

o8o Design

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FIGHTING DECAY

A NEW DENTAL CLINIC IN THE MANCHESTER UNITY BUILDING IS AN UNLIKELY OASIS IN THE CITY CENTRE. THE RESTORATION OF THE BUILDING'S FIRST FLOOR REPRESENTS A FEAT OF INTERIOR DESIGN AND A TIMELY TRIBUTE TO ONE OF MELBOURNE'S NEGLECTED TREASURES.



When the Manchester Unity building was completed in 1932, it gave Melbourne a reason to smile. Among the hardships of the Depression, the speed and magnitude of the project heralded a new faith in progress and an exciting new age of design. While Marcus Barlow's modern gothic odyssey was once Melbourne's most vibrant building, years of neglect have corroded its enamel. Its terracotta faience is stained and discoloured, and its awning is chipped and cracked. The exterior is riddled with air-conditioning units that jut out like crooked teeth and some interiors are gaping cavities. Now, a Melbourne dentist is leading the charge to restore and maintain the decaying icon.

Over the past decade, Dr Kia Pajouhesh has expanded his dental practice from a one-man operation to the largest dental surgery in Melbourne's CBD. Smile Solutions consists of 12 practitioners, including general dentists, specialists and dental hygienists. Its move to the Manchester Unity building last year reinforced its status as one of Melbourne's most prestigious practices.

When Dr Pajouhesh took over the building's first floor, he was confronted with a bland, 1970s-style office interior. Although the original structure was

largely intact, according to Dr Pajouhesh, it was a far cry from the elaborate retail mezzanine of the 1930s. "The refurbishment was painstakingly difficult and slow," he explains. "But we soon realised the beauty and grace of the space we were dealing with so we wanted to show it the utmost respect throughout the process."

It took nine months and a budget reaching into the millions to restore the floor. Dr Pajouhesh asked interior designer Marie Blackmore of La Maison Interiors to bring his vision for the space to fruition.

"From a finished point of view, we wanted the space to reflect the art deco era but have a modern aspect – a high-tech feel about it," Blackmore explains. "It is a modern design, but it is classic modern, with a Manhattan feel to it."

The colour scheme was inspired by the brass and copper featured throughout the original mezzanine. Glass panels and doors are detailed with copper leaf, and contrast with the exquisite, high-grade marble throughout. Particular care has been taken to restore the



ornate ceiling cornices. The opulence of the art deco period is juxtaposed with the latest, state-of-the-art dental equipment in each of the eight treatment rooms.

The style and attention to detail reflects the level of service on offer; the highly polished interiors are indicative of what clients might expect from a high-end, Collins Street dental clinic that prides itself on cosmetic dentistry.

Smile Solutions handles a range of cosmetic procedures from teeth whitening to porcelain veneers – all in the quest for the perfect smile. Anecdotal evidence suggests that cosmetic dentistry in Australia has grown in popularity in the past decade, although it is difficult to quantify the proportion of people electing to have cosmetic treatments. According to Dr Neil Hewson of the Australian Dental Association, most dental work has an aesthetic nature, so it's hard to determine the increase in demand for cosmetic therapy.

“Cosmetic dentistry has been around for the last 10 or 15 years and it’s not a new thing, but there is certainly a proportion of the population who have become more willing to spend large amounts of money on aesthetic treatments,” he explains.

For Dr Pajouhesh, the decision to invest large amounts of money into the building wasn’t just about prestige, or a response to the type of clientele a business such as his might attract.

“The money invested was not purely a business decision,” he explains. “It was a lifestyle decision for me and my staff, reflecting a better service for our patients. I was also motivated by a real passion for the building and the art deco period. I felt an obligation to complete the works to the highest level possible.”

It is this level of responsibility that has seen Dr Pajouhesh elevated to chairman of the building’s body corporate – a position that gives him considerable influence over the building’s future. If the recent works are anything to go by, this future looks bright. Although the building is classified by the National Trust and listed on the Victorian Heritage register, its status as a privately owned building puts it in danger of continuing neglect due to funding

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shortfalls. According to Dr Pajouhesh, not all of the building's lot owners have the means to undertake such extensive restoration projects as Smile Solutions.

“Most of the owners have been touched by the historical essence of the building and its impact on Melbourne, and they know how unique it is,” he says. “But it is hard for them to continuously be putting their hands in their pockets to come up with the money for works that are extremely costly.

“The building is promoted at every opportunity by the City of Melbourne and Heritage Victoria as a Melbourne icon, so it is in their favour to keep the building looking as pristine as possible. However, it's not a public building, so funding is minimal.”

Heritage Victoria architect Robyn Mullen says the first floor refurbishment would provide a benchmark for the conservation of the rest of the building and raises awareness about the need for further funding.

“Heritage Victoria, along with Allom Lovell and Associates has put in place a conservation management plan for the building and a renovation of this size will no doubt help the cause,” Mullen explains. “Buildings with such a plan in place also have a greater amount of leverage when applying for national funding.”

According to Allom Lovell and Associates director Peter Lovell, the plan would also provide the building's body corporate with a useful document to help them manage the building.

“The plan consists of a conservation analysis that takes into account the history of the building and why it is significant from a heritage point of view. The significance of the Manchester Unity building is its architecture, its social history, the nature of the Manchester Unity organisation and the building's broader contribution to the cultural fabric of Melbourne. The plan also provides a series of guidelines for the owners and for Heritage Victoria. It provides key strategies for urgent works and a whole range of issues that effect the management of an historic building.”

And according to Lovell, although some changes to the building have reduced its original grace and charm, restoration is achievable.

“Before the building was heritage listed, some regrettable changes were made,” he explains. “But really, the building is substantially free from any major alterations – it is surprisingly intact and has survived remarkably well, although it is in need of some considerable work to bring it back to its original state.”

Any level of funding would be greatly appreciated. The extent of what Dr Pajouhesh has achieved on the first floor may be hard to match, and his passion for the building – right down to his cufflinks, which bear the Manchester Unity ‘MU’ insignia – makes him a hard act to follow. However, his level of commitment has raised awareness about the need to preserve one of Melbourne's greatest buildings. Cosmetic work is not cheap, especially when there is substantial decay, but regular care and maintenance goes a long way. **MM**