

The Sisters' Building at St Michael's Grammar School, St Kilda

St. Kilda Hill is the site for St Michael's Grammar and this difficult school project by the Melbourne office of the Architectus Group. It is a clever and robust building, grafted on and around existing buildings at St Michael's Grammar and is the first piece in a new masterplan for the school, which started in an existing mansion house on the site in 1895. Inner city St. Kilda has seen much residential urban infill in the last ten years, and this project represents an institution dealing with infill through an informed Architect.

What then does this building propose about school campus development? It accepts the incremental nature of campuses and the layering of styles and masterplans within them. The building itself has qualities of an assemblage, but is a large volume, an extension which is larger than the building it extends. Different treatments on different facades recognise the limited viewing capabilities such a site and building has. In this way, it seems like more than one new building, more than one idea.

The approach taken by the Architect in regards to diversity of type is consistent with the rich context of St. Kilda. The immediate area is typified by 1960s brick 'six pack' type apartments (where six apartments are placed on a site previously occupied by a single house), Victorian Mansions, worker cottages, shops and the school's own dense but 'idyllic' campus.

A roof garden covers much of the new building, accessed by staff and students with high polycarbonate balustrades around. It recalls Seabrook and Fildes' *MacRoberston Girls High School* of 1934 which included roof top teaching spaces, a first in Australia and expressive of a new kind of open and contextual learning. Le Corbusier's obsession with roof gardens is also brought to mind, particularly the kindergarten atop the *Marseille Unite*, which also sought to open education but at the same time contain it with its own context. As a result of contemporary planning concerns (preventing overlooking), the balustrade around this roof deck at St Michael's is quite high, preventing overlooking but, according to design Architect Michael Bouteloup, "permitting long views to St Kilda landmarks".

The north side of the building is a clear Corbusian-like modernist composition, with a columned ground floor area that is recessed to suggest it is open, main *piano noble* in the middle and the screened roof garden above. Cream brick is used proudly here - in context with six pack apartments and resurfacing the legacy of cream brick used on mediated modernist institutional buildings - as in the work of Seabrooke and Fildes. This is the most iconic façade of the project, with three double height bay window and spandrel suites that have been dubbed 'Nun's habits' by the school populus (thus the building was named). These windows register the room based planning behind, with one window per classroom (the rooms can be opened up to each other), and also form the key contextual link with wall and window six pack flats of the surrounding area.

The cream brick of the north side gives way to striping brilliant red and purple glazed bricks on the eastern face, recalling the school colours and registering the intensity of the closed space in front on this wall, which is the only part of the project visible from Chapel Street. This pocket features an open industrial type steel stair; the western edge of the building is anchored by a more closed stair, which screens views into neighbouring houses. A double layer of perforated aluminium sheet produces an evocative varying moire effect that animates this key movement point up to access balconies with lockers and the roof garden.

The treatment shifts on the south side, and is spatially more complex. With an existing building with north facing glazing immediately adjacent, the covered arcade is used to shelter the external circulation and mediate light into the space. The soffit of the covered steel frame roof is perforated fibre cement sheet, featuring a strike running through it, a big line drawn between St. Georges Presbyterian and St. Kilda Presbyterian Churches, local ecclesiastical landmarks. Views to the latter are framed by an opening in the canopy as it skilfully folds down at its edges. The eastern end of this arcade is extensively and elaborately glazed into large flexible-use spaces, in a manner that is dense enough to be like *tracery*, traditional net-like window framing normally used on gothic churches. Here it is all rectilinear and made out of built-up Capral aluminium glazing suite rather than stone, but it adds to the sense of this space as anti-modern, like a 19th Century covered laneway; giving the project a distinct urban feel in the heart of the campus.

Other sections of the building feature concrete blockwork, in both smooth face and some in rough cast - maybe a recourse to gothic notions of the instructive building. The multiple treatments of the building are not schizophrenia but a work of informed assemblage that deals with the changing intensity and openness of a compact campus, and an approach that acknowledges the incremental and fragmentary growth of schools and their children.





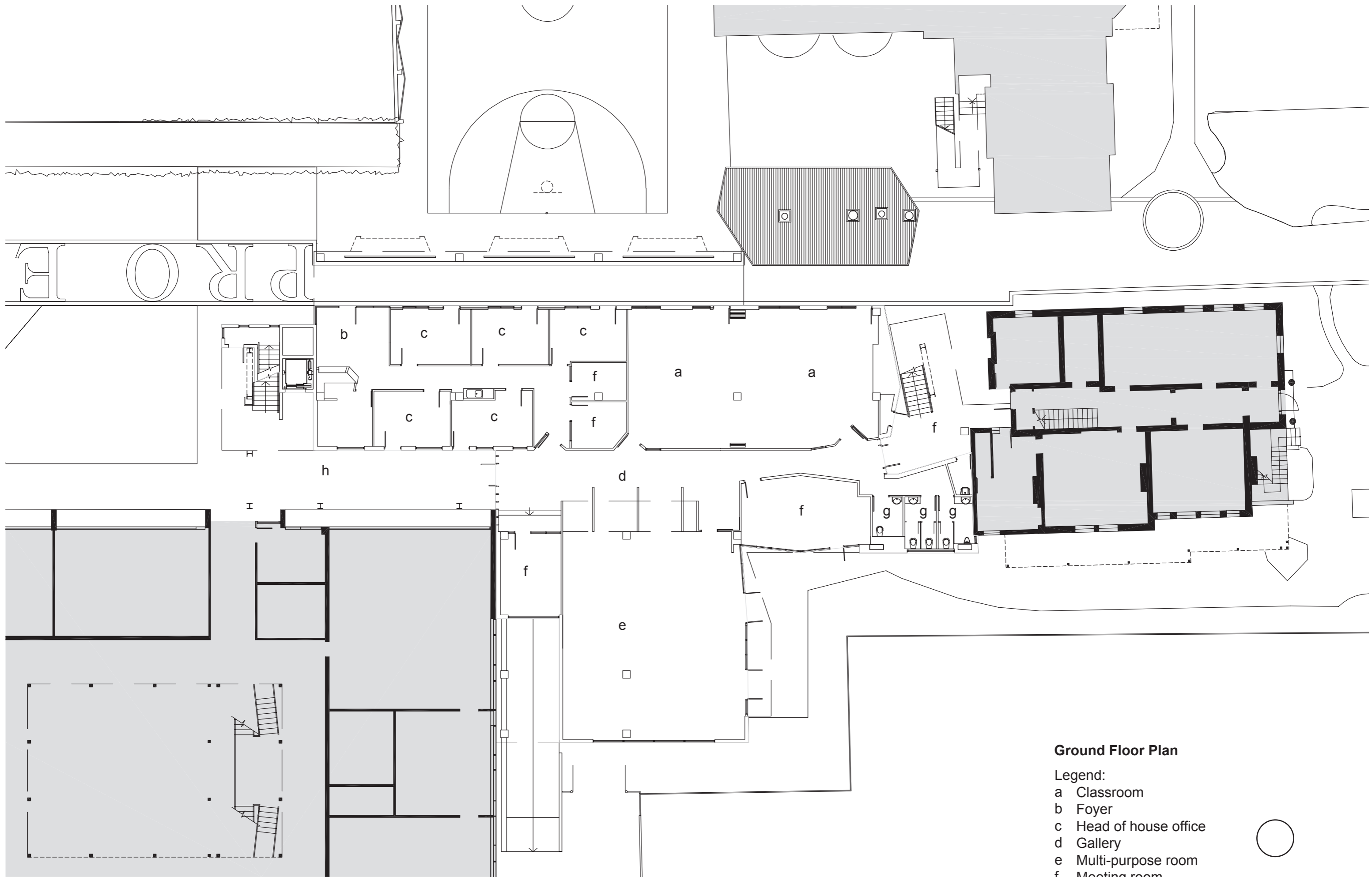


First Floor Plan

Legend:

- a Classroom
- b Computer Classroom
- c IT Office
- d Office
- e Team teaching classroom
- f Balcony
- g Toilets
- h void

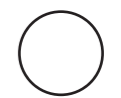


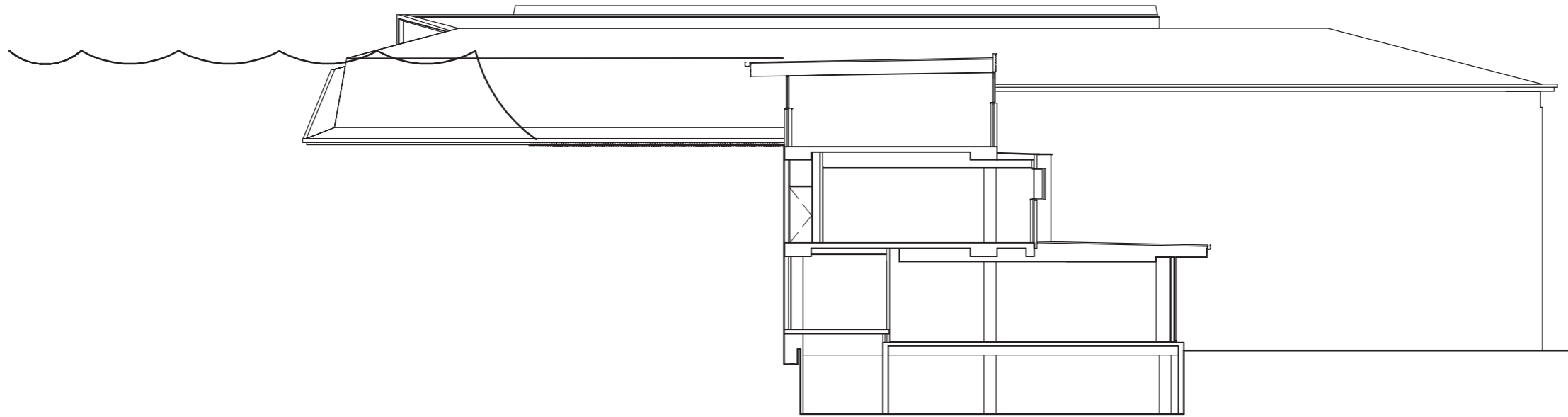


Ground Floor Plan

Legend:

- a Classroom
- b Foyer
- c Head of house office
- d Gallery
- e Multi-purpose room
- f Meeting room
- g Toilets
- h Arcade





East-West Section



East-West Section through Arcade