

Modern studio, heritage quality

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 Read later**Stephen Crafti**

When DesignInc moved house, the fitout was a joint effort.

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Six-metre-high ceilings and large Victorian windows frame the studio's contemporary workstations.

DesignInc had been operating from the 51st floor of Melbourne Central for 12 years.

While the views from the top level were impressive, the architects felt enclosed by its raked glass ceiling.

This office also didn't align with the practice's leaning towards sustainable design, highlighted in the Council House 2 building they designed in conjunction with Melbourne City Council.

"There were enviable views and wonderful natural light, but we wanted to be closer to the ground and feel part of the city," says architect Stephen Webb, design director for the practice.

Their search for a new office took them a few blocks down Elizabeth Street to the heritage-listed GPO. Above the shops, on level two, DesignInc found 1200 square metres, framing the atrium.

Used as a bar for several years, the shell the architects inherited had six-metre-high ceilings, framed by large Victorian windows. For the 70 staff, this offered an opportunity to work in a studio-style environment.

Pinboards are brimming with notes and some of the communal tables are laden with plans.

"We're a large practice, but it was important to create a working office that allowed for collaboration," says Webb.

DesignInc set a number of design objectives in achieving a collaborative workspace. As well as workstations, there are central tables that allow for drawing as well as for informal meetings.

Staff can book one of the enclosed meeting rooms but, in the main, they prefer to move a few metres away from their computers for informal discussions.

"The tables are also used for model making, which lends itself to the studio ambience," Webb says.

Those wanting an even less structured environment can meet in the "lab", a multifunctional seminar space. Pivotal to the space is a large plywood wall on wheels. On one side, there's built-in seating. And on the other is one large presentation board.

"You can turn the wall around or angle it to suit."

And for those who prefer discussing ideas over a barbecue, the lab leads to a large terrace, complete with barbecue facilities and vegetable plot.

Given DesignInc's history for sustainable design, environmental issues were at the forefront in the office fitout.

Operable windows allow for natural ventilation. Indoor plants provide a green vantage point wherever one chooses to work. The architects selected species that directly remove toxins from the air. As sustainable are the materials used by DesignInc, recycled or salvaged.

"From the outset we wanted to put staff first and create a slightly domestic feel to the space," Webb says, pointing out the communal kitchen, with shared bench space.

One of the main issues in the fitout related to heritage, given the nature of the building.

Rather than competing with the soaring ceilings and the studio's arched columned gallery space, DesignInc designed a simple contemporary fitout that was timeless. As well as pendant lights, there are branch-like steel lights hovering above workstations.

"We wanted to reduce the scale of the ceilings and make staff feel grounded."

But to retain the fluidity of the two large studios, the walls of the workstations are made from perforated steel, loosely defining the work teams.

While views of the city streets weren't possible due to the height of the original windows, there are a couple of large projection screens (including one at reception) that connect staff to the simple pleasures of the city traffic.

"Everyone here had a stake in the design. Given the time we all spend at work, the last thing people want to feel is sealed in a glass box," Webb says.

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