

FORM

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AESOP ON COLLINS

The Melbourne Review visits the latest retail and design offering from Aesop

Daniella Casamento

Aesop is celebrating 25 years with the launch this month of a new flagship store at 87 Collins Street in Melbourne. The company, which develops products for skin, hair and body, now has 22 stores Australia-wide including outlets and stores in Asia, Europe and North America.

The company's clear understanding of its brand is an essential ingredient of Aesop's success. In defiance of tradition where retailers typically roll out the same design for all new shops, Aesop has developed a brand that is recognised for the consistent minimalist aesthetic of each individually designed store. Product display and testing stations remain the key focus. Testing bottles and tubes are available for customers to try out and become familiar with each product and their aromas add to the sensory experience, another essential ingredient for successful retail.

The Collins Street store, designed by Kerstin Thompson Architects, has a refined contemporary minimalism that is sensitive to the heritage character of its location in line with the Aesop philosophy of adding to the existing built environment and characteristics of the local neighbourhood.

"The shopfront has lovely copper details and we wanted to make sure that the design complemented that existing heritage frontage," explained Thompson. "The masculine aesthetic is in response to the design brief for this particular shop." With the Athenaeum Club sharing the building and Harrolds men's clothing nearby in Collins Street, the design concept for this Aesop store is that of a gentleman's private salon, somewhere between his study, bathroom and dressing room. The briefing process provides the designer with a clear understand of the brand.

The large sumptuous leather curtain gives the space a sense of theatre and mystery and acts as a backdrop to the black steel sales counter and testing station which are designed as freestanding pieces of furniture. The testing station is a hybrid desk and gentleman's vanity and has black vanity taps and spout, a hinged mirror both sides of a fixed mirror and a slide out leather shelf for

flexible display. The addition of objects such as the Aesop shaving brush and bowl add to the intimate atmosphere of the testing station.

Black steel, copper, perforated sheet metal, leather and charcoal coloured carpet used in this fit-out are in response to Aesop's design brief and the detail of the existing shopfront windows and entry. The sheet copper display shelves have yet to acquire an aged patina and until then, this highlight colour coordinates with the coloured tubes of Rind Concentrate Body Balm.

Thompson says the selection of finishes was also inspired by the amber colour of the bottles which are a key part of the palette. "There is no point in just using any material if it's not going to work well with the lovely amber and black and white labelling so certainly the choice of the finishes and warm leather colour were all about complementing the actual design of Aesop's packaging."

Aesop packaging is notable for an apparent simplicity, an exercise in restraint of detail and colour that belies the depth of research and thought that goes into each product, although the list of ingredients hints at this. Neat rows of product are visually striking and add to the overall graphic quality of store design.

Old museum cabinets were the inspiration for the display fixtures and add to the apothecary like charm of this fit-out. Suspended display shelves at the windows are minimal in design and have a hint of detail also influenced by the shopfront. "You have to remember the thing that is supposed to be at the forefront of the store is the products so it is always that balance between using the beautiful details of the finishes but making sure



that they don't overpower the actual products on display," said Thompson.

A vintage desk lamp at the testing station and vintage brass pendant over the sales counter were sourced by Aesop themselves, as the company frequently incorporates found objects and vintage items to complement the contemporary styling of their stores. "Aesop has fantastic project managers within their organisation that are very sensitive to what the design is about," explained Thompson. An upholstered armchair and large floor lamp, yet to be delivered, are intended to add to the salon ambience and will also serve as a comfortable waiting area.

The overall calming effect on the senses is typical to each Aesop store and helps customers to connect emotionally with the brand. This emotional connection creates a feeling of desire for a product and is another essential ingredient for success in retail. Store interiors should be designed to transcend season rather than be fashionable and this separation from fashion enables the interior fit-out to have longevity.

Aesop has several shops within the CBD and all are designed independently of each other. The prominent location of this new flagship store provides Aesop with an address that has already welcomed new and existing clients.



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