

Landplan Landscape Architecture director and senior landscape architect Simon Mahar has been awarded the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects 2023 Queensland Award of Excellence for Small Projects for his design of a small play area at the Cairns School of Distance Education. Picture: Brendan Radke



# Work and play come together in award win

**Kristina Puljak**

A Cairns-based architect has won a prestigious award for his design of a local school playground after building five other playgrounds in the Far North.

Landplan Landscape Architecture senior architect Simon Mahar designed the Cairns Distance School of Education playground in only a 100sq m space, harnessing the slopes of the ground instead of building against them.

Mr Mahar has previously designed for Whitfield State School, St Therese's School, Freshwater Christian School, Freshwater State School and Trinity Beach State School, as well as being the award-winning designer for Centenary Lakes Nature Play, which made his name in the world of play spaces.

Mr Mahar won the Aus-



tralian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA) award of excellence in the small projects category.

"The space was only 100m squared, so I had to work with the constraints of the space and turn them into opportunities," Mr Mahar said.

"I used the wall from the existing building to create a climbing wall, and I wanted to make sure the space was ac-



Children play in the play space at the Cairns School of Distance Education; and (far left) the lush view from above. Pictures: Supplied

cessible for wheelchair access."

Mr Mahar said the key to a successful play space was the client and their willingness to work with you.

"It all depends on the client and whether the two visions can see eye-to-eye" Mr Mahar said.

"Cairns School of Distance Education have been brilliant and we've been able to work

together to achieve the space.

"We built between two existing buildings so the constraints were hard to work with."

Cairns School of Distance Education principal Chris Rigden said the small play space was the first stage in a larger vision to create a positive outdoor learning precinct for the students from prep to year 12.

"Previously the school had a swing set and climbing structure that worked for the primary students but didn't address the needs or capture the imagination of our whole school cohort," he said.

"As a distance education school, our parents felt strongly our students needed connection to nature and opportunities to learn in different settings, particularly as our students are not used to a traditional school classroom environment."

Mr Rigden said the benefits from the play space were important for the school.

"One of the main benefits is the environmental awareness, coupled with the design, linked to curriculum outcomes in science and sustainability," he said.

"Children can develop deep appreciation for the natural world."