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## Charcoal Lane

*Interior designer Megan Hounslow helped transform a 19th-century bank into a sleekly modern restaurant that celebrates indigenous culture.*

“**C**harcoal Lane was a collaborative project between Meme and Tandem Design Studio ([www.tandem-studio.net](http://www.tandem-studio.net)). The 1865 building was originally a bank, and from 1979 to 1993 was occupied by the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service. It was an iconic building, and Mission Australia won the government tender to develop it as a not-for-profit restaurant and training facility.

“In 2006, Charcoal Lane was designed to be a commercial restaurant as well as a social enterprise. It provides an opportunity for Aboriginal and disadvantaged young people to improve their lives by working in the food industry.

“The design aim of this project was to create an interior that proudly acknowledges its Aboriginal influence and heritage in a fresh and contemporary manner. It had to complement the many nearby restaurants and galleries on Gertrude Street in Fitzroy. It also had to work with the indigenous food philosophy of the restaurant.

“The restaurant seats about 60-70 people with the trainee kitchen and a private function room upstairs. The staff are introduced to the industry and trained upstairs, then graduate downstairs for an apprenticeship in operating the restaurant and kitchen. They not only learn skills in cooking but also bar work, wait staff and restaurant management.

“To follow the cultural theme, we introduced a series of indigenous artworks including a hand-crafted eel trap. The large windows in the restaurant are uncovered, filling the interior with natural light filtered through trees. Materials were selected for their beauty, durability and sustainability. Low embodied timber is used extensively.

“We gathered the talents of various Victorian-based indigenous artists. Gayle Maddigan was commissioned to create the dynamic ceiling installation. It was a challenge to have it installed as it was the largest piece she had ever produced. Jennifer Mullet produced a selection of prints and Elaine Terrick was engaged to make the eel trap which was then adapted into a light. Sustainable and low-embodied materials were sourced and selected locally, while furniture was found and repurposed. The interior is honest and understated so that the trainees, artworks and indigenous food become the focus.

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“The restaurant’s name was inspired by Archie Roach’s 1990 song, ‘Charcoal Lane’. The idea of using it for the restaurant came from a local indigenous elder of the Fitzroy community. This song romanticised the local Aboriginal people, their friends and culture—and it seemed an optimistic fit.

“Our approach to Charcoal Lane was to acknowledge the history of the building and to work closely with our client for a successful brand and functional restaurant/trainee facility. We wanted to create a useful and meaningful place that is fully utilised now and in the future. Despite being a not-for-profit enterprise, Charcoal Lane sits in the market, competes in the market and has been very successful. It’s a unique project that was very rewarding.” .O

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