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Darling Building [2018]
by Williams Burton Leopardi
Adelaide, South Australia | Kaurna

adding lustre to repair

On 13 July 1916, the *Adelaide Advertiser* announced that John Darling and Sons had accepted tenders for the rebuilding of their premises on the corner of Franklin and Bentham streets, and underlined the building's contribution to 'the architectural improvements' then underway in that city. Despite its auspicious beginnings, by the 1990s the structure was vacant and neglected, a situation that persisted for 20 years. The building was in need of radical care and maintenance to return it to the state of comfort, delight and utility that was conceived in the 1910s. Williams Burton Leopardi, the architecture firm that ultimately took up this challenge, realistically appraised it as valueless in its current state—unappreciated, unviable, unusable and abandoned. It envisioned a renovation rather than a wholesale redevelopment project, which would be realised in two parts: first, to achieve a viable commercial property; and second, to create a new home for its own practice. Williams Burton Leopardi's design strategy pursued a minimally invasive ethos to upgrade and adapt the building, while being mindful of balancing the pragmatic imperatives of safety, performance and accessibility.

INTERIORITY

Initial feasibility modelling indicated that the Darling Building was nowhere near close to meeting contemporary code requirements for new buildings, nor was it financially feasible to substantially modify it, as a more extensive project would have triggered burdensome new compliance regulations. There was also evidence of previous need for steel strengthening of the original reinforced concrete structure, which had been pioneering in its day. As part of the conservation plan, it was suggested that removal of the upper level's internal masonry walls would aid the integrity of the ageing structure below. The careful insertion of steel columns and substantial beams enabled the architects to open up new spatial opportunities and provide an appropriate setting for the Williams Burton Leopardi offices without triggering the need for seismic strengthening. This move also maximised the effectiveness of the internal light. The firm pursued a sustainable and pragmatic approach to the vital upgrading of energy performance and servicing. The design enhanced natural lighting, factoring existing openable windows into the calibration of a new HVAC system that allowed for customisation and control across the various leasable floors of the building.

On a limited budget, this renovation—like many other case studies in this volume—productively exploits contrasts between exposed gritty structural and service elements that might otherwise have remained hidden, and delicate insertions of the new and the repurposed. As the architects have noted, the project focuses on stimulating tactility and other sensory experiences, while its planning strategy was to provide spaces of both solitary refuge and collective engagement: 'Found objects set the scene but not as a salvaged aesthetic.' In the mode of kintsugi, flashes of highly polished, metallic finishes further add further moments of lustre to the building.

New office interior fit-out, Darling Building by Williams Burton Leopardi. Photography by Christopher Morrison and Scott McCarten.

This page, top: Restored Darling Building facade. / Below left: New meeting room. / Below right: New office. / Opposite: Former condition of site.


YOYO'S ROOM
SHELLIES
HOUSE