

Barkly Street

# Ethical Architecture

**388 Barkly Street is a special project for DREAMER and we're very proud of the result. More than ever we see a need for a design practice shaped by thoughtful, ethical decision making. With this project, a close collaboration with Breathe Architecture, we delved deep to understand how we could do something that was different, market-appropriate and an exemplar for Melbourne—not only as a well designed building, but as a subtle provocateur in a global conversation about ethical building practice.**

**Ben Shields  
Architect, DREAMER**

Australia’s developer-driven model is in crisis. The ethics of the approach to housing and the quality of outcomes are routinely questioned by the community—and rightly so. Some of the undesirable outcomes include massive CO2 emissions, environmental degradation, deforestation, and damage to community, not to mention subpar buildings that don’t serve the needs of residents and, in some instances, aren’t safe.

In the fashion industry, where issues are similar, it’s heartening to see that conversations and media attention on ethical design and production have led to positive change. Local examples include Kow Tow, Kuwai, Arnsdorf, and A.BCH, whose ethical processes are marketed explicitly as a key feature of what they do. Unfortunately, despite similar conversations being in full swing about ethics in the construction industry, they have yet to yield significant change.

So, what might an ethical framework look like for housing production in Australia, specifically Melbourne? What are the key features to creating an ethical building when using a profit-driven approach? Firstly, it helps to have a clear understanding of what we mean when we talk about ethics in architecture. The definition I find most useful is Jeremy Till’s, from his book “Architecture Depends”. He quotes Emmanuel Levinas’ description of ethics as “assuming responsibility for the other”. In the context of a commercial apartment building, “the other” can be viewed as the occupant, the community and the environment. In essence, those not present at the decision-making table.

When we look at examples of ethical architecture globally, we see collaborations between organisations with aligned goals and a shared vision. High-profile examples include Kéré Architecture, who’ve done wonderful work with humanitarian groups

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in Africa using local technologies and people to design regionally appropriate public-health buildings; Alejandro Aravena and Elemental, whose human-centred approach to community research has led to the very successful and low-cost “half a house” model. Locally, Breathe Architecture—collaborators on this project—have long been involved in Nightingale Housing, which works with local architects to create sustainable, well designed housing that focuses on community development.

Critical in Melbourne, too, is an architect team and developer with a shared desire to deliver a building of high ethical standards—not just high profit. These groups also need to play a role in a bottom-up approach that helps to educate the community and potential purchaser, so they can discern the good from the bad.

Respecting the Environment

With climate change a considerable global challenge, the design decisions for 388 Barkly Street stemmed from our goal to minimise C02 emissions produced during construction and through on-going use of the building. We’ve been extremely conscious of the materials selected for the project, and where possible we’ve removed or reduced the use of high-embodied energy materials, such as steel, concrete, aluminum and porcelain.

The scale and shape of the building (relatively low and flat) presented an opportunity for a large solar array. Micro generating entities like Barkly Street form part of a growing decentralised network of generators, which strengthen the grid and increase renewables in the market. Solar also significantly reduces electricity bills for residents. Any additional energy will be supplied through a 100% renewable energy connection. Integrated with this system is a highly efficient centralised hot-water system, powered by the solar array.

Respecting the Community

Inner-city apartment living has wonderful opportunities for connection to infrastructure at reduced cost. Dense urban areas are key to successful public transport, and public transport has a host of benefits. Barkly Street is highly connected to public transport via tram and train to the city, as well as buses (which are great!) to Westgarth, North Fitzroy and Clifton Hill. Additionally, nearby paths link to the CBD, Fitzroy and Abbotsford via the Capital City Trail.

Buildings and other urban-scale design interventions are around for such a long time, when we get them wrong, it’s costly—but when done right they can enable and strengthen connections to local community and infrastructure.

We like to imagine the heritage exterior of Barkly Street as an unfinished poem to which we’ve been lucky enough to add a stanza. The building, constructed in 1923 is a typical example of a Brunswick textile factory from the inter-war period, and we’ve worked with our heritage advisor to preserve and celebrate it. In many instances we’ve actually removed non-original elements, effectively returning the building to a condition much closer to its original state.

As a methodology for supporting the local community, we’ve been careful selecting materials, appliances and fittings, using locally made products where possible to support ethical Australian businesses and makers. For a few select items, including the terrazzo tiles, we couldn’t find a suitable Australian-made product and instead chose high-quality products imported by local companies.

Respecting the purchaser

The impact of architecture on people cannot be underestimated. Buildings and spaces are the backdrop

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of our lives and a framework for cherished memories. As architects, we have an ethical responsibility to get these things right. It’s more than just a professional obligation, it’s morally important.

The following paragraphs detail our holistic approach to design—critical to which is an involved and passionate development team, striving for a rounded outcome that is more than a beautiful space.

Well-being and Biophilic Design Principles

A set of principles we work with regularly, including on 388 Barkly Street, are those of Biophilic Design, devised by Terrapin Bright Green. It’s a framework that aims to strengthen humankind’s innate connection to nature through simple design strategies that have been shown to improve happiness and well being, and reduce building-related sickness. It helps to explain why activities like camping, surfing, bush walking, swimming in the ocean, boating on a lake—and even more commonplace things like strolls in the park—are so desirable for their restorative effect. Though the term Biophilic Design is relatively new, the principles it describes have been used for a long time.

Some key patterns used in Barkly Street fall under the heading “Nature in the space” and include: visual connection with nature (views to native planted landscaping from every bedroom); dynamic and diffuse light (skylights and voids that let in sun and shadow, which shifts over the course of the day) connection to natural systems (extensive native-planted atrium); and thermal and airflow variability (natural cross ventilation with north-south connections).

The large amounts of internal and external timber flooring, timber fins and island benches were also consciously included and fall under the heading “Natural Analogues”, with the pattern “Material Connection with Nature”.

Spatial Experiences

What makes a comfortable home? What makes an inviting space? As a key underpinning we have focussed on the journey through the home and the spatial experience this entails. Holistically imagining comfort, function and generosity of the important spaces as well as transition spaces – finding simple things that make living a pleasure.

At DREAMER, we’re particularly conscious of spatial diversity and the experiential qualities of the spaces we design. 388 Barkly street’s subtle (and sometimes more dramatic) changes to both the apartments and common areas—through details including skylights, floor-finish changes and wall-finish changes—helps to provide a curated series of experiences that help to augment function and provide a touch of delight along the way.

Sound also plays a key role in how intimate or how public spaces can feel; this is something of which we’ve been especially conscious through the design process. We’ve specified a better-than-required level of acoustic control between the apartments, designing the second stories of the two-storey apartments to have as much carpet as possible for acoustic control, and visual and physical comfort.

Each bedroom window has both blackout and translucent blinds. We have included stunning timber floors and island benches that are rich, evocative and soft. The kitchens are highly designed and considered spaces too. For instance, a focused light integrated above the kitchen bench subtly guides people to this communal part of the home— a simple visual cue that invariably brings people together.

Each apartment has a mudroom or entry cupboard with a generous sisal mat. Select bathrooms intentionally have skylights over windows to help create an intimate and different feeling. Lightwells in

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the single storey apartments are complemented by a built-in bench-seat that doubles as storage and an ideal place for quiet reflection or reading.

Collaboration Play & Humour

Can architecture have a sense of humour? Put simply, yes. Despite the serious ethical considerations inherent to architecture, we see moments of fun, joy and play as critical to life and therefore a necessity in any building. We loved visiting MONA and experiencing a collection of beautiful spaces that at once celebrated art but weren’t afraid to be playful and have fun, and we spent time considering how this thinking could be applied to 388 Barkly Street. We’ve made a couple of small interventions in regard to way-finding and signage, and we collaborated on 3 ‘moments’ within the building with some local makers and designers to bring some outside ideas in, as well as making the creative endeavour richer by non-architects being able to contribute and offer some creative direction.

Material Longevity

An ethical building at its core has longevity in mind. Understanding this led to many of the decisions made. Longevity in how the building will last, how it will be maintained, and how the materials will age. Buildings need to last for 100 years. Expert crafting and quality materials are crucial to that longevity.

But more than that, the tactility—the touch and feel of the building—is an important part of our experience and interaction with home, that adds richness to our lives.

Concepts of Void

This is the high architecture stuff. As architects, we like to use conceptual and poetic ideas to channel the focus of our work into outcomes that match up with the

values set out for a particular project. For Barkly Street, the idea of the void, or ‘taking away to give back’, was very important and played out at varying scales. For instance, at the scale of the whole building, there’s a central planted void that allows for a landscaped heart that ventilates and lets in light. At the apartment scale, we’ve used voids to create large light-wells that bring light in—and beyond that, at the room scale, skylights allow additional light into the kitchens and bathrooms.

Ben Shields  
Architect, DREAMER

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01. The fashion industry has moved significantly in both the transparency of its processes and how these might be altered to benefit the planet. Whilst the construction industry is complicated in different ways, there is are lessons here about the market's growing appetite for sustainable, ethical products. Pictured below: A.BCH's Momentary Field installation by Marsha Golemac.



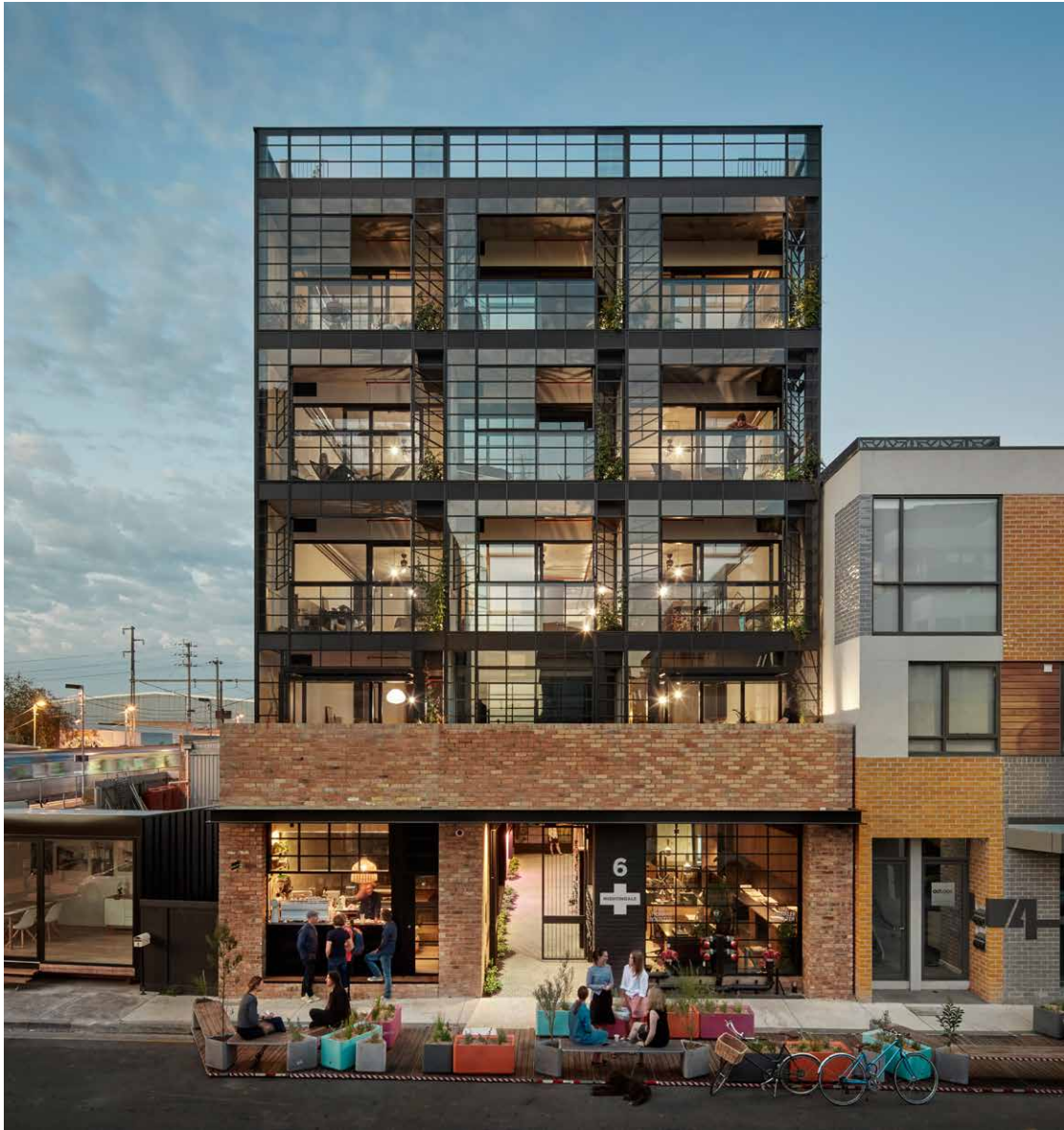
02. Jeremy Till's book, Architecture Depends, describes the complicated forces which contribute to the built environment.



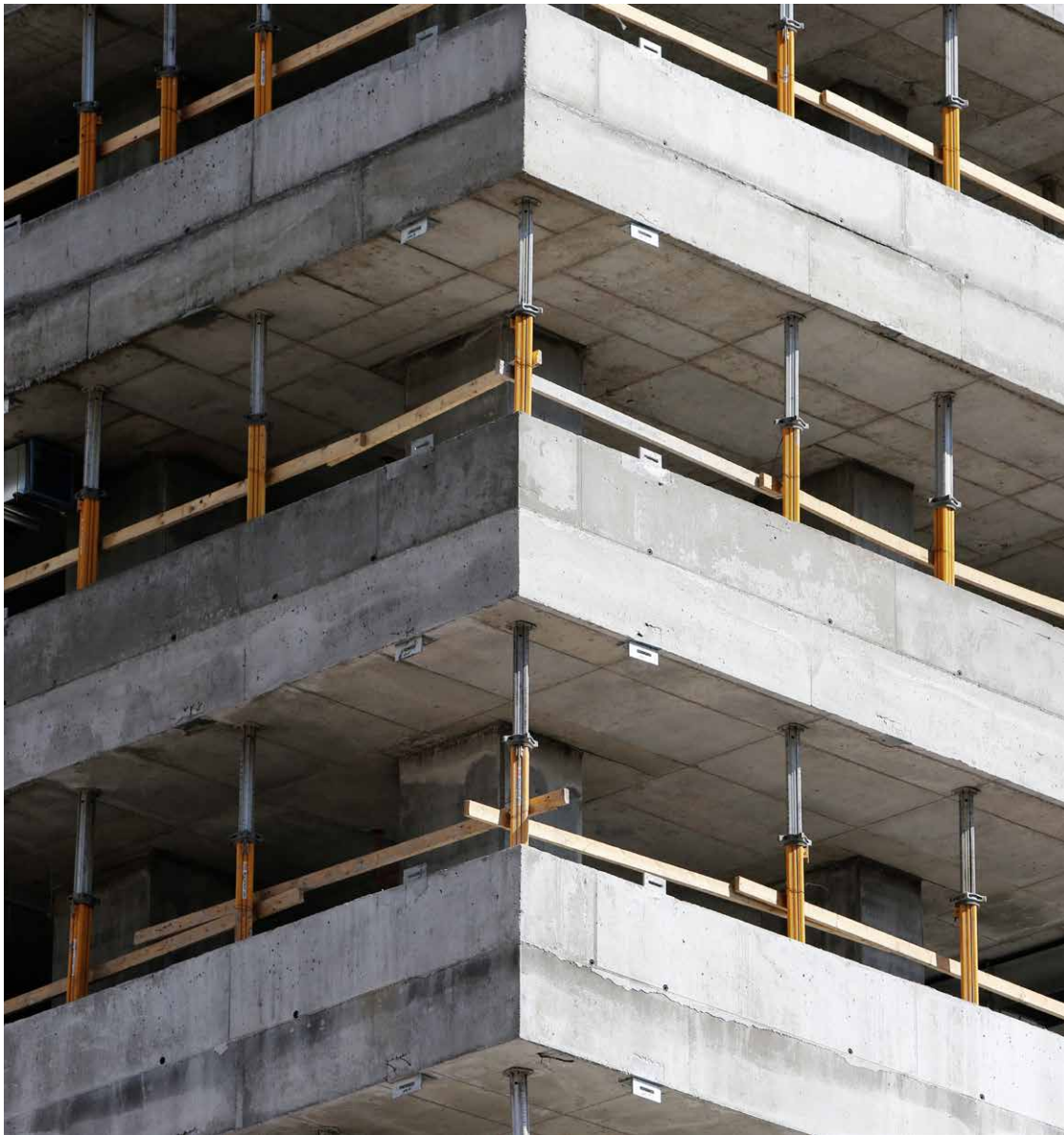
03. Kéré Architecture have designed a number of successful, community driven, climate appropriate buildings in Burkina Faso (and elsewhere in the world). Guided by Francis Kéré who was born and grew up in Burkina Faso, they are sympathetic buildings that help explain the importance of connection to local people and material. Pictured below: Gando Primary School, Burkina Faso.



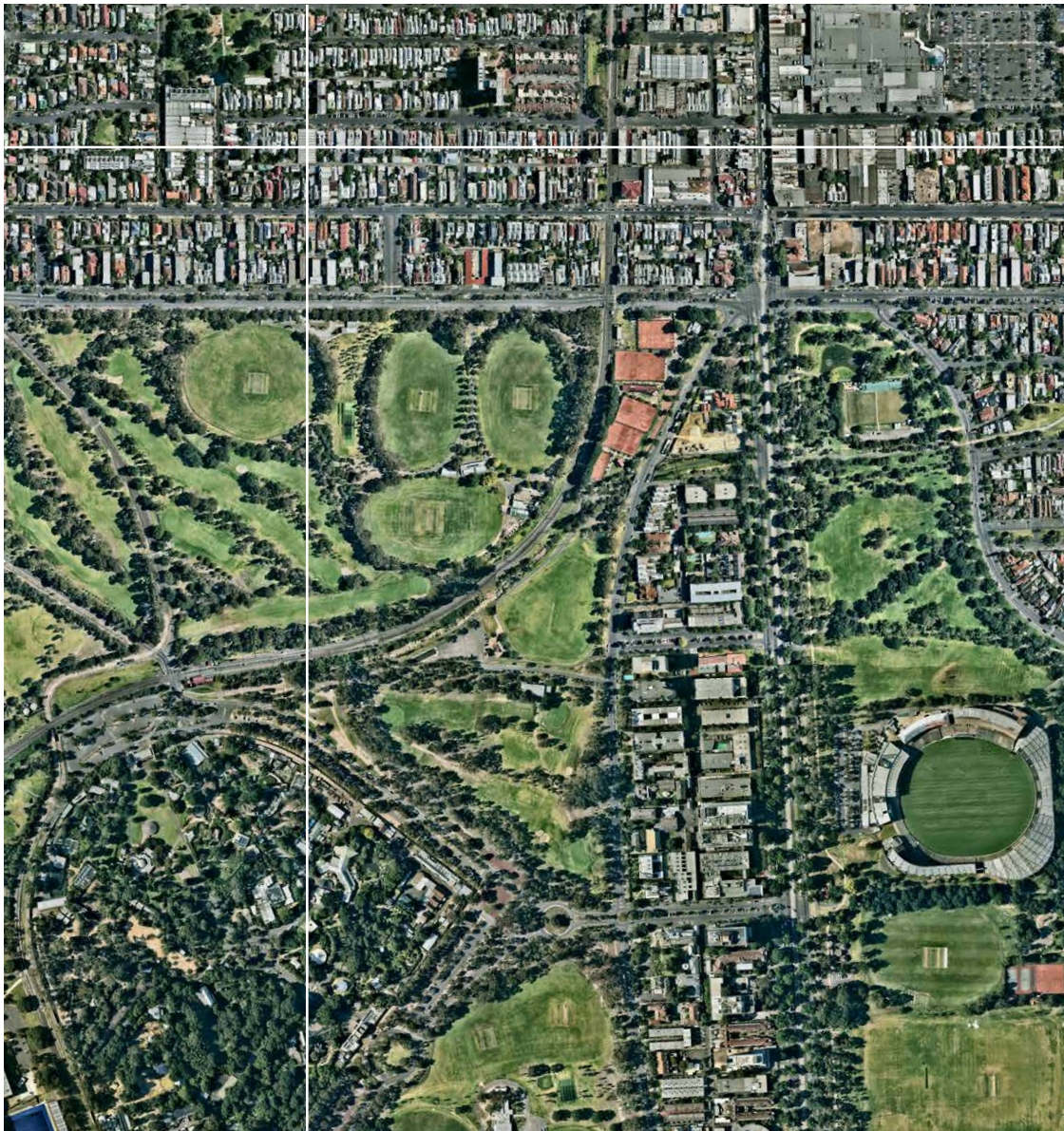
04. Nightingale Housing (established by two directors from Breathe Architecture, Jeremy McLeod and Tamara Veltre, in collaboration with other local architects) has helped to develop a growing collection of socially and environmentally sustainable buildings in Melbourne's North. Pictured below: Nightingale 1 by Breathe Architecture.



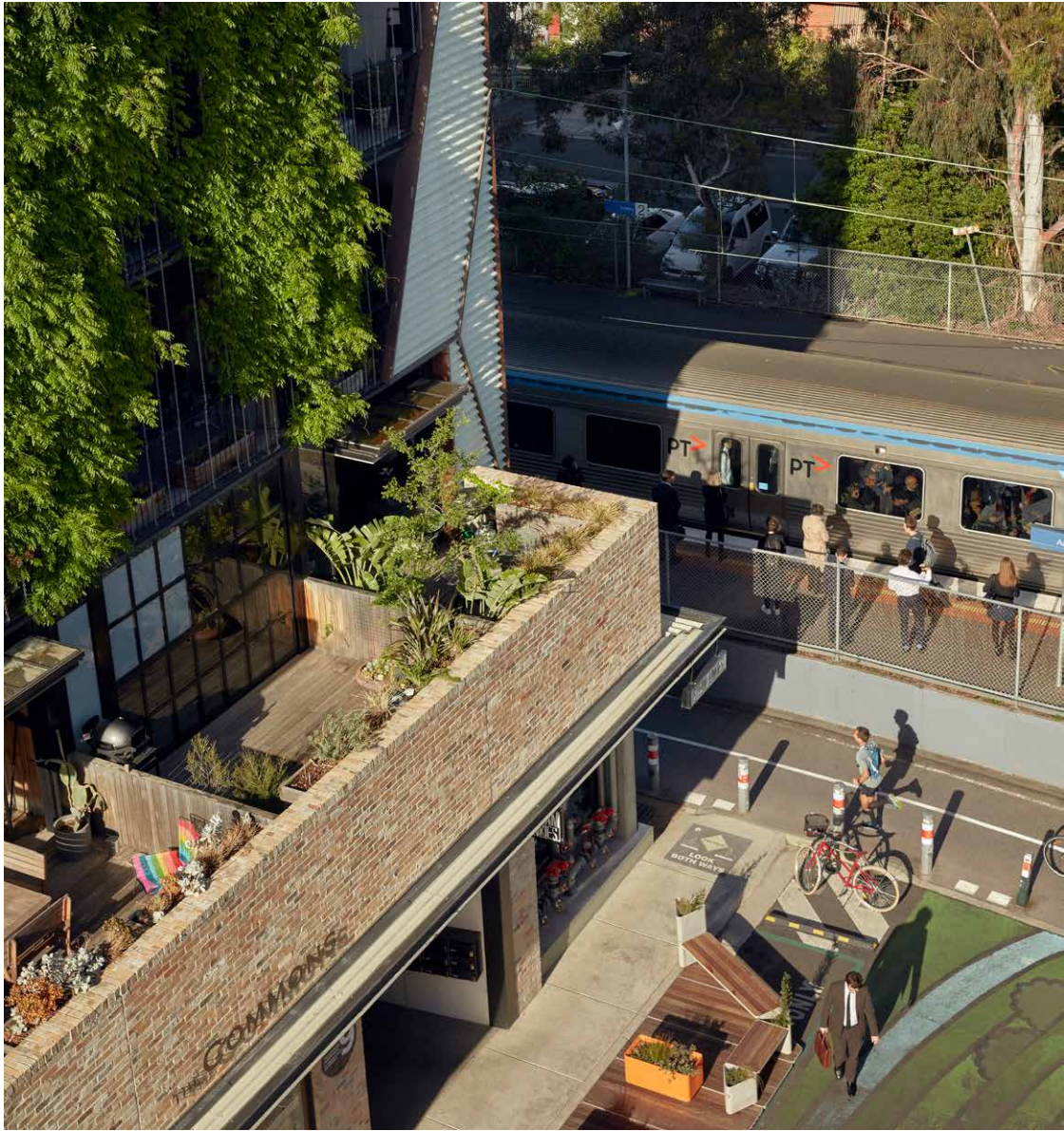
05. Due to its durability, concrete is the most widely used building material in the world—but its ubiquity makes it the no.1 carbon-concentrated material in existence, making it a significant contributor to environmental degradation.



06. 388 Barkly Street is connected to trains, buses and trams, as well as a number of walking and cycling paths. And a staggering amount of parkland — over 200 hectares.



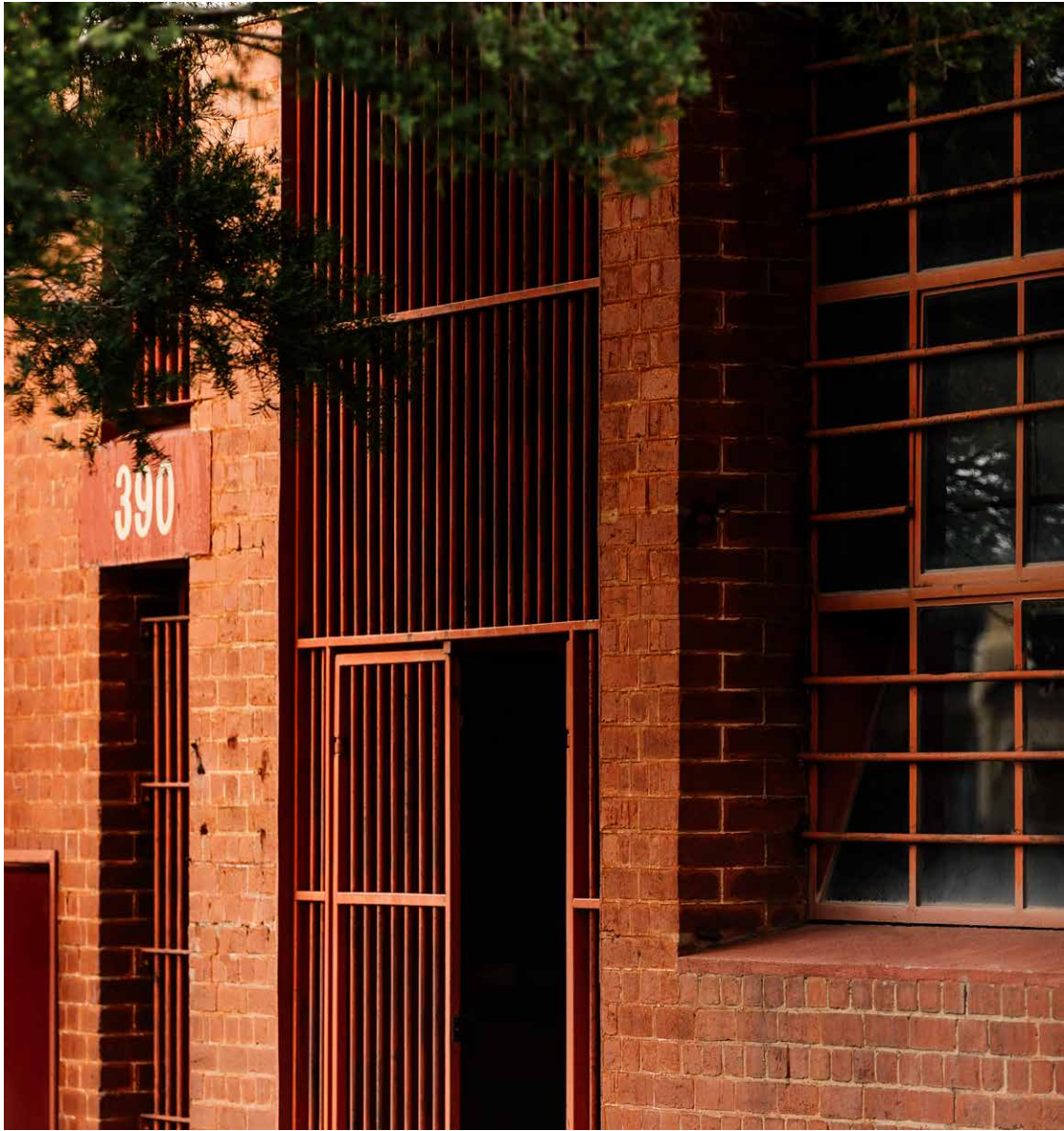
07. The Commons, designed by Breathe Architecture, is a wonderful example of sustainable urbanisation and how buildings can form connections between the local community and infrastructure. Pictured below: The Commons and Anstey Station.



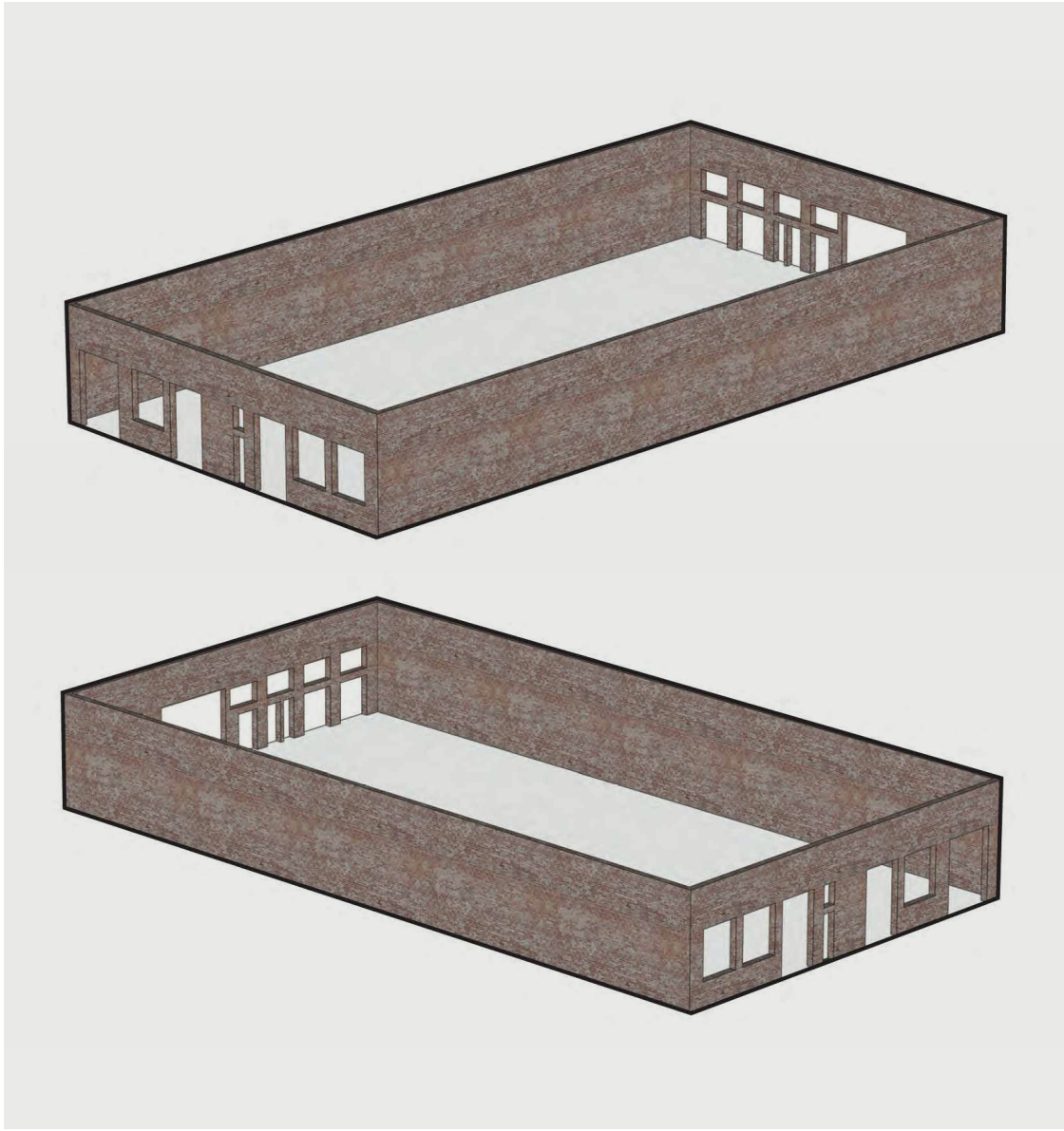
08. Great buildings stand the test of time for decades, centuries even. But sometimes they must adapt to suit a new context. In a sense, architects are custodians as much as creators; when working with an existing structure it's crucial to nurture its soul and respect its origin. Pictured below: The Singular Hotel, Patagonia.



09. 388 Barkly Street's brick façade dates back to the inter-war period, when the building was a textile factory. The delicate use of steel speaks to an era of crafting and style that's rarely seen these days. Pictured below: The existing red brick façade.



10. Brick façades such as this building's are rare historical landmarks that should be treasured. Our design process involved stripping the shell to its original state, then carefully restoring it. Pictured below: Early models of the existing brickwork.



11. Brunswick has a rich history of local brick manufacturing that's reflected across the neighbourhood's streetscape. We're pleased to continue that tradition and celebrate the industrial heritage of the area. Pictured below: John Glew's Brickworks originally located on Barkly St circa. 1866, image courtesy of the State Library Victoria.



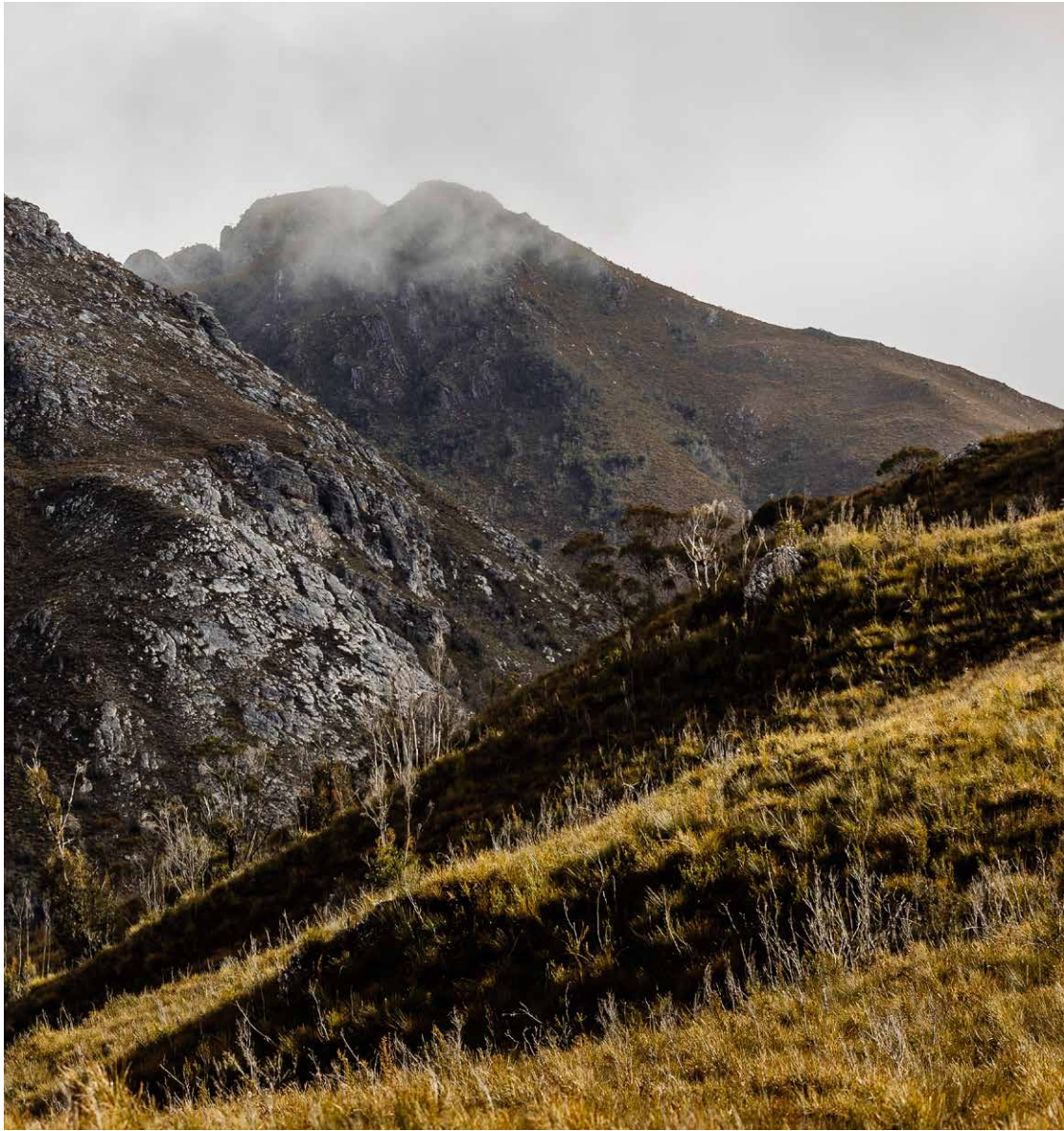
12. A new generation of local makers is emerging in Melbourne, with emphasis on sustainability and human-focused design. As ethically motivated architects, it's our responsibility to engage these designers. Pictured below: Rowan McLachlan of Rowsaan, who have been engaged to design and build custom door handles for 388 Barkly Street.



13. The nuanced elements of a space’s design can often go unnoticed on a conscious level (perhaps that’s when architecture is at its best), but they have immense effects on the ways in which that space is perceived, felt and used. Pictured below: *Blue Bottle Coffee, Kyoto*, 2018 by Schemata Architects, photography by Takumi Ota.



14. In essence, biophilic design is guided by a very simple principle: bring the elements of the natural world—and the physical and mental benefits they confer—into urban spaces. Pictured below: South West Tasmania photographed by Adam Gibson.



15. Maintaining a connection to nature is essential to wellbeing. Observing shifts in light, temperature and seasons, and having a tactile relationship with organic life, can be highly beneficial to physical and mental health. Pictured below: Bedroom, Town Home G01.



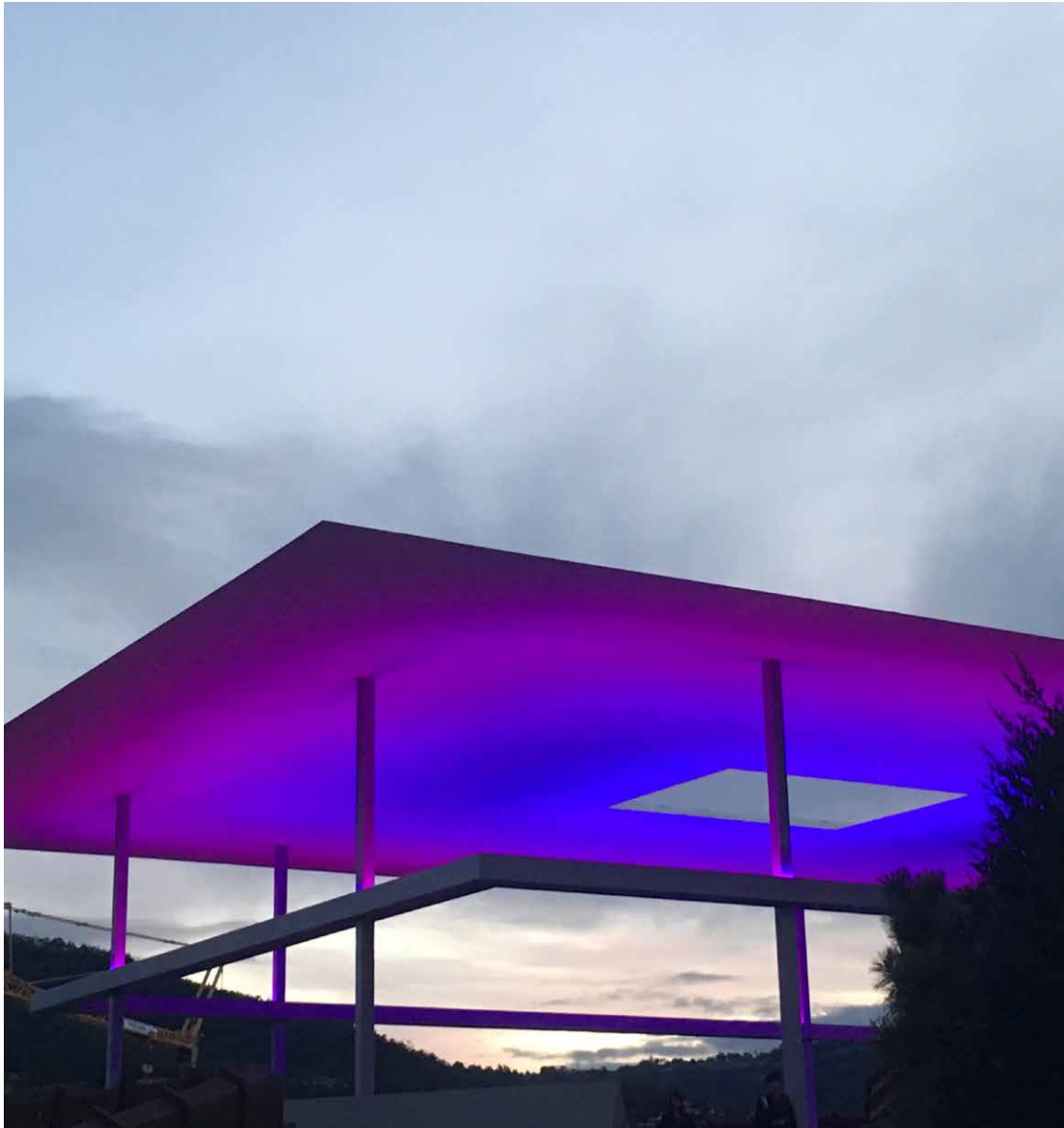
16. It's the simple, everyday objects that make life at home a pleasure. The way materials feel—the smoothed surface of a bench, the weighty materiality of a door handle—it's these elements that connect us to where we live. Pictured below: *The Handshake of a Building*, 2019, custom door handle by Rowsaan.



17. Playfulness matters, too. It may seem inconsequential, but including curious and playful elements in the home can bring joy, delight and intrigue. Pictured below: *Bivalve*, 1969 by Isamu Noguchi. Image © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York / ARS.



18. Beyond its intriguing approach to curating art, MONA itself is curious and brilliant. From the ritualistic arrival by water, to the ways in which exploration is encouraged, to seemingly minor details like signage, MONA is a deeply layered experience. Pictured below: *Amarna*, 2015 by James Turrell.



19. Each project is an opportunity to collaborate with like-minded professionals. On this project, we had the pleasure of working with Fletcher Barnes and James L. Marshall (pictured below) of local design studio BMDO.



20. Amongst other lovely and poetic features, Boyd’s clever assignment of multiple uses to certain spaces gives the house a generosity, that would not have been possible otherwise (what Australian architecture essay would be complete without a mention of Robin Boyd?). Pictured below: *Walsh Street*, designed in 1957 by Robin Boyd.



01. Photography by Lillie Thompson (@lillie\_thompson), installation art direction and styling by Marsha Golemac (@marshagolemac), image courtesy of A.BCH (@abch.world)
03. Photography by Erik Jan Ouwerkerk, image courtesy of Kéré Architecture (@kerearchitecture)
04. Photography by Peter Clarke (@peterclarkephoto), image courtesy of Nightingale Housing (@nightingale.housing)
05. Image courtesy of Pexels (@pexels)
06. Image courtesy of DREAMER (@dreamer.lab)
07. Photography by Tom Ross (@tomross.xyz), image courtesy of Breathe Architecture (@breathearchitecture)
08. Photography by Cathy Moore
09. Photography by Adam Gibson (@adam.gibson.photo)
10. Image courtesy of DREAMER (@dreamer.lab)
11. Photographer unknown, image courtesy of State Library Victoria (@library\_vic)
12. Image courtesy of Rowsaan (@rowsaan)
13. Photography by Takumi Ota (phota.jp), image courtesy of Schemata Architects (@schemataarchitects)
14. Photography by Adam Gibson (@adam.gibson.photo), image courtesy of the artist
15. Image by MR.P Studios (@mr.p\_studios) in collaboration with Rory Gardiner (@arorygardiner)
16. Image by MR.P Studios (@mr.p\_studios) in collaboration with Rowsaan (@rowsaan)
17. Image courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, image © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York / ARS (@noguchimuseum)
18. Photography by Ben Shields (@worthy.dreams)
19. Photography by Coco and Maximilian (@cocoandmaximilian), image courtesy of BMDO (@\_bmdo)
20. Photography by Gavin Green (@gavin\_\_green), image courtesy of the artist

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Architecture and Interiors  
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388 Barkly Street,  
Brunswick

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