



former magistrates court, building 20 interior refurbishment

location city campus la trobe & russel street melbourne australia

status completed august 2002

client rmit university

photography trevor mein

In 1997, RMIT purchased the Former Police Garage, City Watch House and Magistrates' Court. The integration of this vacated legal precinct into the main campus has been an important conclusion to the Urban Spaces Project, stage 2. What had once been a barrier to the east, RMIT now connects directly to Russell Street. All the buildings in the precinct are of great cultural and architectural significance, particularly as it relates to the development of the justice and legal system in Victoria.

The Former Magistrates Court and the Francis Ormond building have been linked together to become RMIT's Corporate Headquarters. The National Trust of Australia (Victoria) will operate a museum and conduct tours within the precinct linking up with the Old Melbourne Gaol. This splendid heritage listed building contains the University Council, Chancellor, Secretariat and senior Executives.

Originally known as The Metropolitan Petty Sessions Court, the building (1911-13) was designed by GBH Austin of the Public Works Department. The court complex marks an important architectural development, as a unique example of the French Romanesque style as applied to the expression of law and justice in Melbourne. The 3 main courts, the spectacular octagonal entry stair hall and the central inner courtyard are well known, having regularly featured in television and movie crime dramas. The interior refurbishment project involves only minimal change to the building, since most of the works involve regulatory and services upgrading.

By good fortune, much of the interior including the three main courtrooms,

the main corner octagonal stair hall, passages and former offices were in near original condition. Subsequent alterations have been easily removed, allowing most spaces to return closely to their original format. The most compelling aspect of the original interior is a sublime sense of light that permeates the building. All day lit spaces have high level opaque glazed windows to control the entry of light. This produces a soft filtered top light that bathes and caresses each interior space. The building layout has a strong hierarchy of spaces with carefully planned circulation routes to separate public, magistrates and prisoners. The three main courts, the corridors and stair halls have an austere but beautifully considered aesthetic that fits its grim purpose. It is a building of great architectural quality with a secure future.

The main design task for the refurbishment was the adaptation of the building to its new use together with the complete replacement of all services and cosmetic finishes like painting and floor finishes. The approach was to conceal and bury as much as possible within the structure of the building. Thereafter new elements were treated in a contemporary way, including all lighting, heating and cooling systems and other regulatory services. The impact on the interior is minimal but decisive.

"The project transforms a drab and neglected city block... into an exciting and accessible series of courtyards and refurbished interiors. Its RMIT's gift to the life of the city, a boon for students, staff, cultural tourists and the public" Chris White, Director Property Services, The Age 19 September 2002

