The Main Corner is the new centrepiece of Mount Gambier, a picturesque South Australian city. The development, designed by Chapman Herbert Architects and supplied and installed by Viridian Mount Gambier, blends into its heritage surroundings while making a bold contemporary statement. As a striking new addition to Mount Gambier’s streetscape, the Main Corner functions as this vibrant city’s centre. The site had already served for many years as a natural meeting place for Mount Gambier’s citizens, and now boasts a stunning new civic building.
Ensuring the project’s harmonious coexistence with the city’s heritage was the architects’ top priority. ‘The Main Corner consists of adjoining State Heritage–listed civic buildings,’ says Stephen Herbert of Chapman Herbert Architects. ‘After the 1950s RSL building on which the Main Corner now stands was razed, we were left with a vacant site adjacent to these two heritage structures.’

In its new incarnation, Main Corner presents an eye-catching hybrid of classic and modern. ‘The juxtaposition of the two eras is an important heritage fact,’ Stephen explains. The architects’ main intention is ‘not about replicating the old buildings – it’s about managing the juxtaposition of new versus old.’ In order to function effectively, the project demanded the ‘reorganising of the underutilised heritage buildings.’ With aesthetic harmony firmly in mind, the new development ‘incorporates strategic heritage work on existing forms, allowing them to meld together.’

With admirable ambition, Chapman Herbert Architects designed the building to resemble a Cenote, described by Stephen as ‘a cave formed by dissolution of limestone.’ The new building’s incorporation of this natural formation pays respect to Mount Gambier’s unique surroundings. As Stephen points out, ‘the Cenote cave wall is more than an abstract geological representation. It’s also a visual form, interpreting our region’s specific geology.’

The design’s local significance ensures that the site’s unique history is made an integral part of its present. ‘Mount Gambier is known as a city built around a cave,’ says Stephen. ‘Behind this building is a hole in the ground – the Cenote, or sinkhole – where the town’s fresh water supply used to be gathered. We’ve opened the site right up, to reveal to visitors that there’s a big hole beyond.’

The highly unusual Cenote form is reflected in the materials used in Main Corner’s construction. ‘The new building is constructed on a limestone bed, and the materials used are quarried locally,’ says Stephen. ‘They have been chosen to match the existing built forms, both in colour and texture.’

‘In its new incarnation, Main Corner presents an eye-catching hybrid of classic and modern.’

To reflect public demand, a large proportion of the Main Corner site is devoted to gardens and open spaces. ‘There were many public meetings held about the use of the site,’ Stephen recalls. ‘Unlike a library, which is built for a specific purpose, this is a building for opportunity.’ This optimistic outlook is an essential component of the building’s success. ‘As the public clearly saw the need for open space, we kept the building’s footprint to a modest amount. In doing so, we’ve created open spaces and encouraged a visual appreciation of the Cape Gardens Precinct.’

These signature details provide a strong link with the city’s past. ‘Mount Gambier was settled in 1860, so we have some quite significant history,’ Stephen explains. ‘Every other city has a major square – and a piazza or plaza – but the people have always dubbed this the “main corner”, because it’s the crucible of where everything happens in town.’
‘The glass is specified for performance as well as beauty. The glazing had to be of extremely high quality and transparency to let light in while allowing heat in or out when required.’

The new building’s advanced glazing serves a variety of purposes by ‘pulling together the new Cenote structure with the historical façades.’ Stephen enthuses about the building’s use of glass as a visual medium which ‘reflects the existing buildings, rather than fighting them for textural quality.’ The glazing was chosen with this property in mind. ‘Entering the site at any point doesn’t diminish the visual beauty of the existing buildings, because they’re reflected back onto themselves,’ Stephen adds. Rather than creating a clash, ‘the new buildings are attached to the existing ones with the fineness of glass.’ The linkage, while subtle, is highly effective. ‘We designed a glass roof, which you can look up through to see the original built forms,’ he continues. ‘The glass provides that transient arrangement, which is based on the contemporary juxtaposition of the solid mechanical artistic forms.’

The Main Corner also employs glazing to create striking visual effects and fluid contrasts. ‘There is a printed glass canopy at the main point of entry, which provides shelter and shade without darkening. That creates a smooth transition from outside to inside under a softened glass canopy, while still allowing people to appreciate the glass above.’ Glare has been minimised wherever possible. ‘Any entries and glazing inside the building are clear glass, so there are no reflective surfaces,’ Stephen says. ‘You can see from inside right through to outside – without the darkened, unreflective and uninspiring elements of some mirror finishes.’

Naturally, the Main Corner’s glazing also plays a starring role in energy efficiency. As Stephen explains, ‘The glass is specified for performance as well as beauty. The glazing had to be of extremely high quality and transparency to let light in while allowing heat in or out when required. The types of glass used in the construction are therefore of immense importance.’
Passive solar design was deftly employed to complement the glass’s insulating properties. Due to a quirk in Mount Gambier’s layout, the entire building plan had to be shifted to take full advantage of the winter sun. ‘As the city’s grid is 20 degrees off north,’ Stephen says, ‘we’ve rotated the building so that its main axis is directly north–south.’ These considerable efficiency benefits have been further increased by ‘sunshading and light transparency, along with external sun shading.’

The building’s insulation from the elements was dramatically improved with the striking ‘living green wall’ on its greenery-covered western façade – a technique far more common overseas than it is in Australia. ‘For this new form,’ Stephen reveals, ‘we utilised the knowledge and wisdom of our landscape designer, who’s done a lot of work on living green walls.’ The living green wall, which is suspended from the glass, unobtrusively shelters the building’s glass façade while ‘adding colour, texture and climate control.’ This advanced dual-layer approach brings immediate benefits. ‘You still get a transparent, translucent feel through the dappled light – but the living green wall also offers a very high degree of light transmission and shading.’

Besides its spectacular appearance, the green wall ‘plays an enormous role in temperature control,’ Stephen says. ‘The western façade is cooled by trickle-effect water in summer, which cuts the temperature of the glass by around five degrees. This helps the glass perform at its best, while allowing natural light in.’

‘Working with the architectural team from early in the design stages contributed to positive outcomes and without a doubt, a quality job,’ says Peter Allen, Centre Manager at Viridian Mt Gambier. ‘Our technical advice on the glass specifications and overall glazing systems at Main Corner ensured superior energy performance was achieved, energy regulations met, and given the volume of glass, this was quite a feat. The 32 metre span of skylight surface area was absolutely flat, we installed 35 double glazed units, running the entire length of the building. The curtain wall housed an expanse of 37 glass panels, in various sizes over 2 elevations, installed between six enormous steel beams. The processing and manufacturing of the glass panels had to be precise, there was no room for the slightest error,’ says Peter.

Peter Allen is exceptionally proud of his installation team and delighted with the outcome. ‘The heritage constraints and complexities of the project introduced many challenges, but nothing we couldn’t overcome. The collective knowledge and experience of our team nationally is hard to beat,’ said Peter.

Combining a deep respect for the city’s heritage with advanced glazing technology the Main Corner project provides the historical city of Mount Gambier with the bustling, stylish and sustainable hub that it richly deserves.