

architect

Muir  
Mendes

project

Law Street  
House

photography

Peter  
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review

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# ETCHING TIME INTO DESIGN

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Toiling away on weekends over a period of four years, Amy Muir and Bruno Mendes have built an enigmatic house that reveals their love both for the suburb of South Melbourne and the poetic localism of Álvaro Siza.





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Architect's  
Statement

In a tight, single-lane South Melbourne street, the Law Street House, on a 93-square-metre site, is adjoined to the north and south neighbouring properties and contained by a rear property, conditions that called for access to natural light and a view beyond. Flanked by a two-storey, modernist, red-brick facade and an ornamented timber cottage to the south, the Law Street House became the fourth little pig.

The plate-steel facade adopts a condition of blankness, concealing the second storey within the adjusted roof pitch that mimicks the form of the site's former cottage. A 'draw bridge' to the front window provides privacy and curates light to the front bedroom, signalling occupation to the house beyond.

Upon entry, the double-height corridor directs the gaze through the full-length skylight to views of the existing palm tree. The enclosed cottage corridor is inverted to maximise natural light to the interior and to provide an aspect 'out' of the tight site. Sky becomes an important distraction for the gaze, and the white walls play host to the passage of light dancing across the interior as the day passes, patterning the walls as it moves.

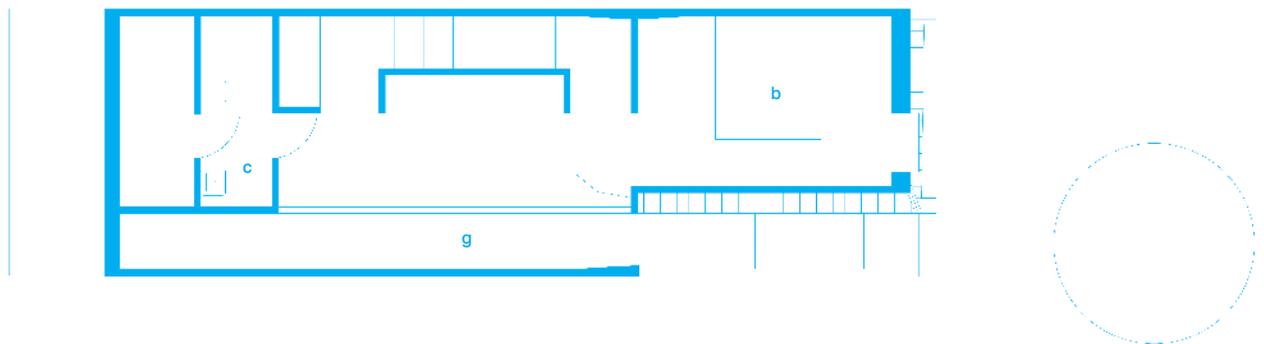
A memory of the original lean-to rooflines ripples across the underside of level one, defining that 'section' of the house. The rear of the house forms a continuation of the roofline, folding down the ResCode diagram to the south. The rear facade to the east is tilted, ensuring no additional overshadowing to the neighbouring property. Internally, the wall is pleated, incorporating the heating panel and concealed blind to the window on level one.

Windows, doors, stairs and joinery have been fabricated from steel, puncturing the white interior, as steel construction combats the tight site and aggressive termites. Tallow wood flooring was selected, as it does not suit the termite palate; it folds through the space and up the walls, providing a robust skirting.

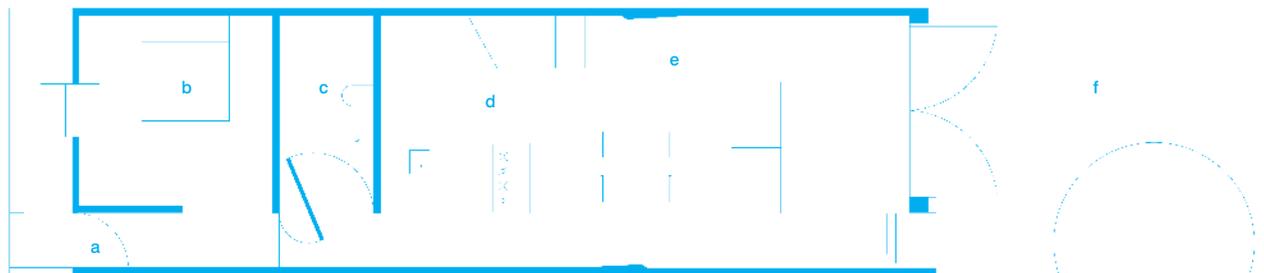
Two bedrooms, two bathrooms, one study, open-plan living and storage have been carefully crafted into the 115-square-metre space. The house is divided into two living zones, with the level one gallery study forming the in-between space, and borrowed light and borrowed vistas articulate a space for living, for gazing, for pondering, for thought.



first floor plan



ground floor plan



a. entry / b. bedroom / c. wc / d. kitchen / e. living / f. courtyard / g. void



02

**Review:**  
Law Street House

Something touches our core when we encounter a self-made house, as evidenced by *My House, My Paradise*, one of Editorial Gustavo Gili's most alluring publications. It captures a range of self-designed and self-made houses, from oversized sand castles made of pot shards, bottles or hand-sized pebbles; to follies constructed on secluded estates by landowners in pursuit of meaning through material manifestations; to Salvador Dalí's ensemble of surreal rooms and objects on the coast overlooking the beach, where he and Lorca spent youthful summers dreaming up each other's lifetime projects.

The house that Amy Muir and Bruno Mendes built at the weekends for almost four years is no exception, etching the sensibility of time into every junction. Muir and Mendes love the inner-city neighbourhood of South Melbourne and longed to find a way of living there. A derelict worker's cottage and their self-build design gave them the opportunity, and after buying the site, they funded construction out of their salaries, week by week.

The timbers of the floor in the entry hall have been angle butted to the riser timbers of the step into the living zone, grain matching grain – a weekend totally evoked by looking at that step at any time. Their hands, wielding Stanley knives,

cut to shape the acoustic board lining the upper-level balcony, where it runs along the skylight gash on the side part wall. As Ken Yeang opines, great architects have a 'hand and an eye', and, quite literally here, the hands of the architects have made the house. Knowing that they were going to build it this way, their collective mind's eye designed a house 'like a Meccano set', in which all of the components could be handled by the two of them.

Knowing that they could master welding and angle-grinding, but not carpentry, determined a steel frame, steel partition studs, a steel staircase. As far as possible, this was constructed by bolting components together. They, 'Daddy Mendes' apprentices', had the help of Bruno's father, a steel fabricator, and the underside of the immaculately welded and grinded stair is an acoustic board-lined Aladdin's cave of utilities: fridge, washing machine, pantry, fruit and vegetable drawer. The joinery, what Muir and Mendes fondly regarded as 'shop drawings', was immaculately worked out and then taken to a fabricator, where, to their amazement, they were sent away to dimension every panel, leaving a 0.8mm tolerance for the Formica. What they then received was a bundled-up jigsaw puzzle of pieces. More weekends etched in the memory. Much had to be done twice: 'Once badly, then learning from that, properly.'

01. A full-length skylight gash frames the existing palm tree.
02. The skilfully welded and grinded steel staircase.
03. A self-built paradise.
04. The bathroom exhibits immaculate attention to detail.
05. Borrowed bedroom light produces a contemplative space.



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The house that Amy Muir and Bruno Mendes built at the weekends etches the sensibility of time into every junction.



04



05

The mental space that informed the design represents profound respect for the area.



06

This hands-on experience impacted directly on their design work during the week, transforming their attitudes to detailing. The house is immaculate, and the only thing they did not make – a superbly lacquered white island unit; the kitchen – sits there at ease in this company. There are no rough edges to draw attention to, but this is not a house where you dwell on the detail. That it is remarked upon is a consequence of the way it was made, a lineage of the house as an experimental site that, for Muir and Mendes, refers back to the Eames House; and to those pioneers of affordable housing who rethought the means of production, back to Walter Segal in England, to Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky's Frankfurt kitchen.

The house is self-effacing, deferring to its neighbours: a clapboard workman's cottage and a red brick modernist house covered in ivy. Its facade is the dull black of the radar-defying model jet fighters that sit on an upstairs desk, and there are three openings in this anonymous black skin: the front door; a panel hinged at the bottom that opens out at the top to let light into the downstairs bedroom; and a panel in the concrete base of the building that lifts to reveal services and meters.

From the street, that is it. Nothing of the double storey beyond is visible, and the house remains as enigmatic as Stephen Holl's Storefront in New York, but that is not the source of inspiration – Álvaro Siza is, his way of enhancing locality, even if its 'thingness' does bring Holl's early work and sketches to mind.

The mental space that informed the design represents profound respect for the area, signified by the rear of the house, where the metal cladding sets off the clapboard of the neighbour as if they have been made for each other. And then they engage with the canon of architecture through their love of the work of Siza, which – perhaps as a reward for completing the house – they will soon experience in Portugal.

Finally, the fact that this 'paradise' is self-built secures Muir and Mendes a place in the lineage of those who have worked to make the product of architecture accessible to more than the wealthy. **ar**

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06. Memories of the original lean-to rooflines characterise the rear.

07. The facade: self-effacing, deferential to the neighbourhood.

section



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07

ARCHITECT: Muir Mendes — *project team* Amy Muir, Bruno Mendes — *CONSULTANTS:* *engineer* Wallbridge and Gilbert — *quantity surveyor* Gibson Dell — *builder* Bruno Mendes, Joe Mendes and Amy Muir — *size* 115 m<sup>2</sup> — *time to complete* 3.5 years due to construction taking place on weekends — *council* City of Port Phillip — *MATERIALS:* *cladding* Steel plate and corrugated iron — *roof* Corrugated iron — *guttering* Zinalume — *paint* Interthane 870 (paint applied to steel) — *windows and doors* Custom-made steel framed — *glazing* Double glazing low-e — *heating/cooling system* Hydronic heating — *ceiling* Plasterboard — *internal walls* Plasterboard and eco panel — *paint* Natural white, Dulux — *lighting* Concealed T5 lights — *flooring* Tallow wood — *surfaces* 2-pac and eco panel door fronts, steel plate to study bench and staircase, Corian kitchen bench — *furniture* Tallow wood dining table, steel bookshelf and kitchen tallow wood bar seat designed and constructed by Bruno Mendes and Amy Muir.