

Higher learning

A historic church finds new purpose within a creative Invercargill campus.

For a few years now, the number of religious congregations in the Western world has been on a steady decline, much like many other gatherings. As some denominations have begun consolidating their worshippers and putting underused facilities on the market for sale, the phenomenon has given rise to an interesting predicament: former church buildings have become increasingly easy to come by – and, perhaps, sometimes too easy.

Church building designs run the gamut from humble to ostentatious, and it is all too common now for these projects to fall into disrepair in the face of rising upkeep costs and dwindling donations. The unlucky ones, no matter how beautiful they may be, become victims of the bulldozer. But when the right buyer is armed with creative vision and adequate financing, some churches are finding adaptive reuse as homes, concert venues, restaurants, hotels, commercial office spaces and more. When the former church building in question is historically protected, an adaptive reuse project can be tricky; but the ones that see it through, and do it well, ensure these structures find a whole new way to serve their community.

The idea for a new campus to house the Southern Institute of Technology's (SIT) Centre for Creative Industries, Te Rau o Te Huia, was conceived when SIT acquired the historic St Johns Church in the heart of Invercargill. The property's Tay Street location was ideal for its adjacency to the main SIT campus, but at 140-years-old, adapting the Category I listed building wasn't without its challenges. The project involved upgrading and strengthening as well as



above and left: To distinguish new from old, a single dark colour for exposed structural steelwork – Resene Nero – was used throughout the campus, including the seismic strengthening in the church interior. The structural steel is undercoated with Carboguard 635 from Altex Coatings (part of the Resene Group). This all-purpose epoxy coating has a variety of attributes that made it particularly suitable for the project, including low temperature cure, surface tolerance, fast recoat times, moisture tolerance during application and curing, as well as excellent corrosion protection. The topcoat is in Resene Uracryl 403 gloss. Walls and ceiling painted in Resene SpaceCote Low Sheen tinted to Resene Black White, timber stained in Resene Colorwood Natural and sealed in Resene Aquaclear satin.

opposite: The Te Rau o Te Huia campus connects the past and the future, providing a vibrant new environment for the students of SIT and preserving and celebrating the heritage of Invercargill and Southland for future generations. The complex contains six sound-proof studios, DJ booths, editing rooms, a group practice room and a green-screen room as well as a café that's open to the public. The upper floors contain computer labs outfitted with the latest technology. Main walls, bulkheads and ceiling painted in Resene SpaceCote Low Sheen tinted to Resene Black White, yellow feature walls in Resene SpaceCote Low Sheen tinted to Resene Bird Flower and structural steel in Resene Uracryl 403 in Resene Nero.

Resene
Black White

Resene
Colorwood
Natural

Resene
Nero

Resene
Bird Flower

adding new spaces to create an integrated campus to house SIT's programmes for film, animation, game design, fashion and music.

Thanks to SIT administration's imagination and McCulloch Architects' considered design, Te Rau o Te Huia has found higher existence as a handsome marriage of old and new. Their approach was to make a clear distinction between the new contemporary elements and the historic church while designing the new portions of the build in a complementary style to link them together into a cohesive, integrated campus. This was achieved through roof forms and decorative elements, as well as colours and finishes.

"St Johns Church faced an uncertain future, so to be able to adaptively reuse and integrate this wonderful building into the heart of a modern, vibrant facility has made it a special project for the entire design and contract team," says Brent Knight, Director at McCulloch Architects. "The original church was built in stages between the 1880s and 1930s and forms the heart of the campus. It was perfectly suited as a multipurpose space and has now been fitted-out with freestanding teaching 'pods' that serve multiple functions, such as learning and exhibition spaces. These are also used to house mechanical services and electronic services and are clad in acoustic sound-absorbing surfaces."

One of the standout details is the new contemporary stained-glass window installed in the former church, which was designed to suit existing stained glass while representing the structure's new educational use. The new seismic strengthening elements are also noticeable due to their high-contrast colour. Exposed and articulated within the former church's interior, they are easily identifiable through their dark hue – painted in Resene Uracryl 403 tinted to Resene Nero to match the structural steel in the new buildings. New architectural lighting has also been incorporated to enhance historic details both inside and out.

Wrapping around the east and north of the church is a new teaching block. "This contains computer labs, specialist teaching spaces such as a green-screen room, stop-motion lab, public café and coworking space for former students, visiting lecturers and industry partners," says Brent. "These spaces are open, bright and light-filled. A full-height atrium links the whole campus together, connecting all floors vertically and forming a north to south public 'street'. This pathway flows right through the site, encouraging public access to the ground floor and linking SIT's main campus with the public park and the inner-city precinct to the north."

The new building is steel framed with precast and structural glazed elements, but its architectural flair is far from the standard 'square box' approach many contemporary structures tend to take





on. The exterior cladding is a mixture of tray cladding and Swisspearl while the north building has steep pitched roofs and skillion ceilings in keeping with the existing church. According to the builders, Amalgamated Builders, the confined site was among the project's challenges. The construction methodology had to be well planned and carefully managed on and offsite to ensure access was maintained for all lifting requirements.

"In the atrium, a dynamic, sculptural staircase leads to bridges and open balconies to celebrate movement through the building and encourage collaboration and synergy between the various disciplines housed within the creative campus," explains Brent. "The fully-glazed west wall of the atrium faces the existing church, making this historic structure part of the day-to-day life of the campus. The atrium also houses a large video wall which is used to display student films and animation while the north café opens out to a public green park, which was the former churchyard. This space forms the public interface of the campus and is designed to encourage engagement between students, staff and local members of the community. It is also designed to be used as a foyer space for public events such as musical performances, film screenings and art exhibitions."

Brent says that the Resene colour and finishes formed a key part of his team's design approach. "These were used throughout to both distinguish the new from the old and also to link the historic church and the architecture of the new buildings into a cohesive whole. This included articulating new randomised exterior cladding in two colours complementary to the existing brickwork. This is continued inside, with feature elements articulated in Resene Fire, a burnt orange colour that reflects the brick of the church. Timber screens stained in Resene Colorwood Natural and sealed in Resene Aquaclear satin in the café and atrium are designed to reflect the ornate timber church ceiling and roof structure."



● **left and above:** The new staircase and feature walls in Resene SpaceCote Low Sheen tinted to Resene Bird Flower and Resene Fire bring character to the airy atrium. Other walls and ceiling in Resene SpaceCote Low Sheen tinted to Resene Black White, structural steel in Resene Nero and decorative timber stained in Resene Colorwood Natural and sealed with Resene Aquaclear satin.

- Resene Black White
- Resene Bird Flower
- Resene Nero
- Resene Colorwood Natural

right: Resene Fire was chosen to colour statement columns and select walls where the new build meets the church, as it picks up on the natural hues of the historic brick walls. Structural steel in Resene Nero, ceiling and bulkhead in Resene Black White and timber screen stained in Resene Colorwood Natural and sealed in Resene Aquaclear satin.

Resene
Fire

The new teaching block is a predominantly airy, light-filled interior with light-coloured walls in Resene Black White – designed to act as a backdrop to the daily bustle of student life. Resene Battleship Grey, a neutral medium grey, was used for the walls in spaces that were critical to colour filming, such as the film studio and stop-motion laboratory. As a counterpoint, bold feature paint colours have been used, such as in the central atrium space where a bright yellow wall in Resene SpaceCote Low Sheen tinted to Resene Bird Flower extends the entire height of the atrium, while dark feature doors in Resene Lusta-Glo semi-gloss enamel tinted to Resene Baltic Sea add a point of difference.

One of Brent's favourite outcomes of the project is that it has become a unifying hub for those who attend the school and the general public. "In addition to vocational training, the campus has hosted regular community events such as night food markets, concerts and art exhibitions. In this way it has fostered the integration of student life with the wider inner city," he says.

For Brent, choosing Resene products to colour and protect the project's surfaces brings him peace of mind. "Having access to comprehensive technical information, backed up with specialist local advice for both designers and contractors means we can specify products with confidence." **BW**

To see more of McCulloch Architects' work, visit www.mccullocharchitects.co.nz.



left: McCulloch Architects' design for Te Rau o Te Huia ensures old meets new in a considered way by using colours for the contemporary portions of the building which complement the existing hues of the historic St Johns Church. Exterior precast concrete walls in Resene Resitex Coarse in Resene Half Stack and church foundations in Resene X-200 acrylic weathertight membrane tinted to Resene Half Stack.

Resene
Half Stack

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