





Salons are very technical. Stylists need room to move and lighting must be hard on colour but not the clients.



## makingwaves

Melinda Williams finds the salon of old is water under the bridge for Stephen Marr. Photographs by Becky Nunes

Serene is not an adjective you would usually apply to a hair salon. Between the pumping music, rushing stylists, flying hair and scissors, humming blowdryers and chattering clients, a busy salon barely boasts a square inch of tranquility. But at Stephen Marr in Newmarket, the first collaboration between architects Sue Hillery and Richard Priest has resulted in a salon with an unconventional sense of calm.

"There are a lot of hair salons around and they're always kind of bright and white and hygienic, a clinical look," says Hillery. "We were looking for something a lot more subdued and that's where we came up with the idea of an underwater experience when you come in."

Starting above the mezzanine floor, a huge photographic mural of waterlilies flows down the wall and underneath, across the ceiling of the waiting room and washbasin area. Hillery says the image (shot by salon co-owner Lucy Marr) was art directed by herself and Priest into a heavy blue underwater experience, and then repeated, so it became like a wallpaper. "It's larger than life so you get completely enveloped in it. When you're sitting in reception or getting your hair washed, you can lie back and see this lovely image."

The wave-like reception couches and washbasin chairs that encourage such supine contemplation of the images were also designed by Hillery and Priest. "We realised it would be quite interesting to fold and bend steel and create new furniture so you could just lie back. It all feels quite integrated. Even things like the lighting and the use of concrete are quite intense, but still give you that sense of calm and serenity."

The concrete chosen for the walls was a new type of lightweight, flexible panelling that the architects had cast in a curve. "The shape makes you feel drawn in from the centre down to the back," Hillery explains. Concrete was also chosen to give the space a stripped-back feel, in contrast to the claustrophobic, carpeted feel of the previous tenant, a 1980s formal and semi-formal clothing store. Even the staircase was torn out and replaced with light concrete steps leading up to the glamorous, 1930s-style beauty parlour, Lucy & the Powder Room.

Lighting and access were also key considerations. "Salons are very technical," says

Tough city chic softened up by the mural of waterlilies photographed by Lucy Marr.



Hillery. “The stylists have to be able to move around and have all their equipment and the clients are constantly being moved around to have their hair washed. You have to have really great lighting for rendering colour on the head, but you also have to make the client look fantastic.” The balance was achieved by mixing stronger overhead lights with subtle backlighting and underlighting through opaque glass in the benches and product display cabinets “to give a crisp, clean feel”. Vertical panels in the reception desk are also lit from behind, casting pools of light on the polished concrete floor. Floor to ceiling mirrors across the rear wall of the salon reflect light and give the illusion of extra space.

Although salon owners Stephen and Lucy Marr didn’t lay down a tight brief, Lucy says Hillery and Priest interpreted their needs perfectly. “They were amazing to work with. They had a really good feel for functionality as well as design and space.” But perhaps the best endorsement comes from the floor staff, who were previously knocking elbows at the existing Stephen Marr salon in Ponsonby. “The response from all the stylists has been that they really love working in it – it’s really spacious – so that’s good to know!” Hillery laughs.

## SELECTED CREDITS

**Furniture makers** Design Productions • **Lighting** Lumen Design • **Cabinetry** David White

