

11 Palmer Parade Richmond – Sussan/Sportsgirl Headquarters

Durbach Block Architects

Text: Stuart Harrison

Slotted into Cremorne, a lesser known sub-suburb of Richmond, is 11 Palmer Parade – the first major building by Sydney-based Durbach Block in Melbourne. An existing building has been dressed in new glass clothing – clothing that slits open, reveals and hides. This is 'factory' glass – extruded glass panels, the glass block of our times. This has been a popular material in the works of OMA, one example being the Kunsthall in Rotterdam (1992) and in other Durbach Block projects, such as Commonwealth Place, Canberra (2002). The space between the glass layer and the existing building is used for effective backlighting of the glass screen, and becomes the 'veil' that this building wears.

11 Palmer Parade has been custom-designed as the headquarters of the Sussan and Sportsgirl businesses and is a work environment for some 160 staff. Cremorne is an industrial pocket near to major infrastructure, and 11 Palmer Parade sits near a major train line and the Monash Freeway. The waters of the Yarra River also glide past, and its green banks make for one of two greenery outlooks enjoyed from the building. The other is an introduced courtyard of mature birch trees, which slices the building into two parts. As a result, all workspaces have a view to the outside, and many have an outlook both to the central courtyard and the surrounding landscape.

The major volumetric move onto the existing fabric is one of subtraction rather than addition – a linear courtyard is cut into the centre of the building creating the small forest of trees in the middle. These trees were matured to ensure the completed garden was present from the first day of operations. As deciduous trees, this internal garden will reflect changes in seasons, just as considerations of the upcoming season's fashions are made by the staff looking into it. The other major greenery design move is the use of a double-height 'green wall' of planting in the entry portico, which forms part of a moment of the entry sequence. The green wall dominates a raised portico, the transition space between the external entry stair and the glazed front doors into the building lobby. The stair upward is registered on the façade by cutting a glass layer to follow the line upwards – this direction is furthered by a raking line downwards on the cut above. A big gap becomes a ribbon window to the entry portico.

The entry foyer itself is a double-height space that is a new area and predominately white in colour. A Sol Lewitt artwork is a strong coloured presence on the wall above the crafted and subtly curving reception desk. This desk recalls the fine detail and considered 'natural' shaping that we see in the work of Finish master Alvar Aalto. Further nods to a restrained sensuality come in the new main stair, which allows light from above to fall onto its curved wall.

A room is suspended within the foyer – an enclosed mezzanine. This tapered object on white legs has a big picture window and inside is the company's private library, a dark and considered space with timber, books and views to the outside. Openings in the glass skin are aligned with the existing windows to allow views outside to the context of mixed-use Richmond.

The office spaces themselves are cleanly planned and organised. As fashion businesses, operations include the storage and display of fabrics and clothing, and these are located in either storage rooms or within glazed studios, which are adjacent to relevant work areas. These spaces are organised in open-plan rooms based on key functions of the business such as finance, marketing and buying. Communal meeting spaces and seminar rooms are located in the front building on the ground floor and are for use by all three businesses. These have access to the entry lobby and the courtyard garden.

The building is furthered dressed internally with a remarkable collection of contemporary art that adorns the meeting rooms, workspaces and circulation areas. This includes works by Miwa Yanagi, Howard Arkley and a large Sol Lewitt in the lobby. This art, from the collection of business owner Naomi Milgrom, is part of the agenda to make an enjoyable and effective work environment. Architecturally, it pushes the building towards a gallery type, with its generally restrained palette and white walls functioning as a backdrop to the art. This in fact becomes the actuality in one space, a double-height gallery for the use of staff and installed with a significant collection. It recalls one of the void spaces in Libeskind's Jewish Museum, a precious tall space for contemplation. It can be viewed into from the upper level executive office area and accessed through an enormous sliding door from the lobby.

As a result of occupying a building that is currently too large for the company, a large area of future expansion space has been retained. In the meantime this is a warehouse space in the true sense, and can exist as a flexible space for functions or even a fashion show.

It is a fundamentally sustainable thing to do to reuse existing buildings, and here an ordinary one has been reinvented into a work of architecture. The existing building has been groomed and given a clear architectural and working-environment agenda. Seen as an underdressed citizen, it has been given a new jacket and a considered inside to make a contemporary place for work.