

# The Commercial Project



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The Guardsman exemplifies studio gram's expertise in creating distinctive atmospheres.

# Rich Narratives—

# studio gram

Words by Jessica Bellef • Photography by Kate Bowman, Timothy Kaye, David Sievers and Jonathan VDK



studio gram has carved a niche by telling compelling stories attuned to the end-user. The Adelaide-based practice was founded in 2014 by Dave Bickmore and Graham Charbonneau, who met years prior as architecture students at the University of South Australia. Dave and Graham honed their skills in large firms post-graduation. They reunited to work on the redevelopment of Hotel Harry in Sydney's Surry Hills, and studio gram, as it is now known, was formed.

At a staff count of nine, the award-winning team works fluidly within the tight conceptual scaffolds they build for each project. "Regardless of the project's typology, we use narrative as the basis for all design," Dave shares, adding that this prologue defines the experience they

set out to create for their patrons. "It sometimes talks to the materiality, but the intent is to capture the soul of the project," he says.

A melange of inspirational cues informs studio gram's storytelling, drawn from far-flung sources and the designers' childhood memories and worldly life experiences. Every design is shaped by the belief that familiarity is fundamental to comfort. "Unconsciously, we all give preference to something we are familiar with," Graham explains. "We are also creatures of curiosity, and there is an attraction to the unknown and excitement in the process of discovery. It is very important when designing commercial spaces to find a balance between the two; familiarity will draw people in, and surprises will keep them coming back."



Fugazzi exemplifies a playful sense of familiarity and nostalgia while still feeling fresh and contemporary.



Arkhé, crafted out of a dark and moody concept, encapsulates the raw and organic nature of the venue's cooking.

The lesson is clear: if you lean too heavily on recognisable tropes, you produce predictable kitsch, but push the elements too far left of field, and you risk jolting the patrons with an alienating novelty. These are the parameters studio gram creates within. "It's not always as controllable as we would like to think it is," says Graham. "We have to tread carefully to avoid the cliché while capturing the familiarity. We try to hide the familiar within the surprise."

Completed in 2021, Arkhé in Adelaide offers a fine example of studio gram's ability to provide comfort and functionality while subverting the norm in a restaurant setting. Charred, organic and volcanic, the interiors speak to the ephemeral nature of time and decay while encapsulating the ritual of cooking over fire. Patrons enter via the darkest, moodiest zones and work their way through to the light-filled courtyard, tinting the dining experience with an ombré overlay.

Ash blacks, dusty whites and the organic imperfections of shou sugi ban timber and rough lime plaster create an all-encompassing atmosphere. The refinement of tailored leather and polished stone balances the rough, raw surfaces and monolithic forms. Expectations are challenged in the open kitchen, where commercial stainless steel is minimised and

timber benchtops and joinery imbue visual warmth and an inviting domestic mood.

The studio celebrates its South Australian-ness by constantly drawing from a rich network of local creators and artisans. "The 'smallness' of Adelaide means that we have incredible access to all of these people, and the opportunity to collaborate with all of them surrounds us in our everyday practice," says Graham, who lists the Jam Factory and Remington Matters as top-of-mind collaborators and friends. "It is a very exciting time to both live and work here," he enthuses. "There are many talented architects and designers in South Australia who continue pushing the boundaries."

studio gram is enjoying recognition at a broader level as it collects national design awards and works on a spread of hotels, homes and hospitality projects across Australia. However, Dave, Graham and their team remain true to their unique design voice and that of their immediate design community. "Adelaide is no longer trying to be Sydney or Melbourne; it's found itself," Graham muses. This self-assurance of identity drives the studio and its in-demand narrative-based approach. "The future is very much the present at studio gram."