Tattered and torn to designer chic - the transformation of Science I

The Mellor Laboratories' new facade features a representation of the molecule structure of Laurenene, which was discovered by Otago PhD chemistry student Dennis Lauren in 1970.

Professor Lyall Hanton has been in love with his "old jumper" – Otago's Science I building – since the early-1970s; so much so that he became a little blind to its loose threads and holes.

The Chemistry head says the building's $56million refurbishment has been money well spent. The first major phase of redevelopment is complete and several key teaching and research areas have been handed back to the Departments of Chemistry and Human Nutrition.

"It was wonderful when I came here in the early-1970s as an undergraduate because the building was only a few years old. I did my PhD at Cambridge from 1977 through to 1981 and have been here since, so [the facility] is like your old, favourite jersey – you wear it so often you don't realise it's unfashionable and frayed, or full of holes."


Professor Hanton says the building, now named the Mellor Laboratories, would be unrecognisable to alumni. During the first stage of redevelopment the 50-year-old building was stripped back to its "bare bones" and new air-handling systems and windows were installed while a new roof and exterior cladding – featuring "living walls" of ivy – were added.

Chemistry first-year classes are now taught on the ground floor and advanced laboratories and senior teaching labs are on the second floor. The refurbished West End of Science I has already been used to teach CHEM 150, a total immersion Summer School course.

The just-completed half of the building features a flexible "super-lab" for 112 students which can be divided in two, iPads at each lab station and the latest scientific equipment.

"It is much improved in terms of health and safety and now it's a state-of-the-art teaching environment that can just do more – students love it," he says.

Proof that world-class buildings create international opportunities has already come in the form of a Georgia Tech request to teach about 60 US students summer school papers on serious organic synthesis at the facility next year.

When asked to describe the new Mellor Laboratories Professor Hanton's quip was suitably sartorial – it's now "designer chic".


Otago alumnus Dr Joseph Mellor at work circa 1904 (image courtesy of Hocken Collections), and (right) a meeting table made from repurposed rimu Chemistry benchtops, which is now used in the Registry Building.

What's in a name?

Science I's reinvention has also seen its name changed to the Mellor Laboratories – in honour of 1898 graduate Joseph William Mellor who made an important contribution to the course of World War 1 by developing ceramic refractories, used in steel production, for Britain.

Mellor also completed an unparalleled contribution to scientific literature by writing a 16-volume, 16-million word Comprehensive Treatise on inorganic chemistry. He was only the second person elected to the Royal Society for ceramic-related work after eighteenth century pottery magnate Josiah Wedgwood.

Unique shape:

The molecule structure on the exterior of the building is an artist's impression of Laurenene, which was discovered by Otago PhD chemistry student Dennis Lauren in 1970. Laurenene is an extraction from the rimu tree and has a unique chemical structure: four rings sharing a central carbon atom.