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Building a department store for the next century or more

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WHEN a private equity group took over Myer, it wasn't just the management team and the company culture that underwent big revamps. The historic building in the Bourke Street Mall had to be thoroughly transformed.

Almost four years since planning began, that work is complete.

"There may be some changes in the next 20 years, such as airconditioning or plumbing, but everything is in place for this building to work as a department store for another 100 years," said Andy Thomson, senior associate and designer with The Buchan Group.

Buchan, an architectural firm with 20 years' experience in retail design, was part of the project team of the developer and building owner, Colonial First State Global Asset Management. Other members were NH Architecture (base-build architects), Probuild (the main contractor) and APP (project manager). Myer director of store concepts and design Megan Foster led the project.

The challenge was immense. Phil Mehrten, managing director of Probuild, said he started the business 24 years ago, and "it would be close to the most complex [project] we have undertaken".

"The logistics were horrendous. Bourke Street Mall, with its many pedestrians, was no option for access unless right out of hours," he said. "The main entry, tiny Little Bourke Street, at times became overloaded with cranes. We had David Jones being built at the same time, so there were days where Little Bourke was full of semi-trailers."

The site had five different buildings, and different floor plates. "There were different floor levels, with connecting ramps — it was a nightmare — and connections across to Lonsdale Street that were different levels as well, a mishmash of spaces pulled together," Thomson said.

A couple of the buildings were demolished, one part was amalgamated, and the facade had to be retained for heritage reasons. "It was a job that had everything," Mehrten said.

The original Myer complex was "L-shaped", the missing piece was the old Telecom building, between Myer and the old GPO. Colonial also bought the Telecom building, giving it a



The logistics of the project were "horrendous", but the result is a collection of interconnected spaces with "strong open vistas".

"wonderful opportunity to generate a new building", Thomson said.

That was the aim, but attaining it was hard. "You had an operating department store, we had an incredible amount of hazardous material that no one knew existed in the building," Mehrten said.

"We were demolishing the old and building the new all at the same time. That's rare. The normal process is you go in and demolish the old, then start building the new, but here we were doing everything simultaneously, which made this project unique. We were still pulling demolished material out of the building until the final few weeks."

Another complication was the need to dramatically reduce the retail space. With the loss of most of the Lonsdale Street store, the previous total space of 100,000 square metres was cut to 45,000 sq m, with administration and back-up stock transferred to the new headquarters in Docklands.

Buchan Group was the design mentor, ensuring Myer's merchandising concepts were aligned with the design and engineering of the building.

"We had to conceptualise the retail before the perimeters of the walls went in . . . we established what spaces we were left with, with Myer we worked out the square meterage, what was important for them, how much retail we have," Thomson said.

"They worked out the density of stock. It was a huge exercise, given the fact they were reducing the size, mix and ranges of merchandise."

Constructing a new building gave the opportunity to rationalise the floor levels. "In turn, this allowed us — from the retail perspective — to generate clear, open spaces, walkways . . . [to] direct people around the whole space," he said.

There was a strong vertical emphasis with NH Architecture's atrium, but also a strong horizontal level.

"There are strong open vistas on the floor area . . . clarity at one end, with open windows at the Bourke Street end, and the ability to see to the back of the store at the other end."

The new building still had to retain its history — the art-deco facade on the mall; Mural Hall, the elegant venue where women used to lunch and watch fashion



parades; and the old Lansom payment system — a small exhibition commemorates that cash system, where the money flew across the room on wires.

Thomson said Buchan wanted to retain but activate the front of the building with an historical reference, so pressed metal ceilings were installed. "It's still got the historical feel of the old building, but once in there, it's definitely a new building, everything inside is fresh and new," he said.

In another historical reference, the lifts were designed in art-deco style.

"We also put showcases in the lift lobbies as an echo back to the original Myer's build, pre-1950s, where you had to walk through the showcases before you got into the building," Thomson said.

The atrium scales back towards the north, so the retail spaces at the front get bigger.

At ground level, they are 50:50. "On the earlier floors, which are quieter, is the more expensive stuff . . . women's fashion, implying a more exclusive feel," Thomson said.

"They also have the benefit of the windows on Bourke Street and the bonus of daylight."



The lifts are art deco in style and floor levels have been rationalised.



PICTURES: REBECCA HALLAS