools to the fully integrated school-community relationship’ to describe various types of community use of school facilities. For the first four points on Clandfield’s continuum—community use of schools, parallel use and shared use of schools, co-location of community services and full-service schools, Clandfield notes “there is nothing that by necessity integrates the life of the school with the community uses of the school” (Clandfield, 2010, p. 19). For the fifth point on his continuum, the school as a community hub, Clandfield proposes that the school be thought of as ‘a two-way hub when children’s learning activities within the school contribute to community development, and when community activities contribute to and enrich children’s learning within the school.’

NSW Department of Education (NSW DoE) has long encouraged schools to engage in ‘shared use’, or ‘community use of school facilities ... [whereby] schools are encouraged to make their facilities available for use by the community’ (NSW Department of Education, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). The shared use that is common in NSW falls largely into the first two points on Clandfield’s continuum—community use of schools and parallel and shared use of schools. In a shared use arrangement, a school controls a facility on its grounds but allows related community use during out-of-school hours. On the other hand, school use of community facilities in a ‘shared use’ sense is a given. Schools, as part of the community, use local council-controlled facilities such as parks, sports grounds and public swimming pools.

Although shared use of school and community sports facilities and halls is relatively common in NSW and in many cases leads to more effective use of these aspects of a school’s infrastructure, a report on sharing school and community facilities by the NSW Auditor General’s Office (2017) concluded:

The sharing of school facilities with the community is not fully effective. The Department of Education is implementing strategies to increase shared and joint use but several barriers, some outside the Department's direct control, must be addressed to fully realise benefits to students and the community of sharing school facilities. In addition, the Department needs to do more to encourage individual schools to share facilities with the community.

A collaborative, multi-agency approach is needed to overcome barriers to the joint use of facilities, otherwise, the Department may need significantly more funds than planned to deliver sufficient fit-for-purpose school facilities where and when needed (NSW Auditor General's Report, 2017, p. 1).

In its School Assets Strategic Plan, School Infrastructure NSW (SINSW: NSWDoE2017) stated its intention to develop stronger partnerships and increased joint and shared use of school facilities. 'Joint use' in NSW is defined as a school sharing and funding facilities with a community partner, such as managing a sports ground with a local council. SINSW defines 'joint use' as:

... where the **department and other parties make significant investments (land and/or capital)** in new facilities, upgrading facilities or maintaining facilities. The asset is typically shared between the school and the other parties over an extended period of time, or the lifetime of the asset. These projects are voluntary and **intended to be of mutual benefit to all parties** [emphases added]. (NSW Department of Education, Policy Library, 2020b, 2020c)<sup>1</sup>

In line with its intention to develop stronger partnerships, and joint use facilities SINSW, NSW DoE (2018) has also promoted the notion of Schools as Community Hubs and identified four fundamental principles underpinning Schools as Community Hubs:

- Developing more socially cohesive societies
- Re-connecting learning with life and enabling learning anywhere, anytime with anyone
- The sensible, collaborative use of assets through joint use developments and partnerships
- Increasing socio-economic benefit/value-add (SINSW, 2018).

In signalling these principles, which go beyond simply economic benefits, the joint use facilities and community hubs as proposed by NSW DoE, SINSW create the opportunity for NSW state schools to develop as real two-way community hubs, with a fully integrated school-community relationship as per Clandfield's (2010) continuum. In the case of existing schools, whether these benefits can be realised will depend on the need for school refurbishment in addition to the community's needs.

In rural and regional areas, there is a strongly held belief that schools are 'central to being a community' (Halsey, 2018). This belief is rarely imagined as a fully

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<sup>1</sup> The genesis of the Young High School-Hilltops Council joint use community library began in 2017. References to NSW DoE policies and procedures refer to the policies available at that time. Since then, NSW DoE has developed a more recent strategic plan and continued to refine policies and processes regarding sharing of school facilities. Updated references are included in the reference list at the end of this chapter.

integrated school-community relationship. However, the belief does provide fertile ground to develop a true two-way community hub as will be seen in the case of Young High School (YHS) and the Hilltops community in the regional centre of Young, New South Wales (NSW) in Australia.

## **Vision and Guiding Parameters**

Establishing alignment between all parties regarding both the vision and the operational requirements is the greatest challenge in developing and implementing a joint use project. Without alignment to a shared vision a joint use project will not be sustainable. Fundamental steps in this project were establishing the shared vision and commitment to this vision, deriving the guiding design principles and understanding and integrating the various sets of policies, regulations and requirements of different government departments.

### ***Opportunities, Synergies and Vision***

The vision for the project, ‘Supporting Whole of Life Learning for Hilltops’ grew out of synergy between a number of YHS initiatives and needs identified by Hilltops Council and community members. Young Shire Council Cultural Infrastructure Masterplan (Young Shire Council, 2014) identified the following needs:

- A new community library
- A cultural precinct
- Facilities for the arts community / arts space(s).

In addition, the newly formed Hilltops Council wished to augment existing education provision and provide new opportunities and networked spaces for learning, including facilities for remote university learning. With the announcement of a new library for YHS, the school saw the opportunity to support key initiatives and infrastructure needs by integrating learning facilities with the new library:

- Youth health and wellbeing hub
- Wiradjuri learning and cultural centre
- Multimedia and project-based learning spaces (Hayball, consultation notes YHS, 2018).

From the outset, Young High School and Hilltops Council Community Library was born out of these shared community needs and conceived by all as a joint use facility for mutual benefit. In determining mutual benefits, the team considered what would be a ‘win-win’ for all community groups i.e., what are the things that this community does not have, that the school might provide, and what are the things that this school does not have, that the community might provide.

## ***Design Guidelines and Principles***

The design was guided by a synthesis of the following principles and guidelines:

- Education Facilities Standards Guidelines (EFSG), General Education Principles (NSW Department of Education, Education Facilities Standards and Guidelines, 2020a)
- State Library: People Places (State Library NSW, 2020)
- Universal Design Principles (Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, 2020)
- The UN Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2020).

Project-specific design principles were developed with SINSW, YHS, Hilltops Council, and the project reference group to address whole-of-life learning: building community, celebrating the arts and the community's multicultural nature, providing contemporary learning environments, respecting heritage, ensuring economically sustainable development, and embedding universal design principles.

## **Realising the Vision**

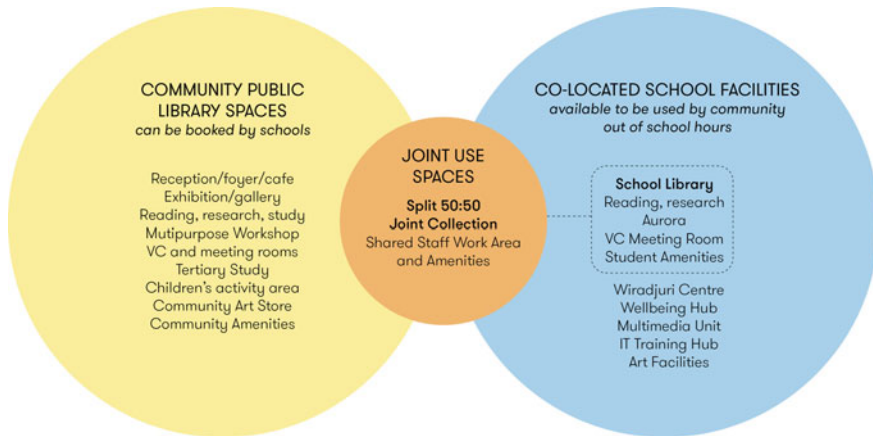
Synergies between SINSW's principles underpinning community hubs and the business case for the project (commissioned by Hilltops Council) demonstrated a positive benefit to cost ratio for creating a joint use library and community learning facility. How the four key principles were given effect is described below.

### ***Seamless Access to a Range of Resources and Learning Spaces***

A schema for the joint use of library and learning spaces was developed in response to stakeholder engagement and project reference group scrutiny (Fig. 1).

### ***Maximising Mutual Benefit, Minimising Space and Budget***

By sharing areas, establishing a joint collection, and developing a booking system for a variety of integrated facilities, the area schedule for the joint use facility demonstrated the efficiencies gained by joint use, with the total area being reduced from the area required for separate facilities.



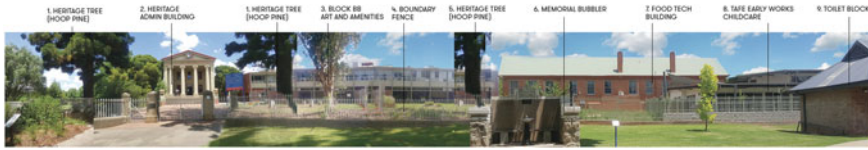
**Fig. 1** Integration of functional spaces including a joint collection and shared staff work area (Image by Hayball)

### ***Building Community and Identity***

To build community and identity and create a culture that reflects and respects diversity within the Hilltops' community, an extensive series of stakeholder workshops were conducted. Further, architect Michael Mossman was engaged to assist the team to develop a design that responded to the cultural values and narratives of place. This process, involving consultations with local elders and visits to other cultural centres, led to a series of themes that resonate through the design. Heritage consultants GML Heritage were engaged to better understand how the heritage significance of the site could contribute to the development proposal.

### ***Connection to the Land, the Place, the History, and the People***

Understanding the rich cultural history of the land on which the facility is located, Wiradjuri country, was central to creating a joint use facility that realised the guiding design principles. In the 1860s the site and surrounds were the locations for the Lambing Flat Riots. False rumours that Chinese workers were planning to take local goldfields for themselves led to a series of riots on the site including the burning down of the original courthouse. A new gaol was built in 1876 on land adjacent to the current YHS site and a Grand Courthouse on the site of the current school in 1884. Immediately to the north of the current site is an open civic area called Carrington Park that used to be separated from the school site by Currawong Street. However, this street was removed, resulting in the Grand Courthouse and the old gaol having an unusual direct frontage to Carrington Park (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2** Significant existing site features (Image by Hayball)

The preferred development site was selected based on its capacity to provide direct community access to and from the adjoining park and because it would help reinstate visual and physical connection to the Grand Courthouse. The existing arts and amenities block, constructed in 1963 and located on part of the preferred development site, was considered intrusive from a heritage perspective. Synergistically, redevelopment of the school visual arts facilities within the new Library and Community Learning Facility added significant benefit to the community arts groups who were seeking facilities and enabled the integration of sorely needed school multi-media facilities into the complex.

Two complimentary narratives were developed to respond to the cultural aspiration of stakeholders and the historical context of the site. Historical mappings were overlaid with cultural considerations to create a response to both European and Aboriginal heritage which was based on interpretation, dialogue and activation.

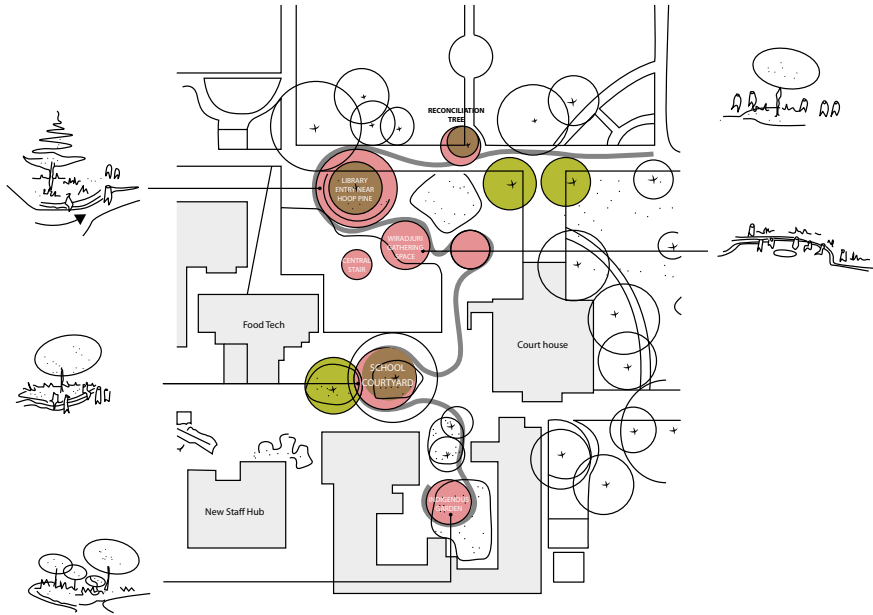
### *Wiradjuri Architectural Narrative and Response*

Design responses that were adopted in response to consultation with the Wiradjuri community included:

- *Yindyamarra*—a Wiradjuri word - respect for everything, expressed by giving honour, going slowly, and taking responsibility
- *Ngumbaay-dyil* (all are one)—reconciliation and inclusion
- *A narrative connected by interstitial spaces*—spaces for gathering, movement
- *Exchange* between the Wiradjuri and European
- *Language*—wayfinding and building naming in Wiradjuri language
- *Cultural artefacts* referenced through façade material and detailing.
- *Fire*—spaces for coming together, storytelling and colours and materials to symbolise the significance of fire.

Consultation with stakeholders identified that places of significance within Aboriginal culture are not defined by linear elements, rather they are defined by and between a collection of nonlinear forms such as streams, mountains, rocks, vegetation, fire, the land and the sky. Stakeholders identified that the traditional approach to these places and circulation within them was non-linear.

In consultation with stakeholders, a non-linear meandering path was created through the facility to emphasise and celebrate the layers of Wiradjuri history and



**Fig. 3** Non-linear meandering path linking interstitial spaces for exchange, reconciliation and gathering (Image by Hayball)

culture connected to this site (see Fig. 3). The forms of the facility and surrounding landscape elements are intentionally nonlinear and define a series of indoor and outdoor interstitial spaces for exchange, reconciliation and gathering. These interstitial spaces are places to emphasise *Ngumbaay-dyil* (meaning ‘all are one’ and ‘all together are one’) as a symbol of hope for the future. The meandering path links these interstitial spaces enabling continuing dialogue between Wiradjuri and European cultural heritage. This meandering path welcomes a visitor at the entrance to Carrington Park and leads through multiple stops to tell a story of past and present from the reconciliation tree, past the Wiradjuri Centre, the Grand Court House, leading ultimately to new spaces in the school courtyard and Indigenous Garden. Archaeological findings uncovered on the site will be located along the meandering path, providing opportunities for interpretation and learning.

### ***European Architectural Narrative and Response***

The massing, forms and detailing of the facility were determined through consultation with stakeholder groups and derived because of:

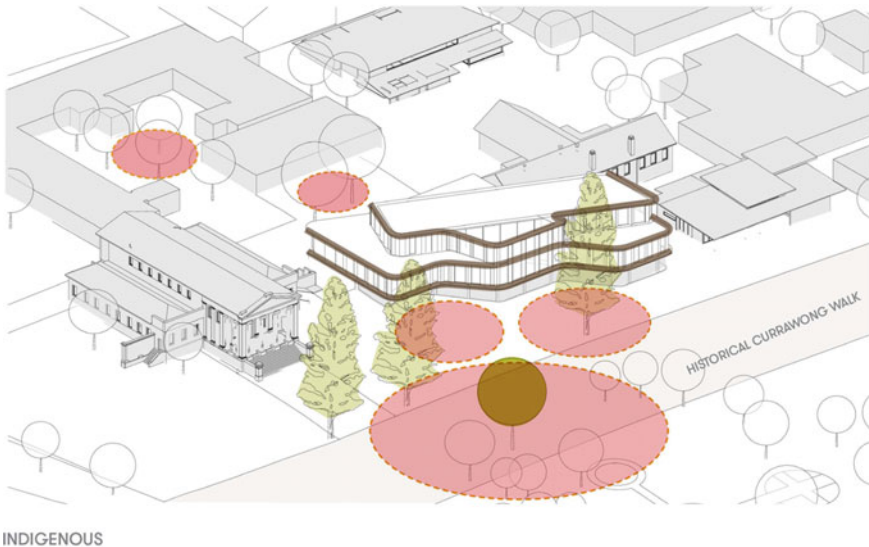
- The bulk and scale of the courthouse
- The historic setbacks and subdivision patterns of the site



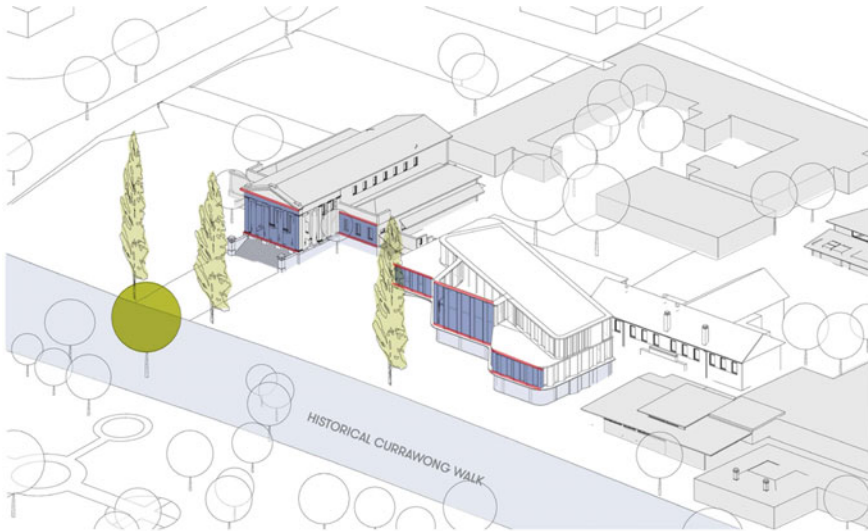
- Sightlines to the courthouse
- The height of courthouse facade elements.

Key outcomes from the heritage investigation were adopted in the design:

- Currawong Walk (historically Currawong Street) was re-established as a means of community access to the facility via Carrington Park.
- Layered historic and cultural landscape of the site, with consideration to character, scale, proportion, form, materials, and colour, were interpreted throughout the design of the facility.
- The heights of the various stepping forms of the facility were derived from the horizontal and vertical datums and forms of the former courthouse (administration building) particularly when viewed from in front of the former gaol.
- When viewed from the north-east, the facility appears more horizontal and sinuous, responding to the cultural spaces within the landscape and referencing a more organic stratification of land formation (Fig. 4).
- When viewed from the north-west in front of the former gaol, the facility can be seen to respond to the scale, form and vertical proportion of the courthouse (Fig. 5).
- Views from the gaol within the park towards the former courthouse are enhanced by the new curtilage (Fig. 6).



**Fig. 4** Sinuous forms create gathering spaces and protection zones



EUROPEAN

**Fig. 5** Response to the European curtilage (Images by Hayball)



**Fig. 6** Photomontage view from the north-west (Image by Hayball)

### Functional Organisation

There were significant challenges to be met in designing an integrated facility that simultaneously meets the needs of the school and the community, especially in terms of access, security, duty of care, and creating a seamless flow between related functional areas. After much consultation, the floor plan emerged. Access is provided for community use of the joint use facilities out of school hours while maintaining the school’s duty of care requirements through the careful zoning of community spaces, joint use spaces, school spaces, stairs, and lifts along with the strategic placement of operable walls. The design enables concurrent use by various community groups for maximum school and community benefit.

The lower ground floor provides community access from Carrington Park and the reinstated Currawong Walk. This floor is carefully zoned, with separate community and school access and egress. Operable doors and walls delineate community and school use during school hours (see Figs. 7 and 8).

The upper ground floor provides access via a community stair or lift to the west, a shared staircase or directly from the main school quadrangle to the south ensuring the library assumes prominence as being central to the school’s learning spaces. This floor houses the joint use staff space, tertiary study space and a combination of school spaces for wellbeing, meetings, virtual learning, and general school library spaces.

Level 1 can be accessed either via the community stair or lift to the west, or the school stair to the east. This floor accommodates school art and computer facilities, with the inclusion of a community art storage space to support community use of the art facilities.



Fig. 7 Lower ground floor and inspiration images (Image by Hayball)



**Fig. 8** Impression of the community entry through to the joint collection (Image by Hayball)

All floors contain a range of bespoke social, gathering, professional, cultural, and learning settings that respond to the various stakeholder needs and support whole of life learning. The zoning of the facility works in combination with a clear definition of vertical circulation paths and a series of movable walls. These adaptable modes ensure that the facility can be used throughout the day for maximum school and community benefit, providing for community integration when desired whilst still meeting duty of care obligations. Internally the facility allows for lines of demarcation between the school and community to be adapted throughout the day.

The orange 'shared' zone includes the main collection, staff, administration, and shared circulation (see Fig. 9). The yellow 'community' zone is designated for community use and enables activities such as reading, gathering, workshopping, exhibition, and storage. School users also use these community zones with supervision. The blue 'school' zone is designated for school use during school hours. Community members can book these zones for use outside school hours.

Each zone is provided with separate vertical circulation. School users can pass independently through the floors within the blue school zone, and community users can access each floor after hours without needing to circulate through the school or shared zone. Figure 9 uses red and blue dashed lines to indicate a series of sliding and operable walls, allowing further division of the space if required.

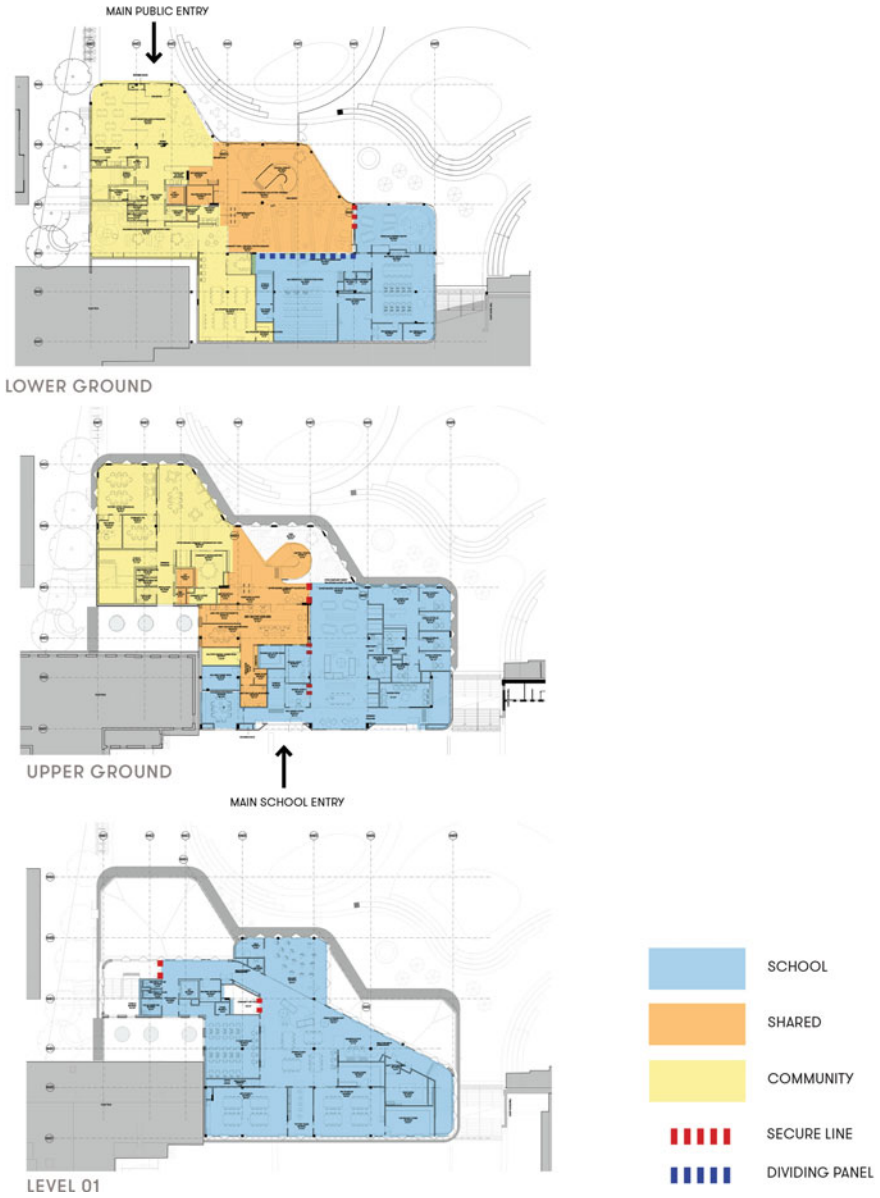


Fig. 9 Zoning of lower ground, upper ground, and level 1 floors (Image by Hayball)



## **Situating This Case Study Within the NSW Context at the Time**

The SINSW School Assets Strategic Plan (NSW Dept of Education, 2017) formalised NSW's intention to develop schools as community hubs. Although there were several existing examples of 'joint use' school libraries in NSW, these projects had been conceived at a local or regional level prior to the development of department-wide policy on joint use. Two of the three existing joint use library projects were successful in achieving their aims while the third had not been successful and was to be disbanded. With the lack of a department-wide policy to guide the individual projects, their success was dependent on whether there was a collective vision that maintained currency and whether appropriate governance and operational systems were in place to ensure the sustainability and practicality of the vision. A report by the Audit Office (2017) noted:

The Department is planning to focus on joint use agreements with local councils. Several agreements are currently being piloted and will be evaluated to provide an evidence-based foundation for this new approach. To develop or refurbish school facilities for joint use, councils, the Department and other key stakeholders must work more closely together and prioritise joint use from the earliest stages of any project. A collaborative, multi-agency approach is needed.

At the time of the initiation of YHS-Hilltops project, mid-2018, the joint use policy and procedures were still very much in the pilot stage.

### ***The Critical Nexus Between 'Hard' and 'Soft' Systems***

It is one thing to conceptualise and design a true community hub, it is another to develop the policies and protocols that will ensure its effective, safe and secure operation. No matter how well-designed the 'hard systems' – the settings, spaces and fit out – are to support and enhance learning, good facilities design must be accompanied by the deliberate development and implementation of 'soft systems'. For example, spaces designed for quiet reflective activities will only function effectively if users of the space monitor and modify their behaviour to ensure that any sounds are at a minimum and, although spaces designed to support collaboration set up the physical fit out and layout so that learners can face each other and work together, these spaces do not suddenly bestow the ability for users to collaborate effectively. Getting the nexus between the physical design and the operational protocols right is crucial in a joint use facility.

'Soft system' elements, policies and protocols are being developed collaboratively by the school, the community library staff, the arts society and community representatives to complement the carefully considered design of the 'hard spaces'. During the construction phase it is planned to trial ways of operating that mimic operation in the new facility.

## ***Governance and Funding Models that Will Make It Sustainable***

Breaking new ground, wherever and whenever it happens, brings challenges beyond those posed in the complex brief and heritage overlay for the YHS-Hilltops Council project. As a pilot project, it was required to develop systems from scratch for capital expenditure and operating expenditure and to develop, collaboratively, policies and protocols. Although the vision for the project might be understood at the senior levels of the Department of Education and the Hilltops Council, one of the biggest challenges in the design stage was the lack of understanding by personnel who had not been involved in the visioning phase. Many departments still operate silos. Without a deliberate education program and a clear pronouncement of the intention of new approaches to joint use, staff hold on to old models that are competitive and focused on ‘protecting their own’. It is difficult to develop a win–win mentality with departments that are unwilling to collaborate and are geographically and ideologically removed from the community.

As stated earlier in this paper, a shared vision for a joint use project will not be sustainable unless there is alignment between all parties. While successfully developing alignment and commitment to the vision at a local community level, the lack of alignment of department staff raised numerous challenges that had to be overcome. The old proverb, ‘where there is a will there is a way’ is a fitting statement regarding the importance of a collective shared vision. Despite many obstacles, the project is at last ‘shovel ready’ at the time of writing in 2021. The construction of the new facility will begin at any time.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding the place and the community who will use the facility has been a key pillar in the success of the project thus far. A strong shared vision and clear identification of needs together with the fortuitous existence and inclusion of historical buildings, have led to the development of a highly integrated, adaptable facility that will respond to school and community needs. The completed facility will support whole of life learning and community building while celebrating the rich multicultural history of the land and the people of Hilltops.

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