

# THE BUNKER

Lovingly dubbed ‘The Bunker,’ this shared workplace in Melbourne was designed by one of its tenants – Clare Cousins Architects.

words MARCUS BAUMGART photography LISBETH GROSMANN





- 1\_ THE BUNKER HOUSES TWO COMPANIES ON THE UPPER LEVEL. ON ENTERING THE BUILDING COMPANY'S SIDE OF THE OFFICE, VISITORS ARE GREETED WITH A PALETTE OF CONCRETE AND PLYWOOD.
- 2\_ THE OFFICES ARE HOUSED IN A CONCRETE BRUTALIST BUILDING THAT "ONLY AN ARCHITECT COULD LOVE."
- 3\_ THE BUILDING COMPANY'S OFFICE FEATURES PARTITIONS MADE FROM CONCRETE BLOCKS.
- 4\_ REFLECTING ITS WORK CULTURE, THE BUILDING COMPANY'S OFFICE IS STRUCTURED AND LAYERED.

Clare Cousins Architects' folio of work is diverse, but it is the studio's extensive residential work that has allowed it to master a certain attention to detail. This attention to detail has been carried through to the refurbishment and fitout of the Blackwood Street Bunker, the firm's new shared studio premises in North Melbourne. "The Bunker," as it has been dubbed, is an exercise in tailoring the design of a workspace to house two organizations, and acknowledging their specific work cultures in the creation of an aesthetically consistent and harmonious whole.

The offices are housed in a building that only an architect could love, and one that was so well disguised that perhaps only an architect could have seen its potential. A somewhat tentative love poem to concrete brutalism, the building was coated in a bilious custard-coloured render and had an internal rabbit warren of medical suites subsisting off the nearby Royal Melbourne Hospital. The building could have easily fallen victim to the wrecking ball, especially given its outsized neighbours and the redevelopment potential of the site. However, this was not to be and the building was saved and given a new purpose.

Now home to the architects, who share it with a construction company (on the same level) and a graphic design studio (on the lower level), the building has been stripped of its render. This revealed a rather lovely raw concrete along with traces of painted signage across the facade. The architecture firm's half of the upper

floor is on the northern side, and one approaches the studio via an echoing concrete stairwell, the walls of which are painted in a rich mid-blue. This bare-bones approach to the materiality of the building is just a taste of things to come.

Entering the studio through a glazed door, the visitor is presented with a vista characterized by a clean and direct approach to materials. Plywood dominates (a material explored in other projects by Clare Cousins Architects), and both walls and joinery are finished in this material. The designer's impact on the shell of the building has been minimal and strategic, involving the removal of a section of internal wall that previously divided the floor into two disconnected tenancies. This was accompanied by the installation of a north-facing glazed wall that spills light into the construction company's half of the floor.

A generous, tiled kitchen with an enormous dining table and an oh-so-necessary espresso machine forms the linchpin between the architecture firm and the construction company. The kitchen, which is easily accessible from both tenancies, provides an informal gathering space and encourages interaction between all employees. The benefits to both businesses of this social cross-pollination are intangible, but important nonetheless.

The two distinct office spaces radiate out the central kitchen and the design of each workplace is uniquely tailored to its tenant's particular work culture. On the one hand, the architecture studio is a



5\_ THE COMMUNAL KITCHEN ON THE UPPER LEVEL FEATURES AN ENORMOUS DINING TABLE WITH A MAPLE TABLETOP ON CONCRETE PIPE LEGS.

6\_ LIKE THE KITCHEN, THE BALCONY IS SHARED BY BOTH TENANCIES, ENCOURAGING SOCIAL INTERACTION BETWEEN ALL EMPLOYEES.



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**project**  
Blackwood Street Bunker  
22–28 Blackwood Street  
North Melbourne Vic 3051

**design practice**  
Clare Cousins Architects  
28 Blackwood Street  
North Melbourne Vic 3051  
+61 3 9329 2888  
clarecousins.com.au

**project team**  
Clare Cousins, Dita Beluli,  
Jacky Chan, Oliver Duff, Jessie  
Fowler, Catherine Parkinson,  
Felicity Wabitsch, Tara Ward

**time schedule**  
Design, documentation:  
4 months  
Construction: 6 months

**builder**  
Maben Group

**landscaping**  
Eckersley Garden Architecture

**render removal**  
Don Giampa

**products**  
**walls and ceilings**  
Hoop pine ply walls, joinery  
and ceiling tiles. New concrete  
blockwork, unfinished.  
Existing concrete  
blockwork, painted.

**windows**  
Powdercoated aluminium  
windows.

**doors**  
Custom-made steel-framed  
doors to offices and meeting  
rooms.

**flooring**  
Existing concrete slab,  
polished.

**lighting**  
Comet spotlight and Beama  
Surface Eye Baby downlight,  
both from Masson for Light.

**furniture**  
Vintage Børge Mogensen  
Spanish Chair. Van sofa from  
Jardan. A-joint trestle tables  
(with marble tabletops)  
by Henry Wilson. Bronte  
tables from Eco Outdoor.  
Custom-made glass coffee  
table with cast concrete  
legs. Custom-made hoop  
pine joinery.

**kitchen**  
Ceramic wall tiles from Classic  
Ceramics. Stainless steel  
countertops. Solid maple table  
top on concrete pipe legs.

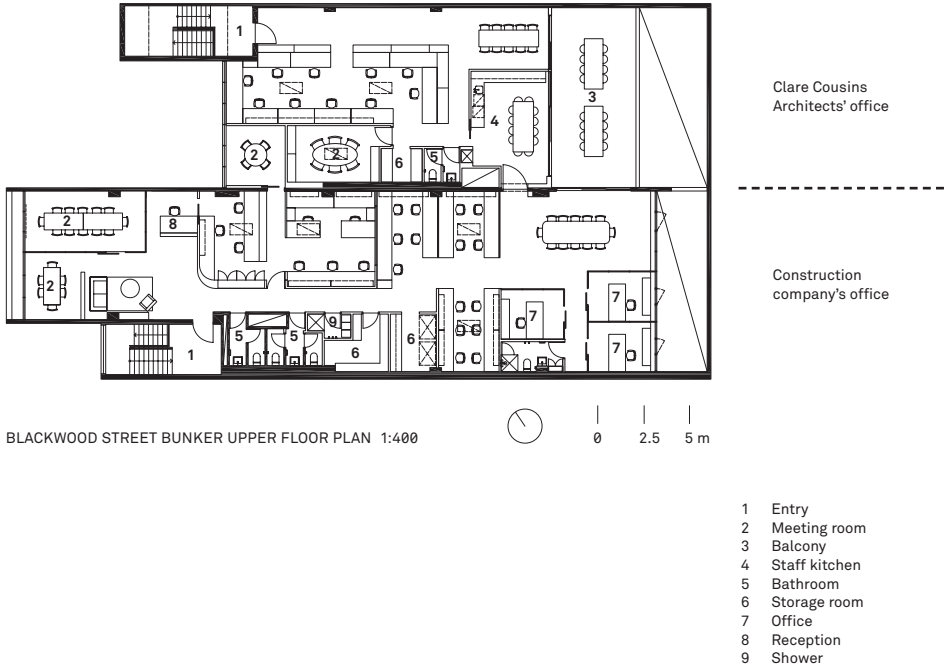
**bathroom**  
Astra Walker tapware from  
Mary Noall. Ceramic wall  
tiles from Classic Ceramics.

**heating/cooling**  
External vertical sunscreen  
blinds. Extensive  
cross-ventilation from  
recently installed operable  
doors and windows.

**roofing**  
Existing roofing with  
new insulation.

**external elements**  
New timber decking.

**other**  
Dion Horstmans sculpture  
in boardroom. Rug from  
Loom Rugs. Custom-made  
hoop pine joinery.



single, open-plan space, just big enough for the team of eight professionals to operate in close, but not cramped, proximity. Surrounded by half-height joinery units that contain the space, this one creative sandpit is where all the magic happens. An adjacent open-plan meeting room is available for group discussions, and a second closed meeting room affords privacy for different kinds of exchange. This is a classic studio, designed to reflect the management style of the one-director practice: open, flat-structured, and all-in-together.

On the other hand, the design of the construction company's office reflects the very different, and more layered, structure of that business. Open-plan work areas sit alongside the directors' individual glazed offices, and the office for the finance and estimating team is given a different, more contained character somewhere between open- and closed-plan. A discrete meeting room attached to the finance area is available for internal administrative meetings, while the front-of-house and reception area are each given a distinctive flavour. While construction companies often use their offices to showcase their ability to deliver polished and “slick” design with expensive finishes and fine detail, in this case a refreshingly direct and almost industrial materiality is on display. In addition to the extensive use of plywood and glazed partitions, concrete blocks have been used to create a screen around a meeting table, a feature that resonates well with the base building.

Despite the very different cultures that each of the fitouts support, both offices are filled with light and are airy and clean-cut in their presentation. This forms a distinct contrast to the heavy weight of the host building as seen from the street, and the contrast between expectation and reality is invigorating.

Next year marks the tenth year of operation for Clare Cousins Architects and it is fitting that this compact studio of eight practitioners will enter its second decade of practice in a bespoke setting. This confident interior is well crafted, carefully considered and further evidence of a practice that has much to offer but nothing to prove. **A**

7. PLYWOOD WALLS, CEILING AND JOINERY SURROUND THE ARCHITECTURE STUDIO'S MEETING SPACE.

8. THE ARCHITECTURE STUDIO IS A SPACE JUST THE RIGHT SIZE FOR THE TEAM OF EIGHT WHO WORK TOGETHER CLOSELY.

