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Windsor's vamped up Parnell space

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A former Parnell warehouse and nightclub that has been fastidiously transformed into an office/retail/showroom complex has three areas for lease.

Owner Callum Baker's company Parklane Group has spared no expense in converting the 1950s property at 7 Windsor St in the city's oldest suburb.

The property is two buildings now it is under one roof. The older part of the property was once an extension to the well-known Heard's lolly factory on Parnell Rd and was used for storing chocolate.

It was owned for 20 years by whiteware supplier Peter Gower and during the 1970s the top floor was a nightclub where pop superstar Lionel Richie and his band the Commodores played.

In recent years the properties were second grade warehousing until Parklane Group bought them in 2006 and spent some time considering how to convert the buildings, while preserving their character features.

It is now a chic 1300sq m office/showroom complex housing Levi Strauss, Oakley International and well-known fashion designer Kevin Berkahn, known for his elaborate creations.

CB Richard Ellis office leasing brokers Jack Brabant and Lorne Somerville have three areas of the building available for lease – a boutique office/showroom of 66sq m, a first floor office of 186sq m and the property's flagship office/showroom of 347sq m. Each area is computer cabled and ready for immediate occupation.

Parklane Group did an extensive refurbishment of the property including new beams, roof, exposing brick walls, polishing the wooden floors and creating false windows on the east side downstairs. These are lit from behind to give the feeling of natural light.

Levi Strauss and Oakley International have their head office in the building and both these companies use their premises for buyers to view their latest products. Kevin Berkahn moved from Teed St, Newmarket to a new retail showroom at ground level.

Brabant says the building is exceptional. "Smaller office/showroom suites are popular in Parnell, which is regarded as Auckland's creative quarter. It is home to advertising agencies, architects, engineers, interior designers, web developers, marketing and public relations companies. It also hosts Auckland's largest art gallery precinct.

"Parnell buildings are human scale, office space is competitively priced, there is good parking and the cafes and public areas give the village an edgy feel."

Parklane Group, formed in 2004, has specialised in difficult Parnell properties and has about 60 offices suites in the suburb.

Baker says about two years the company was trying to work out what to do with its Windsor Street property. "It was a process. We stripped the building back and it was hard not to fall in love with the property. It has such a nice feel."

He felt the same when he bought his first Parnell building in 2001. Parklane Group bought 211 Parnell Rd from the Auckland City Council and redeveloped the property into well-known restaurant Nori, office suites and apartments.

"During that development we recognised that many of the Parnell office tenants we deal with don't want large floorplates. They want around 100sq m and we have specialised in this market," says Baker.

His company has tenants ranging from medium sized businesses to international brands. "They are solid tenants who have done well and appreciate the charms of older buildings in a village where you can walk down the street and talk to people."

Although Parklane Group has been operating in Parnell for five to six years it had never established an office in one of its own buildings. Baker and his team have now moved into Windsor Street.

Baker says he appreciates old buildings although he has been involved in the development of a multi-storey apartment towers. "Rejuvenating old buildings is much more rewarding and satisfying."

He says the renewal of the back streets of Parnell is creating an atmosphere similar to Double Bay in Sydney. "The buildings behind the main street are developing into an area for different types of businesses and destination shopping."

He says the city end of Parnell Rd is becoming the Paris end of the suburb because most of the building have been redeveloped or converted and haven't been pulled down.

"They don't have historic classifications, and while they are lovely they have restrictions on the type of tenants allowed to take up residence.

"Landlords have recently taken a different view on the tenants they want to attract and it's no longer shooter bars and students. They are after a more sophisticated edgy type of tenant, and this boosted the area's attractiveness."

Parklane Group is a long-term investor and rarely sells a property. However, everything the company owns has now been transformed and Baker is on the look out for more property. "Finding this type of property is rare; it's like looking for hens' teeth."

Parnell's history dates from the 1840s when European settlers decided it would be the focus of the Church in England in Auckland. Bishop Selwyn quickly established a cathedral, library, bell tower and Bishops court in St Stephens Ave.

Most early sellers in Parnell were mechanics and tradesmen. They congregated in Mechanics Bay until the land was reclaimed for railway and port development in the 1870s.

In the early 1850s a bridge crossed the inlet to Mechanics Bay to where Parnell Rise begins and this opened a main highway through Parnell and Newmarket. Some of the Parnell's finest foreshore houses disappeared when they were demolished and their land cut away to form Tamaki Drive. This severed Parnell from contact with the open harbour.

By the 1960s Parnell was languishing and it became shabby. Its transformation began in the 1970s when Les Harvey bought up old houses and turned them in Parnell Village, a hotch potch of bricked walkways, restaurants and tiny specialty shops.

He made brick courtyards fashionable and created the village by using bits and pieces salvaged from buildings which were being knocked down all over New Zealand. Much of the work he did himself. The rest was done by craftsmen working to his design.

Harvey pointed out that properties that have stood for 130 years or more are good for another 130 years if they are looked after. Baker agrees and says the city's old buildings need to be treasured. "Far too many have been pulled down."

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