

10: Cheeky Opulence

Most Australian design is as unpretentious and straightforward as the natives, but a wilder strain flourishes in Melbourne, and nobody does it better than the local firm of Hecker Phelan & Guthrie. The architects' design for the Reserve Restaurant in Federation Square is a mirror-accented fantasy of patterned turquoise plush, and their lobby for the Palace Cinema appears to be as decadent as anything you might have found in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. The one big difference: it's all tongue in cheek. To call a bijou art house the Palace is a joke the designers have picked up on, turning the

tiny lobby into a set for a Max Ophuls movie. Here is the circular banquette in buttoned gold velvet, where the courtesan will receive her acolytes; there are the ornate black-framed mirrors set against ruffled black draperies to conjure a mood of naughtiness. Light from black blown-glass chandeliers highlights the varied textures and the exaggeratedly bulbous columns and lamps. Chairs and chaises are grouped in pools of light, allowing the imagination to roam free in the shadows beyond. Long ago, before television degraded the visual experience, going to the cinema was a dress-up affair,

an escape from the quotidian. The Palace carries a faint echo of that lost era, and the lobby provides a transition zone between the darkened theatre and the brilliantly lit shopping street outside. It's the perfect place to see and be seen – but not too clearly.

Michael Webb
Photography by Shannon McGrath



It's All an Act: Moviegoers can be forgiven for thinking they've just stumbled onto a film set in the lobby of the Palace Cinema, Melbourne, a design by Hecker Phelan & Guthrie.

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