

# Feature

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## SWEEPING ALONG THE RIVER

The new Hamer Hall is a triumph of re-invention, with original ideas wedded to latest technologies of design

Daniella Casamento

In the thirty years since Hamer Hall first opened as the Melbourne Concert Hall in 1982, the well-loved venue, together with the Theatres Building, has become integral to the performing arts of our city. Redevelopment architects, Ashton Raggatt McDougall (ARM), have honoured the architecture of Sir Roy Grounds and John Truscott's interiors and have made significant technical improvements to the auditorium and to public access and amenities throughout the building.

Substantial re-planning of the public areas, foyers and bars, the filling of original voids in the floors and the introduction of new escalators have improved access between levels and have provided more open space within the foyers. Interior finishes are a blend between the old and new in homage to Truscott's original design. Truscott's original sample books, retrieved from The Arts Centre's archives, were a priceless treasure for ARM in sourcing carpet dye lots so that new carpets were a perfect match to the existing carpet.

As the main point of arrival, the St Kilda Road Foyer is a celebration of Truscott's vision and Hamer Hall as an entertainment venue. A large illuminated sculptural artwork of Swarovski Crystal by Robert Owen in collaboration with Rachel Burke of

Electrolight is a focal point of the spacious foyer. The sculpture was funded by The Arts Centre's Maxwell and Merle Carroll Bequest following a competitive selection process and has been in development for over nine months. A large bar combines ticketing, cloak and merchandising and has a nine metre digital screen on the wall behind. The original gold leaf ceiling and box motif is continued over the bar with recessed and dramatically elongated gold leaf boxes that have integrated lighting.

On the level below St Kilda Road, gold coated light fittings are suspended over a new bar and add to the allure of entertainment and luxury. "We have attempted to out-Truscott Truscott," laughs McDougall. The original leather wall panelling has been retained and new leather panelling added with integrated signage.

Most visible are the extension of the St Kilda Road foyer and the new Riverside Foyer. Both foyers provide access to Southbank and also gave ARM an opportunity to reference aspects of Grounds' original design concept. "Grounds did a proposal for the foyer floors that had an indigenous snake in it so we have brought that back," explains lead architect Ian McDougall. The cut-outs on the river side facade refer to the movement of the snake along the river. "We have started a motif of the river which sweeps in and allows us to generate a more contemporary surface."

Three new restaurants with views to the city, including Trocadero, a Mediterranean brasserie owned by the Van Haandel Group, will also provide alfresco dining. The new glass and concrete façade takes advantage of its position to draw the new lower level of Hamer Hall closer to the river. McDougall says that prior to the extension, the undercroft structure was something of a 'fortress'.

A grand stair provides a link between the promenade, St Kilda Road and Princes Bridge and alternative access between levels is via a 24 hour lift housed within a sculptural concrete structure. The parapet wall which divides the grand stair from the St Kilda Road Foyer forecourt is curved in three dimensions. Project Director Tony Murphy says that the concrete forms were a huge challenge for the builder Baulderstone. Despite the challenges of construction, "the concrete work is fabulously finished," he said. McDougall adds that the concrete finish picks up on Truscott's original vocabulary of exposed raw concrete columns and beams which contrasted against the gold leaf ceiling, leather wall panels, Persian travertine floor tiles, lush carpet and reflective surfaces.

Inside the Riverside Foyer, the river and snake motif is expressed by sinuous lines that travel along the floor and walls and in the detailing of the black ceiling. The space is carved with curved shapes finished in grey rendered cement contrasted against a bright yellow counter. ARM's design development and documentation team were so committed to the project that they worked overnight for several nights to project and trace these curved lines onto all surfaces until they were satisfied with the result. Aesthetically, this detail was something that couldn't be sufficiently resolved and represented by the architectural drawings.

The design and construction process was fast-tracked over two years. ARM's team of 18 staff worked from the site office documenting the project as Baulderstone progressed with construction. The original 'as built' drawings were not always accurate and as some sections of the

old fit-out were removed, the architects had to modify details to allow for what was revealed. "The building team, the design team and the client team all work frantically together," McDougall said. Murphy adds, "When a problem arises we are on site and you get it resolved."

Technical advances in the staging of productions over the last three decades revealed limitations of the existing stage and auditorium design. McDougall estimates the cost of the auditorium refurbishment to be one third to half the overall project cost of approximately \$135 million. Substantial and

intricate structural and acoustic improvements have increased the range of performances that can be held and behind the scenes, a new dedicated loading bay and lift can deliver staging and props directly to the rear of the stage making the bump in and bump out process operationally much easier than before.

A new technical zone is suspended over the stage and a large adjustable acoustic reflector "opens up just like a curved ceiling," explains McDougall. The technical zone is supported by 70 tonnes of steel which spans the large stage. "This whole room is a concrete box so we can tap into the existing structure which is quite substantial. The nature of the concrete shell also means that it is acoustically isolated and sound proof," he says. Kirkegaard and Marshall Day Acoustics provided advice on the acoustic performance of the room which led to the removal of some balcony seating and narrowing of the stalls amongst other acoustic improvements.

Bronze mesh is used as cladding over the technical zone, stage surround and organ recess due to its acoustically transparent properties. McDougall explains the selection of the bronze cladding as a material that is "dignified and monumental like Grounds' original scheme but it is also warm." Bronze sheet cladding has also been used on the bars and balustrades throughout the public spaces.

Truscott's aesthetic was an important factor in the choice of finishes for the heritage listed concert hall. The original team of scenic artists

who applied the faux-rock grain to the concrete walls and ceiling of the auditorium were brought in to reapply the finish to the walls. "The Arts Centre knew exactly who they were and found them through their connections. They did a fantastic job," says McDougall. Folklore is that the exposed rock face of the cutting in Barker's Road Kew was Truscott's inspiration here. The carpet colour is the most intense at the Stalls level and is lightest at the St Kilda Road Foyer.

Orange velvet upholstered plywood shell chairs manufactured by Spanish company Figueras, are wider than the original seats and were rigorously tested for comfort. A cluster of custom designed cylindrical lights hang over the seating and create a large sculptural element within the cavernous space. "The room now feels more like a single room rather than a proscenium theatre. It's the convention and tradition of concert rooms that they don't feel like they are theatres but they are a room for music so you sit in the same space as the musicians," insists McDougall.

As an indication of public anticipation for the re-opening of Hamer Hall, The Arts Centre has received over 20,000 entries across Victoria in the public ballot for tickets to the opening concerts to be held on July 26 and 27.

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