

# CONCRETE PLANS

It's hard to imagine the stuff of pavements can be transformed to create a nurturing family retreat, but this award-winning Melbourne home proves that, in the right hands, it most certainly can.

BY ANNEMARIE KIELY PHOTOGRAPHED BY EARL CARTER

THIS PAGE: in the LIVING ROOM, Arflex Jules (left) and Jim armchairs by Claesson Koivisto Rune from Poliform Australia; Cassina 194.9 coffee table by Piero Lissoni from Space Furniture; custom black steel bench and fireplace; Scenes on the Death of Nature IV artwork (1986) by Anne Ferran. OPPOSITE PAGE: in the ENTRANCE, polished plaster walls, oak floorboards and custom sculptural painted steel stairs. Details, last pages.



OPPOSITE PAGE: in the FAMILY ROOM, *Arflex Ben Ben sofa* by Cini Boeri from *Poliform Australia*; *e15 CM05 Habibi tray tables* by Philipp Mainzer from *Living Edge*; *B&B Italia Harry ottoman* by Antonio Citterio (used as a coffee table) and *Fat-Fat tray* by Patricia Urquiola, both from *Space Furniture*; *Lumina Flo floor lamp* from *ECC Lighting & Furniture*; *blue-and-white Two Stools* by Doug Johnston from *Criteria Collection*; *Silkyway rug* by *LE Limited Edition*.

**R**aw concrete architecture can, in the hands of the unpractised designer, look like a “mildewed lump of elephant droppings”, to pilfer one of Prince Charles’ disparaging remarks about London Brutalism. Especially when the requirements of formwork (the moulds that set the concrete) and the reaction of composite to site conditions are not expertly controlled. But when placed in the hands of a master, and Japanese architect Tadao Ando must be the undisputed sovereign, concrete radiates a timeless sanctity that few materials can match. Is there a more perfect example than the Pantheon in Rome?

Melbourne architect Michael Leeton is a consummate manipulator of the medium, as shown in this Melbourne citadel badged the ‘Twig House’ — a structure whose woody name, worked from the eucalypt battens that filter light into its inner chambers and the woven wicker folly at its door, belies its ballsy constitution and colour. This building’s massing of grey forms, behind a curved wall cast with the texture of a tree — the outcome of oak formwork — tells that the stuff of pavements can embed sensory thought.

“Yes, it does seem contradictory that something so gritty and pedestrian can feel so nurturing and natural,” says the architect, standing within the entry cavity of the house he conceived as an inhabitable sculpture. “We love concrete and we did lots and lots of prototypes before the project started — trialling different mixes, using different formwork, building little walls.”

Using ‘we’ in deferential reference to interior designer Allison Pye and builder Len Bogatin of LBA Construction, Leeton says that he brought his long-time “collaborators” on board early to aid in the continual refinement of a complex construction premised on feeling cocooned. “The clients provided a meticulous, succinct brief,” he says, describing them as a visionary, socially engaged couple seeking immersive connection to landscape in an introspective structure. “The idea was that this ground plane looked inward — felt safe — and that the second storey exploited those amazing distant [city] views.”

According to Leeton, the clients had occupied the sloping site for three decades but had latterly determined its 1980s architecture too inflexible for the ebb and flow of extended family. Rather than renovate, they decided to raze it and start again. “They’d built houses before, so they’d been through the process,” says Leeton. “We did some loose sketches, showing how the house might look and flow. They loved it, fully entrusting the team once engaged.”

Attributing this trust to a business acumen that knows how to make decisions and privileges the artist — the clients, who wish to remain anonymous, are committed philanthropists — Leeton explains that the three-level house came together quickly in an L-shape plan that positioned a tower at each end of its arms. Of the curved monoliths that now coset sleeping quarters in their turrets and sitting rooms at ground level, he says, “They are the foundation of the house. They sit autonomously within the building and are expressed with tapered edges, as if weathered over time — a sense of archaeology expressed in their elemental monumentality.”

Between these pillars, the architect sequenced living rooms in a layering of positive and negative space — “meant to feel like moments” — that never allows the full scoping of building scale but directs sight lines into a landscape designed in collaboration with Taylor Cullity Lethlean (TCL). Leeton fashioned “transition zones” to frame vistas onto TCL’s painterly plantings — coral-bark maples fluorescing against beds of scalloped slate — stitching both public and private space into a seamless organism that secretes stairs into its labyrinth of polished cave.

“It represents hours and hours of keeping form blank,” says Allison Pye, lifting her eyes to a floating timber ceiling in the front salon that conceals a tangle of technology and mechanics. “Everything is hidden in this house.”

That diligent concealment and ubiquity of concrete demanded a restrained hand from Pye, who furnished with a transparency and barely-there tone that took nothing away from the art content or its container. The one anomalous flash, or ‘flesh’, is found in the kitchen, where a piggy-pink dining suite seemingly derives its palette from an adjacent Dale Frank painting. “It’s just a happy coincidence, a bit of softening,” says Pye. The interior designer then shows its “quieter” two-tone, two-table counterpart in a neighbouring dining room that defers all colour to a wall-draped stretch of art painted on-site by Fraser Anderson. “If this was one table in one colour, it would consume the space,” she says. “There’s something so uninviting about the endless spread.”

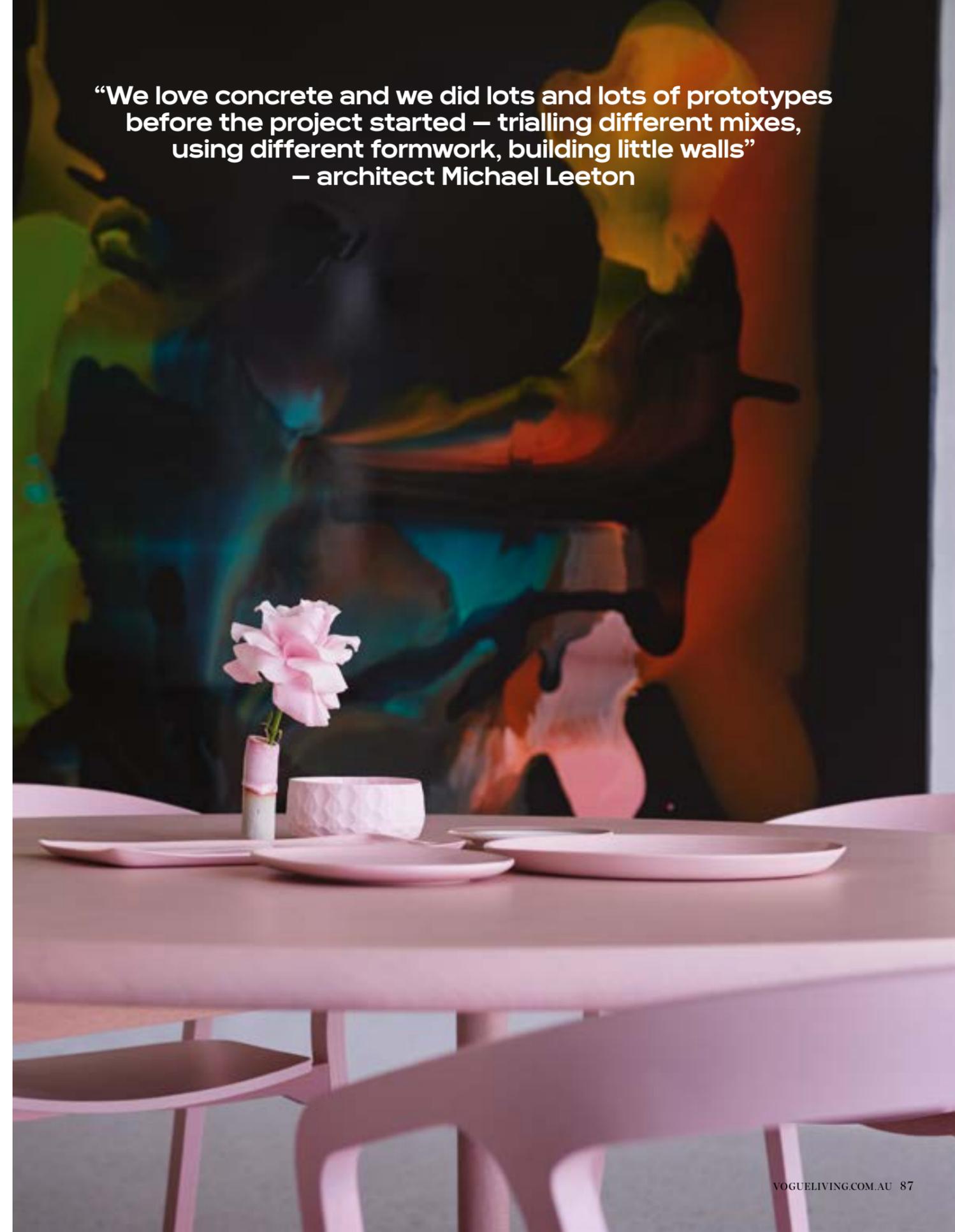
Asserting that “it is not an ostentatious trophy house, but a real family home”, Pye directs passage to an intimate study dressed with artist John Kelly’s 37-piece opus, *Red Rocks* (2015–16) — a master-work recording the same stretch of coast over a 12-month period. It is the perfect full stop to a tour of architecture that brushstrokes an empathetic buffering of monumental form by extraneous forces. “Each one of Kelly’s investigations is spectacular,” the designer says, likening the individual intensity to Leeton’s time-loaded detail. “But the magic emanates from the whole.” *VL*

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THIS PAGE: *in the GALLERY, looking towards the kitchen and family room, linen curtains by Clearview Sun Control; Mask 3 sculpture (1979) by Joel Elenberg; Nexus sculpture (2016) by Jason Sims in background.*  
OPPOSITE PAGE: *in the KITCHEN, Mattiazzi She Said dining chairs by Studio Nitzan Cohen from District, with custom colour-matched Tambootie table from Agostino & Brown; artwork by Dale Frank.*



**“We love concrete and we did lots and lots of prototypes before the project started – trialling different mixes, using different formwork, building little walls”  
– architect Michael Leeton**



THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT: in the KITCHEN, *Mattiazzi She Said* counter stools by Studio Nitzan Cohen from District; custom joinery by Planera Joinery; glazing by European Window Co; Barazza cooktop and V-Zug steam oven with Qasair rangehood. On the OUTDOOR TERRACE, custom dining table made by Motto Furniture & Cabinetry; Potocco c37 Egao chairs by Toan Nguyen. OPPOSITE PAGE: in the STUDY, e15 Sloane table by Philipp Mainzer from Living Edge; Hay About a Chair desk chairs from Cult; Matter Made Discus 2 pendant light by Jamie Gray from Criteria Collection; Red Rocks artwork series (2015–16) by John Kelly.



THIS PAGE: in the ENSUITE, *Apaiser Haven* bath; *Vola* tapware; *Barbera Bronze* table in background. OPPOSITE PAGE: in the OUTDOOR ROOM, *Paola Lenti* Swing seat by Edward van Vliet from Dedee; *Riva 1920 Clessidra* cedar stool by Mario Botta from Fanuli; *Gervasoni InOut Ghost Out* armchairs by Paola Navone from Anibou; *Massproductions Tio* dining table from Luke Furniture; *Potocco 037 Ego* chairs by Toan Nguyen. Details, last pages.