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Minimal Mavens

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In an age of relentless stimulus, founders of Melbourne design studio We Are Huntly, Alicia McKimm and Kylie Dorotic, demonstrate the uncompromising power of less.

Just off Chapel Street, in Melbourne's sociable inner-south, a discreetly marked heritage building emits the kind of relaxed charm, characteristic of the practice within. The one-time dance studio retains its original timber floors, with a new white interior shell accommodating the team of six at the core. Artfully placed greenery completes the scene: the headquarters of We Are Huntly.

Co-founders Kylie Dorotic and Alicia McKimm met at university, and after some years gaining individual experience in the field, decided to join forces. "We wanted to create a title that wasn't all about us, to describe a little design firm that looks for new ideas," says Dorotic. Playing with descriptive terms for hunting and gathering, a name was decided upon, and We Are Huntly was established in 2013.

Since then, it has been something of a stellar trajectory for the team, named Emerging Interior Design Practice at last year's Australian Interior Design Awards. Building on a strong background in residential design – in fact, an early project of theirs was featured on *Grand Designs* – We Are Huntly have extended their portfolio to include an array of beautifully resolved commercial, hospitality and retail focussed work.

Compared with the largely predictable requirements of residential work, in some ways, these civic projects require a greater leap of faith between client and designer – something that Dorotic and McKimm are learning to embrace. While it is commonly the client that defers to the designer's expertise, "With public spaces, you do have to trust and draw on the client's knowledge of their field and their own brand quite a bit," says Dorotic. "When there's a strong story behind the brand identity, it helps – we can then come up with a design and visual language that communicates that."

In the early conceptual stages, We Are Huntly aim to distil four or five words, which describe the client's vision for the

space, relating to mood, or colour. Every design decision from this point is then measured against these words, a strategy which the practice has found aids in maintaining the integrity and focus of the original idea.

Alicia says, "We try to focus on the idea of being timeless. There has to be a strong idea, but not 10 different ideas in one place. Just one."

Demonstrative of this is their work at Prahara Grocer, a contemporary supermarket which reimagines a small-town local grocer from the 1950s. Here, clipboards and pegboards used as signage are employed to graphic effect, making a motif of everyday items. Similarly, Penny Drop, a café at the base of Box Hill's new Australian Tax Office, is defined by the repetition of circles, an expression of the whimsical concept of a penny dropping from the pockets of the financial institution overhead.

"Everyone is so plugged into social media; Pinterest, Instagram – our brains are so cluttered," says Dorotic. "It's important to preserve negative space, visually as well as in an intellectual capacity. And to trust in the big idea." We Are Huntly strive for an honest, reductive approach to their work, a method which draws on the power of the singular statement.

In conversation with McKimm and Dorotic, it is clear that their open dynamic is a key factor in the success of the practice. A collaborative attitude and the pursuit of an uncompromised design, two qualities which the pair work to maintain as their young practice gains momentum.

"We balance our aesthetics out, and we challenge each other a lot," says Dorotic. McKimm agrees. "I think our strength is in being able to nut things out together, finding the answer in the back and forth."

wearehuntly.com.au







Less Is More

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