

Could your office headquarters double as a collective workspace? When Excelon Group acquired an aging office space they had big ideas, and a very loose brief.

# Smart New Suit

25 King Collective, Melbourne by Kennedy Nolan  
Words *Sandra Tan* Photography *Derek Swalwell*

Kennedy Nolan overcame distinctive heritage features (that staircase!) to vividly imbue the historic 19<sup>th</sup>-century building with modern functionality.

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The stony frontage of a heritage building on Melbourne's King Street is punctuated by a bold blue door – the only clue to the immersive new interior within. It is from here that siblings Kelvin and Rachel Tang run Excelon Group, a property development company that collaborates with architects to deliver design-led projects.

“We did make up a brief about how we intended to use the space, but we typically give our architects quite a lot of freedom to put their designs into the project,” says Kelvin. Back in 2017, having worked with Kennedy Nolan on a handful of multi-residential projects, Excelon approached the team to overhaul their newly-acquired space.

“They'd seen lots of other co-working places and wanted theirs to feel very contemporary and fresh,” says Patrick Kennedy of Kennedy Nolan. “We took a look at the building, and worked out what needed to be preserved, highlighted, edited or removed.”

The end result was a scheme incorporating two lower levels of co-working space, to be called 25 King Collective, and a top floor head office for Excelon. Originally built to house the Melbourne Steamship Company in 1888, it was crucial to both client and architect that the design would remain sensitive to the history of the building, and the new fit-out retain as many old features as possible. These include solid timber flooring, glass signage, and a grand staircase complete with heavy antique safe.

According to Patrick, the office seems to have undergone a somewhat unfortunate refurbishment in the late 1980s, when a fashion for *faux* heritage and fake Art Deco plaster mouldings were *de rigueur*. Kennedy Nolan set about creating a more neutral backdrop for the design by whitening out or removing the most egregious examples of this, bringing the building's true character to the fore. Though not every element was as easy to tie in – the deep brooding tone of the staircase presented a particular challenge.

“That mahogany has very strong heritage connotations – it's not a particularly fashionable colour and hasn't been for a long time,” says Patrick. “But it's obviously beautiful in its own right, so we wanted to find a colour scheme which amplified its presence, to make it feel like a logical and integral part of the interior.” Cobalt blue became the perfect counterpoint against the dark mahogany, with white and grey acting as an uplifting base for the interior shell.

“I think they blended the whole renovation very well between the new and the old,” says Kelvin. “It's seamless.”

In mapping out the space, Kennedy Nolan explored multiple spatial arrangements, providing cellular workstations, co-working areas, shared tables, private meeting rooms and breakout areas. The space is as diverse as possible to accommodate many different modes of working.

The fit-out at 25 King Collective features a curated selection of pieces by local makers, including custom limed plywood furniture by Power to Make, a design studio and CNC workshop in Preston. The pieces are cut by a computer, and come flat-packed ready for on-site assembly. Fine, minimalist feature lights by enigmatic Melbourne-based design house, LAAL, echo the shape of the heritage building's arched upper floor windows, while bespoke leather handles by Made Measure add an unexpected tactile element to built-in joinery.

“I guess what we wanted to achieve is something that had its own integrity,” says Patrick. “We hoped it would appeal to a broad cross section of people, but it's not built for everyone – it's made for people who potentially share the same design values as Excelon. Because it's about building a mini community, and they're the anchor. It reflects what they're about and want to project.”

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Page 144: Royal blue brings renewed vibrancy to an aged interior.

Page 146-147: Simple boxed shelving is a porous, efficient way to define space.

Opposite: Slender pendant lights by LAAL introduce delicate detail into a bold room.