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Australian agora

Studio Tate's communal spaces for a prestigious Australian school set out to rework elements of the traditional village square into something quite new

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Designer: **Studio Tate**
Client: **Caulfield Grammar School** Location: **Melbourne, Australia**
Project duration: **Sep 2017 - Feb 2018**
Floorspace: **300sq m** Cost: **Undisclosed**



“The brief was to transform
what was a quite dark
and oppressive interior
into a bright, fresh
invigorating space”





In any town, village, or even bustling neighbourhood, the central square is the beating heart of business life and social activity. Different types of shops and workplaces, leisure activities, seating options, and maybe even a spot to grab some food or a hot drink and enjoy your lunch break. In this regard, co-working spaces are a lot like village squares – they cater to different types of workers and their needs by design, while allowing inspiration and productivity to flow.

That was the mission interior architecture practice Studio Tate received when tasked with redesigning the offices and some communal areas of a prestigious school in Melbourne, which it transformed from a typical old, stuffy, and dark office into a vibrant and convivial piazza. Co-working in real life.

The Melbourne-based studio was approached by the new head at Caulfield

Grammar School, who was eager to transform part of its heritage listed building into a co-working area for teachers, students, parents and visitors.

“He was very keen to introduce a fresh and bright aesthetic that could be enjoyed not only by himself, given his office was there, but also by staff, visiting parents and students alike. The brief for us was to transform what was a quite dark and oppressive interior into a bright fresh, invigorating space that would function as a permanent work space,” explains Alex Hopkins, design director at Studio Tate. “The principal, the deputy principal and their assistant work there full time, and then there’s a series of other work areas and meeting spaces, where other staff members can come and work in a co-work facility.”

The guiding inspiration behind the development of the Caulfield Grammar School co-working space was the idea that it should feel and act as a village square. “Given the principal’s brief of bringing people together and strengthening ☺

↑ A tree in a planter, with timber seating around it, acts as a focus for the open-plan space

← Terrazzo echoes the cobblestones of the village square



↑ On-trend pastels provide a contrast with the traditional style of the rest of the school

→ In the lounge area, Muuto sofas and Jordan armchairs sit alongside art works from a local gallery

community ties, we felt that the idea of the village was a great place to start for the narrative,” explains Hopkins. “We used that to help with the space planning within the heritage building. Generally in the village there’s something to congregate around, there’s a central element, it might be a piazza or a church. In this instance, we actually brought in a tree, and we built a planter around this tree internally in the space and made it the centrepiece for the idea of planning for the village.”

Beyond refreshing the space, Studio Tate had to cater to quite specific needs from the teachers and students using the area. A school is quite unlike other workplaces in that many different types of needs have to be met: students need an inspiring and nurturing environment, teachers need a thriving and functioning office, and visitors need to walk away with a positive impression. True to the spirit of the agora that guided the project, Studio Tate heard directly from teachers and students to understand the school’s requirements and developed a series of cleverly zoned insertions within the limited footprint. “It was a good opportunity to be able to have some conversations around what people thought they might like to see in the space,” says Hopkins.

The result is an office with plenty of breakout spaces, meeting rooms and informal gathering points to allow for, and encourage, all types of interaction, from working independently to collaboratively or in a larger group. One of the key takeaways from the exercise was a deep desire for lightness and airflow. “Originally it was a bit of a rabbit warren in here,” says Hopkins. “So we did actually take out some of the walls.” Most notably, Studio Tate removed a modern addition at the back of the listed building in order to open a new window facing the back atrium that floods the offices with light, and comes complete with a terrazzo-adorned stone bench for quiet contemplation.

From the open-plan main work area the space branches out to multiple meeting spaces and offices, culminating in a central boardroom. The heritage nature of the building limited structural changes, so Studio Tate relied on aesthetic fixes and invested heavily in colour to bring light into the space. On-trend pastels, terrazzo patterns and a strong lead blue rejuvenated the interior and offer a welcome contrast to the original Federation-style features such as original lead-light glass and heritage bay windows. “Within this heritage building, we developed an intelligent interior design solution that married some soft colours, a lighter, brighter palette with a functioning co-work facility,” says Hopkins. “The vibrancy of colour was really important in this heritage building, to make it really feel invigorating, in terms of being in that space.” ☺



“We didn’t want to make it feel overtly corporate in terms of the palette, but it was important to reference it”

The idea of a village square also permeates the aesthetics of the space. Terrazzo surfaces emulate cobblestones, and are the visual unifier of the whole space. The bespoke formula with specs of gold and blue was developed by Hopkins and her team to reflect Caulfield Grammar School’s colours. It appears on the table legs in the primary communal work area, as the surface of the kitchenette, and the side tables around the tree. “We didn’t want to make it feel overtly corporate in terms of the palette, but it was important to reference it,” adds Hopkins.

Many of the pieces that furnish the space have been custom designed by the team at Studio Tate, the centrepiece being the timber seating area around the tree. “It was directly inspired by that creative narrative of the village concept,” explains Hopkins. “It was a lovely piece to design. We added the cute little round tables that are integrated in there. We felt that was similar to a park bench if you like, so you might sit at a park bench in a public space and enjoy a sandwich or take a personal phone call, whatever it might be.”

Custom masonry is complemented by a few hand-selected designer pieces. The Muuto Oslo sofa makes appearances in two shades – millennial pink and navy – standing in for the park bench in Studio Tate’s village square dynamic. The lounge area is pulled together by Jordan armchairs in a deep maroon. The whole composition is set off by striking art pieces sourced from the Sophie Gannon Gallery in Melbourne.

Even though the co-working area is a part of a school, Studio Tate’s proposition is a very adult and polished space. According to Hopkins, this was exactly the point: “This is where visitors come when they’re visiting the school. So it does, I suppose, provide a bit more of a professional, corporate feel if you like. It really does elevate the space from simply a campus environment to

something that is quite a professional setting,” she explains. “And that was also, I think, bringing a level of sophistication to match the importance of the school.”

Co-working space, school office, or village square – call it what you will – Studio Tate’s refreshing approach to this interior works because it’s both consistent and inventive. Ultimately, it has succeeded in providing an inspiring, social, and functional space for users that brings the school community together. ■



↑ A strong blue, used throughout, highlights the flecks within the terrazzo shelving