



Precast aesthetics enhance the healing process

Situated on the extensive campus of the Nepean Hospital in the outer western Sydney suburb of Penrith, the Nepean Mental Health Centre includes 64 mental health beds servicing high dependency, acute and specialist mental health services for older persons. The unit includes a dedicated inpatient ward and new facilities for the outpatient day program.

The Centre's design creates what the project architects, Woods Bagot, call a "living architecture." A facility such as this requires a hard edge for security but the building, both internally and externally, must engage with the patients. The conventional commercial construction methodology contrasts strongly with the non-institutional feel of the interiors, with large areas of glazing and comfortable lounges allowing a visual connection to the three therapeutic internal courtyards.

Salutogenic design has been cleverly incorporated into the building; the concept that the quality of the built environment has an influence on our health. At first glance it may seem that precast concrete walling is the antithesis of a nurturing, healing environment but the mellow, tactile exterior walling of the Nepean Mental Health Centre

Precast manufacturer

Austral Precast

Staining Supplier

Nawkaw Australia

Client

NSW Health Infrastructure

Builder

AW Edwards

Architect

Woods Bagot

Engineer

Hughes Trueman

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demonstrates otherwise.

Manufactured by National Precast member Austral Precast, the precast walling gives the building's façade a striking appearance. Substantial areas are decorated with a bamboo pattern that is debossed into the concrete surface. The pattern is the result of a rubber formliner that is placed in the base of the casting form or mould. Once the formliner is in place, steel reinforcement is positioned and the form is filled with concrete. When cured, the concrete panel is lifted out and the formliner stripped away, ready for reuse. All precast panels, plain and patterned, are finished in a pleasant coppery green colour, applied on site using the Nawkaw staining process.

The use of green, patterned walling is most effective around the building entrances, on the long street elevation and most especially in the therapeutic courtyards where the colour and texture blend happily with the landscaping.

It's well accepted that colour has a direct effect on a person's wellbeing. Green is the benign colour of nature and has long been favoured as a positive colour, giving permission and safety. The 'Nepean green' was custom-formulated to an approved sample. The gold-bronze base is topped with a non-metallic weathered green. In certain lighting conditions the metallic base colour becomes more prominent.

The 147 precast panels for the Centre were cast on automated tables at Austral Precast's state-of-the-art facility in Wetherill Park, NSW. They were then delivered to site and installed by the precast manufacturer. The company is proud to be able to offer a complete end-to-end service from design consultation through manufacture and finishing, to delivery and installation, all with one contract and one point-of-contact and total responsibility.

"The design sought to create a building that fits with the colour palette of the surrounding environment," explains Woods Bagot principal Domenic Alvaro. "The copper green colour and natural patina of the precast concrete panels has depth and tactility, providing a unique 'on weathering' finish that will continue to evolve over time."

While meeting strict budgetary, treatment, safety and security requirements, the Centre's use of precast also provides a level of humaneness and connection to landscape that will assist the patients on their healing journey.