

# WILLIAMS BURTON LEOPARDI

Robert Williams, David Burton & Sophia Leopardi

Robert Williams,  
David Burton and  
Sophia Leopardi were  
photographed by  
Jem Cresswell  
at the Darling  
Building in Adelaide.



“WE FIND CLIENTS RESPOND TO HAVING BOTH THE INTERIORS AND ARCHITECTURE CONSIDERED IN TANDEM.”



This page, from top A North Adelaide home was updated with a double-height pavilion with slim steel windows connecting with the outdoors. A residential project in Adelaide's Bowden was adventurous in its use of form ply to convey an 'elegant frugality'. Base 64 was the regeneration of a series of buildings including an 1865 Adelaide residence to create a contemporary co-working space.

Opposite page, from top An original stone wall in Spanish restaurant Iberia was matched by a sculptural concrete bar. Taking a twist on tradition for Hanson Chambers in Adelaide.



Sometimes a city finds the architects it deserves and vice versa. There is something in the philosophy of Williams Burton Leopardi around the intersections of memory and context, heritage and contemporary life, external form and interior space, that is very much at home in Adelaide. The founder of the long-established South Australian practice, Robert Williams retired in 2015 leaving the business with two directors, architect David Burton and interior designer Sophia Leopardi.

“We find clients respond to having both the interiors and architecture considered in tandem. It means we can deliver a cohesive design vision that ensures a building works for the rituals of daily life,” says Sophia Leopardi. It wasn't always this way. “While we were constantly collaborating across disciplines it took a review of our most successful projects to see clearly how integrated thinking from the outset produced better results,” she says. The micro and macro dovetail, such as when a client wanted to retain a much-loved dining table, which they related structurally to a door opening, or how materials weave from inside to out connecting the two spaces.

Another example is a residential development project at Bowden, five minutes from Adelaide's CBD. Instead of the usual cookie-cutter approach to off-the-plan apartment interiors, WBL opted for a term coined by the practice, “elegant frugality”, which used form ply in a generous and strategic way to visually link split levels. Aimed at a young demographic, the creation of thoughtful moments, such as a stair tread doubling as casual seating, or a logical place to position the TV, reflects how people like to live and so held great appeal for the target audience.

But much of the work WBL undertakes, with skill and sensitivity, is with Adelaide's many heritage buildings in the residential, commercial and hospitality sectors. Their award-winning Base64, a co-working space for startups in Kent Town, is the brainchild of technology entrepreneur Simon Hackett, who bought the rambling series of four buildings including a significant 1865 residence called Wavertree. The impressive bluestone and sandstone buildings had a number of identities over the years, including a theological college and a TV production studio, each contributing unfortunate and ill-conceived additions.

“Much of what we did was peel away the generic office space divisions and impose a restraint, a clarity of vision and rational order over what remained,” says Burton. The clients clearly loved the property's history but saw that it needed to perform with 21st-century functionality, such as integrating communal space into the scheme and providing private working areas. The central courtyard is pivotal to the design and the kitchen with its outdoor access and rich material palette makes it the perfect place to hang out.

One of the most inventive examples of their work is Iberia, a Spanish restaurant co-owned by chef Andrew Douglas. With no room for a standard tapas solution, the integrity of the site's original stone wall adds a robust energy to the venue matched by WBL's insertion of a formed concrete bar, tinted a dusty pink, which reads as an enormous sculpture. Upstairs, in the restricted width of 4.5 metres, a commercial kitchen and seating for 20 tables are housed under a rhythmic canopy of formed oak dowelling. “One food critic said it reminded him of the rib cage of a fish,” says Leopardi.

A growing number of residential clients are recognising WBL's willingness to explore their needs and deliver a solution that, while filtered by their expertise, speaks to the client's lifestyle and aesthetic aspirations. “We learned from Rob Williams, who had a disarming manner and would get clients to talk about themselves in a way that felt unselfconscious and genuine. That was always his starting point and we have made it ours,” says Leopardi. [designbywbl.com.au](http://designbywbl.com.au)



**NORTH ADELAIDE  
BARN**  
ADELAIDE, SOUTH AUSTRALIA



NORTH ADELAIDE BARN



SOME 150 YEARS OF CASUAL indifference had seen this substantial 19th-century barn, set in the backyard of a North Adelaide residence, begin to give way and deteriorate. In fact, it had become unstable and dangerous, but as it was on the SA Heritage Register, it couldn't be demolished. Considering the work involved to bring it back to a useful condition, even as a shed, the owners began to wonder if the structure could become more than storage space.

When approached by the family, Williams Burton Leopardi adopted a philosophy of doing 'as little as possible and as much as necessary' when it came to maintaining the original building fabric. Their thinking paid off – the studio has picked up several awards for their work. Significant rebuilding of the roof, floor and southern facade was necessary to stabilise what remained, and the walls required straightening and bracing in order to be safe.

The architects made it a priority to maintain the essence of the barn's original character. It was more about "arrested decay", according to Sophia Leopardi, than total renewal. Materials such as the old loft floorboards were salvaged and reused in the main living area and structural timbers were repurposed as new rafters in the reconstructed roof. Ample evidence of the barn's former life also remains: the old ladder that once led to the loft, the original saddle hooks and the slate flagstones that were repurposed as a hearth.

The additions are elegant and finely detailed, with materiality that complements the rough stone walls and recycled materials. The Diesel by Moroso 'Nebula Nine' sofa, for example, is oversized and the loose linen upholstery invites lounging, conveying the sense of a luxurious retreat. When designing the kitchen, the team made sure the insertion of appliances celebrated the unique structure of the space by disguising them in freestanding joinery for an "unfitted feel" that allowed the stone walls to "breathe". The Gaggenau 'Downdraft' cooktop negates the need for a rangehood, which allows the Lindsey Adelman-designed pendant to float gracefully over the bench.

Now an intrinsic element in the owner's everyday life, the barn – with its adjoining grassed outdoor entertaining area – has drawn the family into the new space. Whether it's for grand-scale celebrations or gathering to watch the football on a Saturday, the backyard retreat has been given a new lease on life.

Photography  
**CHRISTOPHER MORRISON**

THE ADDITIONS ARE ELEGANT AND FINELY DETAILED, WITH MATERIALITY THAT COMPLEMENTS THE ROUGH STONE WALLS.



These pages With a philosophy of doing 'as little as possible and as much as necessary', Williams Burton Leopardi set about turning this heritage-listed barn into an attractive (and stable) extension of family life.



This page The barn houses a living, dining and kitchen area and a small adjacent bathroom. Any introduced materials are used with confidence making robust additions to the existing characterful space.

Opposite page Comfort was a key consideration; with the choice of a generous Diesel by Moroso 'Nebula Nine' sofa and an Oblica 'ErgoFocus' fireplace the space is a destination for family events and football finals.