

» **Fruity nose, woody finish:** The ground floor bar features a timber ceiling over bar made from American walnut veneer with solid timber profiled strapping detail. The bar is clad in Calacutta marble, while the floor tiles are Sadler stone. Underfoot is the grey ironbark tongue and groove flooring. Plank 'Paper' dining chairs (from Insitu) abound.



The Undertaker

The site of an old undertaker's building in Melbourne's east has been resurrected. Christopher Holder meets the team who took up the challenge.

Jonathan and Olivia Frawley are a brother/sister combination and the managers of this new venue in Melbourne's leafy suburb of Hawthorn. And, you've got to hand it to them, they've got guts. Most people when taking over the old haunt of a Victorian-era undertaker would shy away from any 'coffin and cadaver' allusions and compensate by christening their club, Cute Kitten, or some such nonsense... I mean, except for the black nail varnish brigade 'The Undertaker' isn't a name that immediately conjures up a fun night on the tiles. But to the Frawleys' credit they've embraced the heritage — no skeletons in the cupboard here... they made sure of that during the initial site inspection.

As the accompanying pictures will easily attest — again, much to the disappointment of Marilyn Manson and Cradle of Filth fans — there's absolutely nothing macabre about the design of The Undertaker. The historical façade of the original building has been kept intact but otherwise everything is brand spanking new, and all designed and built with quality materials and a fine eye for detail.

The architect, Chris Baker (from Sentel Architects), has created a venue that offers numerous possibilities. On the ground floor: a restaurant and wine bar; upstairs: a bar with dancefloor and balcony, which all doubles as a function space in off-peak periods; downstairs: a cocktail bar; and in the attic: a private dining room.

The interior designer, Stephen Tieppo (from NH Architecture), has taken these various spaces and given them identities that simultaneously ooze warmth and vibrancy — quite a feat.

The audiovisual contractor, Richard Hallam (from Factory Sound), has done an excellent job with the sound. There's chest thumping wallop where required, non-directional ambience where needed and great separation between the spaces throughout.

I think you're getting the picture here: The Undertaker is extremely well constructed and well conceived. And although the venue's moniker possibly evokes images of a high-concept, flavour-of-the-month theme bar, it's anything but. The Undertaker is built to impress, but its beauty is far more than skin deep. Return visits to The Undertaker are like peeling layers of an onion, only without the sobbing... It's a rewarding experience.

Major Undertaking

Behind the giant tombstone-like original façade is The Undertaker restaurant. With such a direct connection to the original building you'd expect a few neo-gothic references and Stephen Tieppo

hasn't let us down. On the walls are walnut sculptured timber panels. They're decorative and provide that link with yesteryear. The restaurant has been an immediate success, in no small part due to the appointment of head chef, Dianne Kerry. The Undertaker does an average 70 covers during the week and around 150 on a Saturday. It's not a large dining area, but it's warm, modern and comfortable. Striking Planck 'Paper' chairs (from Insitu) and custom banquettes (from Camm Upholstery) set the tone. Mirrors that frame the walnut panels help open up the space, as does the ceiling that carries across over the room divider into the wine bar and lounge area.

"Everyone know that mirrors are great to make a space feel bigger," noted Stephen Tieppo. "But you don't need great planes of it. In the dining area the mirror isn't constantly confronting you, but there's still a reflection of light and space."

There's more mirror behind a section of the bar, only this time it's charcoal grey. Again, it opens the space up.

Elsewhere, Stephen's multi-layering, 'onion peel' approach is obvious. Large slabs of marble, stone and wood abound, counterpointed by splashes of colour. Behind the bar the corridor to the bathrooms is a vibrant lime green.

The area adjacent to the restaurant has recently been appropriated as a wine bar and lounge. With the out-of-the-blocks popularity of the restaurant the Frawleys want to a) have a more enticing zone to accommodate waiting diners and, b) exploit the strengths of their bar manager Anne Marie Banting, who is a sommelier of some renown.

The ground floor sound system has been spec'ed with background music in mind. Saying that, there's still quite a bit of oomph on offer. Two 18-inch subwoofers have been very cleverly concealed in the ceiling cavity. But before you think, 'hey, great idea', you should hear the lengths that have been gone to in ensuring the subs aren't rattling the air conditioning ducts and knocking plates off tables. The sub bass cabinets are actually hanging from the structural beam on threaded rods and resting on concrete via Embleton rubber cushion. If that wasn't enough, they've been encased in an acoustic wall.

"It really cleans up the sound — it keeps it tight and stops the rattles," remarked Richard Hallam. "No sound comes out of the box except in a downward direction — it works well."

Upstairs

The upstairs bar was originally conceived as a function space. It has all the hallmarks: it's accessible via its own door/staircase from the street; it's quite a large space with its own bar,

dancefloor, outdoor area and bathrooms; and has an audiovisual system set up to accommodate lectern-style presentations.

Saying all that, subsequent to opening, the bar has been a victim of its own success. It's been a weekend favourite for the over 25s, with around 300 people filling the room at a time. With this in mind Olivia and Jonathan Frawley have been studiously assessing the usage and are bringing in more bar accoutrements, such as a better developed lounge area, a 42-inch plasma display, and various little cameo furniture items, such as lamps on the bar, which should make the space a little more intimate for the night owls.

Stephen Tieppo has continued certain themes used downstairs but with a few twists in the tail. The wall alongside the stairwell is rendered but as it hits first floor level it is abruptly clad in wallpaper. It's a Florence Broadhurst design that has art deco overtones; overtones that are picked up by a wrought iron screen behind the bar. Elsewhere, it's the use of timber (American oak panels on the walls) that act as decorative elements. There's no art on the walls or big-ticket light fittings, it's the use of materials that imbue the room with movement and interest.

As far as the sound goes, Richard Hallam designed the system to serve as a function space that could double as a bar/lounge.

In-ceiling speakers are strategically dotted about the room. Near the bar they've been placed close enough to the overhanging bulkhead of the serving area such that the bar staff are spared much of the direct sound — helping to maintain the staff's sanity and allowing them to hear drink orders. The dancefloor is served by four Quest eight-inch two-way speaker boxes and two 15-inch Quest subwoofers. The full-range speakers are positioned on the four corners of the dancefloor, to provide coverage without having too much of the sound spill out into the rest of the room.

DJs haven't been forgotten. There are two wall-mounted audio inputs on the dancefloor and (I like the sound of this) one input on the balcony for the summer months when the balcony doors can be thrown open without fear of a Melbourne hurricane blowing in.

Staff members have the use of simple-to-use control panels to dial up the audio source (a Nightlife music scheduling system is used) and the volume for the various zones. A Bose E4 system provides some of that control in conjunction with Peavey's Architectural Acoustics routing and processing system.

The upstairs bar is a great case study in how neat a sound system can look if the audiovisual contractor is consulted in the early stages — having ugly leads snaking their merry way around the room under cornicing needn't be a necessary evil with a certain amount of forethought.

Downstairs — Arabian (Cocktail) Nights

The downstairs cocktail lounge is certainly the most 'out there' of the three main levels. Fascinatingly, the basement isn't some sort of reclaimed crypt or cool-storage area from the site's undertaking days, but was recently dug and built during construction of the venue. Olivia and Jonathan were always keen on such a space and envisaged it to be a 'members only'-style zone of privilege. The metal door with its porthole certainly makes the statement that this is not a spot for Joe Schmo to grab a quick pot of VB. Once downstairs the real fun begins. Moorish cum Gothic arches combine with some crazy modern chandeliers to give the room dimension. Splashes of colour and opulent fabrics create a mood of decadence. It's like a cross between the Alhambra and the Moulin Rouge.

"It's not a particularly big space, but I think we've given it a sense of volume and grandeur," observed Stephen Tieppo. "John and Olivia's father (who also bank-rolled the venue) is originally a plasterer by trade and was keen to explore different ceiling options. The arches have become a real feature of the space."

The ceilings might have given the room volume but the private booths are great little hidey-holes for intimate sipping and canoodling. What with the flashy wallpaper, deep-buttoned upholstery of the banquettes (by Camm Upholstery) and low light offered by the LED colour changers, I imagine it won't be long before people will be reserving their favourite nook.

The bar itself is a talking point. It's made from black and white corian. The pieces have been fused together and then underlit. Olivia mentioned that after a few cocktails people find it difficult to



» **Stairway to a Haven:** The upstairs bar again employs Calacutta marble counter cladding, but this time American oak is the timber panelling of choice. On the floor is a combination of Pietra Grigio tiles (from ArteDomus) and Supertuff Escape Twist carpet (colour: Bondage... no, honestly). In this picture the bi-fold doors to the balcony are open. Audio tie-line points are built into the outdoor area to allow DJs to wreak havoc alfresco-style during summer months.

“There’s no art on the walls or big-ticket light fittings, it’s the use of materials that imbue the room with movement and interest”

resist the urge to 'play' the bar like some giant novelty piano. Stephen's trademark splash of colour this time comes in the guise of lime-green bar front upholstery, which is nicely picked up by the wall lights (from Inlite). The room may look supremely chilled and inviting, but it's a audio powder keg waiting to explode: "The brief for the basement sound system was for it to be high end, high quality, high SPL and hi-fi... suitable for dancing," summarised Richard Hallam. "The main speakers in there are Nexo PS10s, which are devastatingly loud!" If that wasn't enough, just to get those cocktail shakers shaking, four 18-inch subs have been installed. "It's all about coverage," explained Richard. "You don't need to drive anything hard, but the number of subs allows for an even bass coverage throughout the floor. When the bar is full of people and you only had subs at one end, you'd lose it half way into the room. I'm not talking about the super-low sub-bass — that wouldn't get lost — but the bass that thumps you in the chest, that's when you need the extra subs. Most times when you inspect a DJ's mixer you'll find the low-frequency EQ cranked up to 11, but that's not happened downstairs, so I think we've done something right!"

Dead Set Winner?

The Undertaker had only been opened about a month prior to my initial visit and, after a chat to Olivia Frawley, it was fascinating to hear how the venue had taken on a life of its own. It's almost impossible to predict how people will take to a venue once the doors are flung open, and it sounds like the initial trading period wasn't without its surprises.

In a nutshell, it seems that everyone's delighted by the success of the restaurant; the adjoining lounge would make more sense as a wine bar; the upstairs area looks like it'll be more of a mass market bar than a function space; and the cocktail bar needs wider customer recognition before it can be made an exclusive retreat. In fact, it's the cocktail bar that appears to lend itself to functions, perhaps more so than upstairs. "We're getting lots of enquiries," said Olivia. "Spring Carnival after parties, movie launch parties, car companies are interested..."

In all, it's been an eye-opener, but to Olivia's credit she's staying flexible — observing and reacting.

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» **Paper makes cut:** (This page) The stunning wallpaper is from the Florence Broadhurst Blueprints Collection (style: Japanese Flora. Supplier: Signature Prints).



» **Moorish or More-ish?:** (Opposite) The neo Gothic cum Moorish arches set the tone downstairs in the cocktail bar. The chandeliers were custom designed by NH Architecture and made by Diadem. The black and white corian bar top invites a piano recital, and is complemented by timber veneer bar cladding (from Laminex) and upholstered fabric panels (Kvadrat Maharam). Elsewhere, the wall lights are from Inlite, the side tables from MAP and the upholstered furniture custom made by Camm Upholstery.

Plank Paper

The dining chairs in The Undertaker are a design called Paper by Plank. Paper uses a maple veneer from Alpi Veneers. Paper is around \$442 each plus GST for trade buyers. Plank Paper is shipped from Italy on an eight- to 10-week lead time.

» **Insitu:** (03) 9428 9622 or www.insitufurniture.com.au



Nexo PS Series

The cocktail bar required a sound system that was loud, clear and unobtrusive, and the Nexo PS10 was an ideal choice. It's a full range loudspeaker that's compact and comes with a bunch of clever processing tools to allow the installer to achieve the best results possible. There's also a matching sub (the LS400). Nexo is a clever company that's renowned for its high performance products and the PS Series is well worth a demo when you're after a no-compromise installed sound system.

» **Group Technologies:** (03) 9381 4911 or www.grouptechnologies.com.au



- » **The Undertaker:** 329 Burwood Road, Hawthorn VIC (03) 9818 3944
- » **NH Architecture:** (03) 9654 4955 or www.nharchitecture.net
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- » **Inlite:** (02) 9211 3544 or www.inlite.com.au
- » **Camm Upholstery:** (03) 9555 7580 or cammup@bigpond.net.au

» **Judging Panel:** More solid American walnut timber and more Plank dining chairs from Insitu in the dining area — including the tub-style Plank Baba chair.

"You have to let the customers decide what they want to do with the space," observed Olivia Frawley. "You can't be over confident. With such a large investment you don't want to start ordering vast amounts of furniture determined that your customers will use it this way or that. Because, if they don't, then it can break your heart — you don't want a whole showroom of expensive furniture sitting in the back unused. But when you don't have enough furniture it's very stressful. So it's a balancing act."

I also asked if many of the changes that have been happening were largely driven by key staff appointments.

"Hospitality is about people. There's no doubt that the success of the restaurant is in large part down to our head chef Dianne Kerry; the drive to set up the wine bar is down to Anne Marie Banting; while our bar manager is doing wonders with the upstairs bar. We've also invested almost \$20k in training staff before we opened, which has paid for itself. The staff really appreciate it and that flows on to the customers.

"I recall reading an article about Stephanie Alexander where she mentioned that after 22 years she'd lost that passion and that personal touch you need when you run restaurants. That's so true. People like to see the owners walking around. They need that familiarity and direct connection — it makes people feel special.

"Fortunately, entertaining people is in our blood. My dad's Irish and we like to make people feel special. And we're a family business, so it's all very personal to us. It can be a bit intense sometimes, but you really need that passion." «



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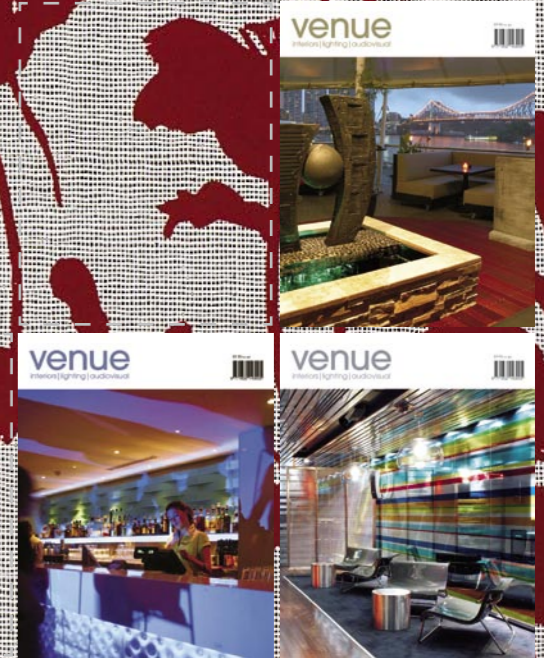
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