

breaking ground

The oldest Afrikaans school in Pretoria is turning heads with its visionary approach to modern design

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The new sports complex of the Afrikaanse Hoër Meisieskool in Pretoria is centrally placed among the sports facilities to act as a beacon.



The new gallery overhead is clad in maintenance-free, thermally regulating factory coated sheeting. LEFT The school coat of arms was abstracted from Anton van Wouw's 'Boere Nooientjie' sculpture.

While the tendency for so many of the country's older institutions is to look to the past in creating a cohesive aesthetic, Pretoria's renowned Afrikaanse Hoër Meisieskool has taken a path less travelled. In the late 1950s the then principal Elizabeth C Steijn chose to embrace the modern architecture of the time and commissioned the construction of a modernist-inspired school hall, the Elizabeth C Steijnsaal, to stand against the backdrop of the school's historic red-brick buildings. It was a bold move on her part but one that set the tone for the future.

Affies Meisies – as the school is more affectionately referred to – is once again leading the charge, thanks to a set of future-forward buildings conceptualised by award winning firm Mathews & Associates Architects that redefine the notion of the school landscape. The update of the hall and the addition of the sports complex have catapulted the girls' school into the 21st century but not without first weaving its history into the plans. 'Buildings should tell stories and at Affies Meisies we had an abundance of them to tell,' explains Pieter Mathews, one of the lead architects on the project.

For the hall, Pieter and his partner Philip du Toit were tasked with upholding the building's spirit of modernity while respecting its initial structure. Using a strap-on technique, a gallery was built on top of the existing hall and a foyer was incorporated at ground level. At every opportunity local artists have been commissioned to make their mark in and around the space, ensuring a rich and thought-provoking outcome. The result is a cohesive meeting of the times, with the former 1960s facade partnering harmoniously with the distinctive streamlined addition.

'Every joint, junction and detail where old meets new has been celebrated, original symbols were dusted off and re-interpreted and materials were re-used in a fresh way,' says Pieter. A narrow steel channel was introduced in between the existing and new structure; throwing a shadow during the day, the border is illuminated by



strip lighting at night. The project's patron and former principal is remembered by way of a printed canvas photograph at the top of the stairs up to the gallery. It's thoughtful design details such as these that narrate Affies Meisies' history while doing double duty as a tangible lesson to its scholars.

The sports complex on the western side of the grounds was to become the fulcrum of the school's sporting activities, centrally placed among the various fields and courts instead of to the side as was previously planned. As such, it stands as a beacon, orientating first-time visitors and quickly drawing them to the sporting arena.

With its signature Mathews & Associates Architects appeal of graphic angles and lean, geometric form, it still satisfies a multitude of uses. Continuing to pay tribute to the past, the building's standout cantilevered roof – an inverted truss – is a reference to the triangular profile of the Voortrekker *kappie* (bonnet), which forms part of the school's coat of arms.

The wide stairs at the entrance double up as an amphitheatre for swimming galas while the raised foyer can be used as a platform for concerts, with the roof slope lending itself to audio enhancement. The latter has also been used as a projection surface for movies, with scholars taking their seats on the field below.

'We tried to blur the boundaries between art, architecture, tradition, pragmatism and modernity, every layer adding new meaning to the whole,' explains Pieter. Where many designers fail to observe the past and the future successfully in a single creation, Mathews & Associates Architects has managed to do both. More importantly, it has made an architectural statement that will inspire the very people it serves to accommodate. maaa.co.za

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP The entrance to the sports complex; students watch a netball match from the raised foyer; a canvas portrait of former principal Elizabeth C Steijn faces the stairs leading to the gallery in the updated school hall.



The blue mosaic panel on the hall's north face was an aspect of the original building's plans that never got included.

