



BOLD ENTERPRISE

BUILT BY A COUPLE WITH NERVES OF STEEL, A MELBOURNE COTTAGE'S DARK FAÇADE GIVES NO HINT OF THE DAZZLING LIGHT MOVES ANIMATING THE INTERIOR.

PHOTOGRAPHER: PETER BENNETTS PRODUCER/WRITER: ANNEMARIE KIELY

REACTING TO THE DARK INTROSPECTION OF THE SITE'S FORMER WORKER'S COTTAGE, OWNER/BUILDER ARCHITECTS MUIR MENDES DESIGNED THE MAIN LIVING SPACE OF THEIR OWN HOME FOR THE MAXIMUM PENETRATION OF SUN. LIGHT-BOUNCING WHITE WALLS WERE PUSHED TO THE BOUNDARY AND A BUILDING-LONG SKYLIGHT WAS INSERTED ABOVE THE HALLWAY'S DOUBLE-HEIGHT VOID. AS WELL AS THE PAINTED STEEL FAÇADE, INTERIOR DETAILS SUCH AS THE STEPS LEADING TO THE SECOND LEVEL ARE ALSO CLAD IN STEEL. COATED IN AN OIL FINISH, THE STEPS WILL DEVELOP CHARACTER AS THEY AGE.



THE ENTRY WAS DESIGNED TO BE THE SOARING SURPRISE BEHIND THE FLAT, SINGLE-STORY, STEEL FAÇADE AT STREET FRONT. ITS DARK WALLS AND NARROW PASSAGE AMP UP THE EFFECT OF ENTRY INTO THE DAZZLING WHITE OPEN-PLAN LIVING SPACE, THE FOLDED CEILING OF WHICH, OPPOSITE, RIGHT, RIFFS ON THE ROOF LINES OF SURROUNDING COTTAGES. THE TALLOWWOOD FLOORBOARDS ARE FROM URBAN SALVAGE AND THE OWNERS MADE THE TABLE WITH SURPLUS BOARDS, MATCHING IT WITH 'SLAB' CHAIRS BY TOM DIXON FROM DEDECE. THE BLACK LEATHER SOFA WAS PURCHASED EIGHT YEARS AGO FROM KING FURNITURE AND THE PAINTING IS BY FELLOW VICTORIAN ARCHITECT BOB SINCLAIR.



FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT once famously quipped that while physicians can bury their blunders, architects can only advise their clients to plant vines – and so should build their first buildings as far from their own homes as possible. The advice appears lost on Amy Muir and Bruno Mendes, two young Melbourne architects who have made a home of their fledgling practice's first piece of architecture. But perhaps they have paid half a heed to Wright's words by hiding all the attributes of their domesticity and design behind a four metre-high, flat steel face that gives nothing away to the outside world. A passing pedestrian's crack about their Darth Vader-dark façade sums up general sentiment in the tight South Melbourne street – "What the...?"

The architects laugh at this confused interest in their inscrutable house that animates like an alien spaceship with the drop of a little drawbridge (a crank-out window shutter) or the opening of the front door. "I kid you not, every time it is open, someone pokes their head in and says, 'Gee, I never thought it would be like that on the inside,'" says Mendes of a glimpse down a crinkle-cut, sky-lit corridor that frames the property's remaining palm tree. "But that was part of our thing, playing with perception and inverting the dark introspection of what was originally there."

Backtracking to the search for an inner-city site that could accommodate new architecture, Mendes remembers rejoicing when they found their 4.6 by 20 metre-block replete with a 100-year-old worker's cottage unencumbered by the area's everywhere heritage overlay. "It was tiny, but we lived in it for a year, taking in the constraints of site, the poor penetration of light and working out how to invert the original."

The pair responded purely to the existing conditions of their neighbourhood – a modernist box on one side, a century-old cottage on the other – deciding to make their new statement sit somewhere in the middle of that timeline. "Formally, the house responds to the typology of the old worker's cottage, because the parapet heights and the proportions are the same, but it takes its modernist cues from next door, blander and blanker," says Mendes, hand-balling further explanation to Muir. "It was a single-storey house that we wanted to replace with a two-storey house, but we didn't want to signal a two storey from the street," she says. "So we decided to lift the original roofline slightly and slide another level under it."

Nodding to the referential culture of their training (the pair studied architecture at RMIT), Mendes remembers drinking beer on the roof of the old house and reading into the en-masse abstraction of the local lean-to roofs a pattern that could sculpturally enliven their interiors.



“WE DESPERATELY TRIED TO LIMIT THE NOISE – CUTTING STEEL ON SATURDAYS ‘TIL ABOUT THREE O’CLOCK, THEN ASSEMBLING IT QUIETLY FROM SATURDAY AFTERNOON INTO SUNDAY.”



“We thought, why not take those profiles and put them across the ceiling?” Muir says. This left the ground-level living space to luxuriate in the sculpture of plaster folds. Such ‘crafting’ of space was reliant upon an expert builder. For three and a half years, Muir and Mendes both worked Monday to Friday in big practice – he for Woods Bagot, she for Carr Design – and Saturday to Sunday as owner/builders – doing all the hands-on dirty work required to get this practice-launching project out of the ground.

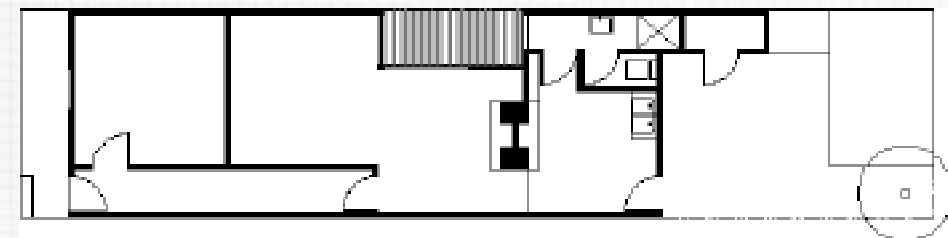
“We did it all,” says Mendes, crediting his father, master steelworker “Daddy Mendes”, with their apprenticeship in the construction of steel (essential for the primary structure given the area’s termite presence). “We designed, demolished, excavated, poured footings, built with our own hands, all the time being conscious of not upsetting the neighbours. We tried desperately to limit the noise – cutting steel on Saturdays until about three o’clock, and then assembling it quietly from Saturday afternoon into Sunday.”

Muir is quick to remove any suggestion that their seven-day-a-week work schedule was punishing, breezily declaring their two days of outdoor activity the ideal antidote for the weekly hang in architecture’s head-space. “But Friday and Saturday night parties were off for a couple of years,” she explains. “It’s amazing how reliant we became on being outside for two days of the week, and how very fit we both became.”

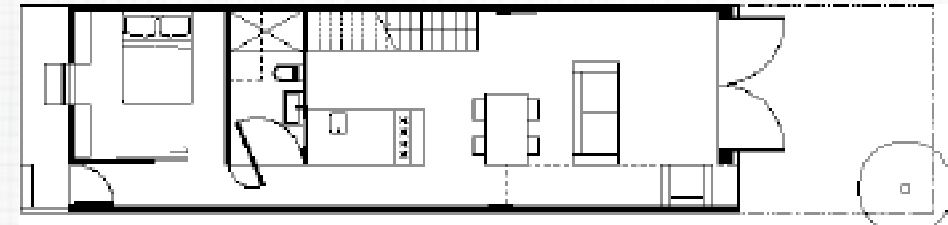
Their hands-on effort – cutting the acoustic board that surfaces key walls, angle-butting timber boards of termite-resistant tallowwood, piecing together the puzzle of joinery that arrived mass-packed from the fabricator, angle grinding steel – has afforded an invaluable experience that the pair say will forever inform their detail.

After finally moving into the ‘no excuse’ space of finished structure without ‘the client’ on which to blame for any anomalies, Muir Mendes put their maiden attempt to the ultimate peer test in the Royal Australian Institute of Architects’ 2011 National Awards. Their two gongs – a National Commendation for Small Project Architecture and the award for Residential Architecture for New Houses in Victoria – picked up ahead of seasoned competition said it all: no vines need growing here. **VL**

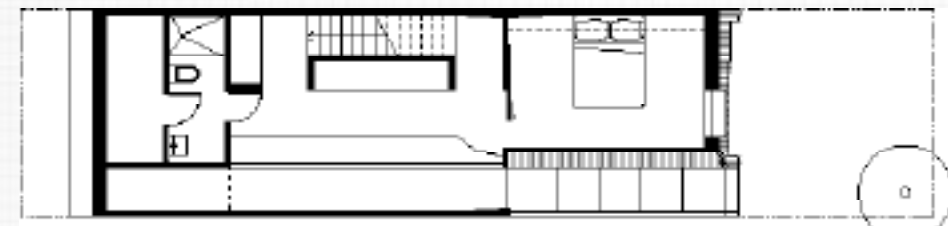
PHOTOGRAPHER (PORTRAIT), MARCEL AUCAR



BEFORE ground
1 entry 2 living 3 kitchen 4 dining 5 wc 6 laundry 7 pantry 8 courtyard 9 carport 10 bedroom 11 bathroom



AFTER ground
1 entry 2 living 3 kitchen 4 dining 5 wc 6 laundry 7 pantry 8 courtyard 9 carport 10 bedroom 11 bathroom



AFTER level one
1 entry 2 living 3 kitchen 4 dining 5 wc 6 laundry 7 pantry 8 courtyard 9 carport 10 bedroom 11 bathroom



- A dramatic skylight over the double-height entry corridor creates an amazing shadow play and floods an otherwise gloomy interior with light.
- Steel used on stairs and a desk, for instance, echoes the hard facade that the house presents to the street.

THE ANGLED WALLS OF THE FIRST-LEVEL MASTER BEDROOM AND ADJACENT STUDY, **THIS PAGE**, EXPRESS THE ARCHITECTS' EFFORTS NOT TO IMPOSE THEIR BUILDING'S BULK ON NEIGHBOURING PROPERTIES, **OPPOSITE**. CUSTOM-MADE STEEL DOORS SWING OPEN ON SUMMERY NIGHTS TO EXTEND THE LIVING SPACE ONTO A REAR DECK. THE COUPLE DESIGNED THE SHELF THAT HOUSES THEIR COLLECTION OF BOOKS ON ART, PHOTOGRAPHY AND ARCHITECTURE.



B+A

Aim of renovation? Contained on three sides, "the original one-bedroom cottage called for access to natural light and views," says owner/architect Amy Muir.

The solution? "The inversion of the enclosed cottage corridor provided a full-length corridor skylight in order to maximise the penetration of natural light to the interior."

How long did it take? "Three and a half years. We only had weekends, as we worked full-time. We lived with family for two years, not thinking it would take as long as it did, and moved in at the beginning of last winter – it was very cold! The excitement of getting that far kept us going."

Biggest saving? "We built all the joinery ourselves."

Best advice? "To develop the perseverance and patience for learning. Halfway through, we thought it would be nice to walk away, but we had to keep our determination. Once you get into building something on your own, you're in for a very big challenge. We learned more than we could have imagined."

Has it changed the way you design? "Architects are on the sidelines at construction phase; as owner/builders, we now have a better understanding of how things come together."

Any unforeseen problems? "Time always seemed against us – it felt wonderful to finish but it took us a long time to adjust to having our weekends back. It felt weird!"

Materials used: Plate steel on front façade, windows and door frames painted on site and raw plate steel on interior features; Lysaght Spandek Zinalume on the rear exteriors.

Builder/architects: Muir Mendes and Bruno's father, Joaquim Mendes, a steel fabricator, (03) 9686 6868; muirmendes.com.

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