



**In the workshop** The adaptation of gritty, industrial inner-city spaces is most often the remit of designers practising in Sydney and Melbourne. But in the design of its own workspace in Fortitude Valley, Brisbane-based Wrightson Stewart has converted a former garage into an understated and multifaceted contemporary interior.

Wrightson Stewart  
Studio



Wrightson Stewart

Transforming a grand old stone building into a contemporary space takes particular talent. Unfortunately the structural architecture of Brisbane, while elegant, is rarely sufficiently robust to provide an adequate starting point. More frequently and most successfully, the transformation is a marriage of the typical Queensland with contemporary features. Brisbane-based architecture studio, Wrightson Stewart, however, has opted to forgo this route with the creation of its new office space within the urban dialogue of a former garage in Fortitude Valley. The studio's use of space, finishes and well-appointed furnishings more than make up for the lack of charm in the building's shell. And while the transformation attests to the firm's deft ability to provide a metamorphosis, it also stands as a refined piece of interior design in its own right.

Structurally, the space comprises a glass-fronted, ground floor corridor facing the street, with the furthest portion raised due to a slight elevation in the ground plane. With ceilings of moderate height and a horizontal i-beam support at its midpoint, the space was ostensibly a slightly awkward corridor. These aspects, in typical Wrightson Stewart style, have been turned to advantage. Long horizontals of cabinetry and wall finishes serve to exaggerate the

elongated dimensions, adding volume and scale. Simultaneously, shifts in the material palette and a layered composition of built features transversely delineate three distinct areas, without truncating the whole.

Featuring a polished cement floor and sculptural furnishings, the welcoming entry is lean and contemporary: an orchestration of sorts. Sitting slightly lower than the rest of the office, the space functions as both a greeting area and showroom. The furniture, including Zanotta Zeus and Teli stools by Prospero Rasulo and a low rattan table from Patricia Urquiola's Flo collection for Brno, is less about sitting than admiring. Guests and clients are encouraged to stand, thereby adding their individual silhouette to the space, further containing it from the remainder. The space could be mistaken for a residential one, with its well-designed built-in joinery running the length of the left wall. Minimal ornamentation, comprising the iconic fittala Aalto vase in burgundy and ceramics by Joseph Davis, sits in accord with horizontal bands of impeccably finished timber. As a result, the eye is first drawn to the fine craftsmanship of this timber joinery before realising its purpose as a kitchen. More precisely, it is a beautiful display

of the WStudio modular kitchen, a side project that Wrightson Stewart launched late last year (the unit's companion piece, designed for outdoors, forms a visual continuation on the upper level, where a wall of solid timber floorboards has been waxed for a matt finish as its backdrop).

Connecting the lower entry area to the slightly higher space beyond is a low but deep pair of solid American oak steps and a banquette of studded caramel leather. The theatrical gesture of the stair and banquette provides a physical parameter without interfering with the visual scape of the office as a whole. Tiling has also been used for cohesion, with cream tiles used on the banquette's facing. This is continued with an adjacent wall clad in black tiles, signalling the end of the lower floor kitchen and the beginning of the utilities zone on the upper floor.

Running the length of this higher mid-portion of the office is the i-beam support. Rather than conceal or build into this structure, Wrightson Stewart has made a sculptural feature of its form. And though the wall concealing the utilities has been aligned with the upright to retain visual cohesion, the structure itself remains fully exposed with both uprights freestanding.

Left—The entry to Wrightson Stewart's studio, housed in a former garage in Fortitude Valley. Opposite—A small flight of stairs conceals the front and centre sections of the office. The building's structural i-beam remains exposed in this centre section.



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Left—The studio also includes a display space for the finely crafted timber modular kitchens designed by Wrightson Stewart through side project, WStudioKitchen.



Right—The shared U-shaped desk at the back of the office provides enough space for the team to spread out as they work on new projects. Below—New timber cabinetry adds visual contrast to the existing besser brick walls, which have been painted white.

This serves to further delineate the space into two portions, with the larger of the two occupied by a round Eames Segmented table (Herman Miller) and matching chairs (Eames plastic armchair with Eiffel base) dedicated to meetings. The second portion is occupied by the outdoor kitchen, while the interlocking space functions as a corridor connecting the different areas of the office. Importantly, this allows the flow of activity to cross from right to left as a lateral 'S', traversing the whole without the shotgun effect of a singularly orientated passage.

Continuing the visual flow of the upper portion is a floor of cork tiling. Often equated with a 1970s sensibility, it is a material too often overlooked. The floor had initially been covered, like the lower portion, with polished concrete; however, while glamorous, working on this surface was unrelentingly inflexible for such an active team. As director, Ian Wrightson, recounts, the decision to install cork was met without contest: "Steven [Stewart] suggested it and the next day it was installed. It was a horrible procedure, the glue is awful, but we have never looked back. It's light, it's comfortable and it works with the space." More than a consolation solution, the cork adds a richness of

texture and warmth of tone to the fitout. These elements cannot be achieved in Brisbane with carpeting or texture-rich flooring due to the high humidity and, as such, a solution of such aesthetic congruity is to be applauded.

In the final of the three zones lies an open plan working environment, dominated by a single U-shaped white desk. Positioned to create a visual pause between the meeting area and work zone, the desk area is both interactive and self-contained. "As the hub of activity, it provides functionality and space to spread out and create," says director Steven Stewart. Visual cohesion has again been achieved through strong horizontal lines, in this instance a long, fine bank of under lit floating cabinetry. With limited display space, Wrightson Stewart has utilised this area as a means to demonstrate the various door hardware available through WStudio, with each cabinet opening through a different system. Completing the space is an end wall of broad timber panels painted a deep black.

Where stonewalls and grand pillars may provide the visual bedrock informing a contemporary interior within the Melbourne or Sydney paradigm, Brisbane's heritage is largely drawn from the traditional Queensland and the more recent

conventions of cyclone-proof building. For this particular project, the heritage consisted of besser brick walls and a cast iron ceiling. Both were integrated into the design in acknowledgement of the honesty of material inherent to the site's origins as a garage. "The lovely old besser blocks had to stay," says Stewart. These foundational elements also imbue the whole with a simple texture, which, while underplayed by a simple coat of paint, adds to the overall richness of the office.

In creating three phases within a single space, Wrightson Stewart has addressed a multitude of needs ranging from client liaison to utility, workspace and showroom. The firm has also very effectively demonstrated its ability to fashion a wholly contemporary, if slightly modernist, interior from rudimentary origins. The studio is completed by the partners' personal additions of art, including a delicate sculptural form by Michael Riddle and an amorphous timber work by Judith Wright. Effectively, this shifts the client experience from general to personal by acknowledging the role of the interior designer as both rarefied and empathetic, and is very nicely done. ■

wrightsonstewart.com.au  
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