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SUBTLE MOVES

HAVING RECENTLY SET UP SHOP IN AUSTRALIA, UNIVERSAL DESIGN STUDIO BRINGS WITH IT A SOPHISTICATED INTERIOR DESIGN LANGUAGE, ALIGNED WITH THE FINELY HONED ATTENTION TO MATERIAL OF ITS SISTER COMPANY BARBEROSGERBY.

Entering the new premises of the Universal Design Studio I spy a small model on the windowsill. It's a modest cardboard rendition of Universal's own soon-to-be-built entrance off Oliver Lane in Melbourne. It is poignant, almost poetic, that the first Australian project of this new studio is to design its own entrance. Though renowned internationally for its finely crafted, elegant interiors, Universal Design Studio is also deeply committed to the practicality and utility of its work. For its director in Australia Mark Simpson, interiors must not only look good and photograph well (which Universal's certainly do), they must also work. So what could be more practical than ensuring that new clients can easily find you, in this burgeoning design precinct?

Not that Universal itself is new. It was founded by its sister company BarberOsgerby in London in 2001, with Simpson joining the team in 2003. Since then he has worked on a range of award-winning projects, including some extraordinary retail interiors for clients such as Stella McCartney, Paul Smith and Liberty of London. But Australia was calling. So Simpson packed his bags and moved to Australia, working initially with Carr Design. Then, following the visit of Edward Barber and Jay Osgerby to Australia last year, the idea was developed to open an Australian office.

This decision was partly informed by the growing global presence of their client base; however, Simpson is very clear that the new office was not established to simply service Universal's Asian clients, but rather to build a new client base within Australia. He enthusiastically cites Australia's can-do approach and its sophisticated design culture as two important criteria for the company's decision to expand into Australia.



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01.

The Stella McCartney store in New York is filled with hard surfaces, terrazzo, stainless steel and a ceramic tiled wall yet exudes a soft and feminine atmosphere.

02. 03.

Tiles designed by BarberOsgerby are used to great effect creating texture and depth as a backdrop to the product.

04.

Understated elegance in the New York store gives great hangar appeal to the clothes.

05.

The London store accents a distinct colour palette, achieving a very different appeal to its sister store in New York.

As for the studio's aesthetic home, it is not located in any one place. Sourcing its inspiration from the high points of international modernism, the studio's 'Universal' name suggests a belief in the adaptability of creative design thinking to any project or any context. Its design credo is one of clarity and cohesion, and Simpson himself prefers to talk about texture and form more than surface and appearance. The practice has consciously rejected the overtly decorative styling excesses of less interesting late century design practices.

Two elegant examples of this approach are the Stella McCartney stores in London and New York. Talking about the New York store, Simpson describes the floor plane as a 'landscape' and discusses many of the decisions in the project as revolving around the integration of the architectural language of the building and the client's interior design brief. This is not interior design applied to a neutral shell; it is a design response to and informed by the bones of the building.

What makes this interior quite extraordinary is the way in which the project's architectural materials and hard surfaces (poured terrazzo, stainless steel and a ceramic tiled wall), defy the soft and fluffy clichés of women's fashion, yet remains sensually, confidently feminine. The tiles, designed by BarberOsgerby, perfectly reflect the interdependence and cross-disciplinary nature of this practice. While these tiles were also used in the London outlet of Stella McCartney (and in this regard there is a consistent 'branding' in their use) the different location,

building type and context of the two stores challenged Universal Design Studio to reinvent each store with some similar elements, which nevertheless resolved the particular design challenges of the new site. If BarberOsgerby's core talents lie in the creation of great design products, Universal Design Studio's skill lies in the ability to apply primary design principles to any and all interior spaces. This attention to each new space as a fresh design challenge avoids that familiar disappointment of a great flagship store, followed by a diluted roll-out of secondary look-a-likes that so plagues retail interiors.

Another significant benefit of this approach lies in the capacity of these projects to stand the test of time. More than any other area of interior design retail is perpetually prey to change for change's sake. With a project such as Stella McCartney, however, the level of craft in execution, the distillation of the space to its most essential component parts and the classic elegance of its material palette save it from the sands of time. Rather than endless refits, the store becomes a backdrop to any number of adaptations, rearrangements and 'curated' displays. The subtlety and intelligence of this approach is Universal's primary strength. It will, in time, find expression here on our home turf.

Only two-months-old in Australia, Universal Design Studio may not have any major runs on the board as yet, but look out for what comes out of that smart new Oliver Lane entrance. **(inside)**