



MICHAELHOUSE

FELLOW ASSOCIATE OF MICHAELHOUSE

NICHOLAS COWLEY GRICE

22 November 2019

It was Winston Churchill who said “We shape buildings, thereafter they shape us”. How very apt when applied to Nick Grice’s work at Michaelhouse. There is probably not a single boy, member of staff, parent or visitor who remains untouched by the buildings of Michaelhouse: the gentle colour of the red brick, the cloisters, the quadrangles, the essential harmony of the architectural design, the sense of history and the warm and unique home to some 600 boys.

Nick Grice, himself, had a distinguished career at Michaelhouse. Like his father, he was in Farfield, as was his son, Justin. Nick was Second Prefect and achieved Honours for Hockey, representing Natal Schools. As an academic, he also starred, achieving a First-Class Matric, with distinctions in Mathematics, Latin and the Sciences. He went on to UCT and then returned to practise in Pietermaritzburg where he settled with his supportive wife, Gill.

Nick became the school architect in 1997, having served on the Buildings and Grounds Committee prior to that. Looking back, the mind boggles when one contemplates the number and range of projects undertaken at Michaelhouse by Nick over the years. To list them all would take far too long, but it is worth recording some of his major undertakings:

The new Media Centre fronting onto the parking area containing the Snell Memorial.

The conversion of the old library into the Rector’s Reception area and fashioning accommodation for the English, Speech and Drama and Art departments.

The Knight’s Astoturf.

The complete upgrade of the school’s kitchens, which involved lowering the floor of the basement below the Memorial Hall to accommodate a butchery and bakery. During this huge project all cooking and feeding of the school took place in a giant marquee.

The Indoor Sports Centre.

The upgrade of every dormitory and bedsitter throughout the school. At Michaelhouse almost all dormitories and bedsitters vary in size so individual drawings had to be done for virtually every room.

Numerous Staff houses.

The extension of East House into the Pennington Quad and the extension of West House over the Biology and Computer Sciences Block, plus the enclosing of the Pennington Quad by the building of new classrooms for the English Department.

The new Swimming Pool and Water Polo Complex.

The new Science Block including two apartments for the housemasters of West and Farfield.

The new Heritage Centre and Old Boys Club.

Two new boarding Houses, McCormick and Ralfe, plus the complete rebuild of Baines House.

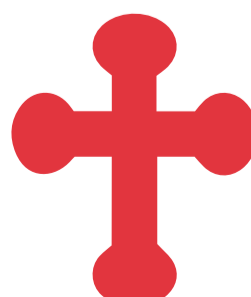
The Punchbowl Astroturf and the complete refurbishment of the Gym.

What an incredible list of achievements! It should also be remembered that, concurrently with these major projects, Nick was involved in a myriad of smaller projects, varying from designing the school’s signage to refurbishing the Rector’s house. The care and consideration that has gone into every detail of Nick’s work on the Michaelhouse campus is truly remarkable. The Chairman of the Board refers to Nick as “the guardian of the school’s aesthetics”. It is a guardianship which has the universal approval of the Michaelhouse community.

Two unusual examples illustrate Nick’s singular talent as an architect. A school’s Sports Centre is usually an ugly block of a building. There is no such jarring of the senses with the Michaelhouse Sports Centre. Nick’s design of a long pergola, water feature, coffee shop and sitting area has softened the façade of the building in a most attractive way. The second example is the Science Block. The original building had an extremely limited footprint and, into this confined area, Nick had to fit a building delivering many more facilities as well as two spacious apartments for housemasters. How Nick accomplished this is beyond comprehension, but at least we now know that it is possible to fit a camel through the eye of a needle!

If you go to St Paul’s Cathedral in London, you will find a plain stone plaque on the main floor beneath the centre of the dome. The inscription on the plaque was written by Christopher Wren, in memory of his father, Sir Christopher Wren, the architect of the Cathedral. The last line of the inscription states, “Reader, if you seek his monument, look around you.” These exact words could not have been better scripted for the work of Nick Grice at Michaelhouse. He is a most worthy Fellow Associate.

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