

A MUCH-NEEDED REDESIGN OF EXCHANGE SQUARE IN SYDNEY'S AUSTRALIAN SECURITIES EXCHANGE HAS TRANSFORMED THE HEART OF AN AGEING INSTITUTION

# TRADING PLACES

ARCHITECT WMK  
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LEFT: A sense of purpose and personality is now evident in Exchange Square, the multi-use venue at the Australian Securities Exchange.





### Architect statement

The client's brief was to develop a design strategy that would add value to the under-utilised Exchange Plaza space, providing additional client and visitor accommodation for the ASX as well as retaining a strong public face to Bridge Street. The design concept evolved out of the idea of an "urban room". ASX required a space that could adapt from having a few people engaged in casual meetings through to large groups for official functions and media releases. The design is bold and elegant, utilising forms which wrap and intersect, creating a welcoming place that nevertheless commands attention from both within and without. The form of the space is a dialogue between the timber panels to the walls, plus the timber and carpet to the floor, offset against the sculptured planes of the white plasterboard to the upper walls and ceiling. The acoustic treatment of the space couldn't be too lively for large functions yet had to be able to deal with small meetings. We also didn't want the space to sound too dull – it still had to acoustically feel like a large space. Finally, the audio-visual component, including the market update screen, was an important layer to the space. The striking conceptual solution of the urban room transforms the existing Exchange Square space into a dynamic and multi-functional facility for ASX and its staff.

JOHN ANDREAS

The redesign of Exchange Square – a meeting hall/media space/function venue of the Australian Securities Exchange near Circular Quay in Sydney – ought to have been something of a challenge for WMK Architecture's John Andreas. The bland space awaiting transformation lacked any sense of purpose or personality, simply housing whatever event was taking place at the time, while the brief merely required "that the new fit-out provide a connection to, and an aesthetic relationship with, an existing floor of conferencing facilities", explains Andreas. Yet the result, in line with a shift toward good design in financial institutions, is rather a stunning one.

According to Andreas, the client – at the time headed by CEO Rob Elstone and followed currently by Elmer Funke Kupper – was heavily involved with the project, but the space we see today doesn't greatly differ from Andreas' sketches that won the commission. Andreas and his team, including builder MPA and project manager CBRE, and his own staff, including Guy Blunden, Petra Bonamy and May Fong, have achieved the illusive result of balance in the project by virtue of its room-within-a-room structure. There's a sense of warmth to the space in its use of natural materials and cocoon-like shape; it's easily adaptable to the size and scope of its inhabitants, whether many or few, with scattered lounge chairs and ample wall seating.

Andreas believes the comfort of the space is, in large part, due to the critical role lighting and acoustics play within the room. The lighting, reveals Andreas, couldn't overwhelm the video walls, and so with lighting consultants Simpson Kotzman he shielded the media screen while allowing natural light to flow through frosted windows at the building's rear (backing onto a laneway) and through glass windows perched above the timber panelling at the front, thus connecting the space with the bustle and light of the CBD outside.

Circular, moon-like installations illuminate and add symmetry to the space, while carefully positioned downlighting – running the length of the wall-seating and placed at foot-level along the stairs – provides extra light. As a result, the media section of the space maintains a theatrical feel with its subdued, tailored lighting

and dark oak panelling, and yet, in contrast, the rest of the space feels light and welcoming, as it should for meetings and events.

The acoustic treatment, according to Andreas, had to be that the space wouldn't become a hall of thunderous echo during large functions, but wouldn't seem dull either. "It still had to feel like a large space," says Andreas. "And the audio-visual component was an intrinsic layer given that the market's constant updates are so important to ASX's operation." Andreas and acoustic consultants Wood and Grieve used folding walls and the subsequent creation of nooks and corners – as opposed to a vast, rectangular floor plan – to help, along with the mix of materials like carpet and timber, to balance sound.

Andreas was forbidden from touching the marble floor in the building's lobby, separated by carpet in Exchange Square, but he creates a seamless transition by panelling the walls in both rooms with a rich American oak that wraps the hall in smooth, sculptural planes. It's an effect mirrored by

the ceiling; sculpted plasterboard that curves, bends and undulates, imbuing the space – particularly the staircase, with its lower orbit – with a sense of warmth.

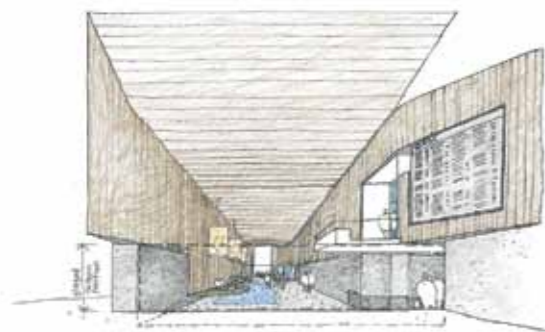
It feels contemporary – Andreas' combination of Paul Smith upholstery, leather armchairs, downlights and feature pendant lighting brings it into the now – but the natural lines and materials, such as the timber, feel classic. With a project like this, on an institution that dates back to 1861, it seems important that the architect pays some respect to its history. Of course, Andreas – and, by extension, WMK – isn't a bulldozer architect. He adopted the Rex Architects notion of replacing the "I created this process", hoping to meet technology and tradition with conscious consideration for the space and its users.

And history is something ASX has in spades. Countless mergers and changes in management make for a dense wall-mounted sculpture – an integrated visual tracker of the ups and downs of the country's key financial organisation.

There's a little room for new additions at the end of the line, just prior to the escalator that marks the end of Andreas' design hand, but he jokes about the collective hope that there's fewer such wall-worthy additions lying ahead. For his own part, the architect remains involved. Up the stairs – which are now commonly used for speech making, given they imposingly overlook the ground floor – is the executive floor that WMK has also been engaged to redesign, with work due to begin shortly. Andreas notes the design concept will remain faithful to what is now the gloriously executed transformation of the Exchange Square below. **M**

#### PROJECT DETAILS

**ARCHITECT:** WMK Architecture  
**AV CONSULTANT:** Matthew Loupis of Innovatech  
**DIRECTOR:** John Andreas  
**ENGINEER:** Joshua Williams of Simpson Kotzman  
**BUILDER:** MPA  
**INTERIOR DESIGN DIRECTOR:** Guy Blunden  
**INTERIOR DESIGNERS:** Petra Bonamy, May Fong  
**PROJECT MANAGER:** Cindi Corcoran of CBRE  
**CONSTRUCTION:** 5 months  
**DESIGN AND DOCUMENTATION:** 6 months  
**FLOOR AREA:** 550m<sup>2</sup>  
**STRUCTURAL ENGINEER:** John Linsell of Opus Int. Consultants  
**CEILING:** Perforated plasterboard from Décor Systems, American White Oak timber veneer from Briggs Veneer  
**FLOORING:** American White Oak timber floor from Precision Flooring, carpet tiles in Charcoal by Nolan UDA  
**JOINERY:** Stainless steel alucobond by Alutite Alucobond  
**WALL CLADDING:** American white oak and American walnut timber veneer from Briggs Veneer



**TOP:** The lighting has been designed to increase the visibility of the media screen, an integral part of the ASX identity, while still allowing for the flow of natural light. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Wood panelling brings warmth to both the visual and aural footprints of the space. **ABOVE:** A concept sketch of the project. **RIGHT:** A wall feature charts the evolution of this storied institution.



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