Mel Bright of Make Architecture

Make Architecture skilfully balances the public life of the city and the private domain in its growing suite of carefully considered, highly crafted residential projects.

Words by Marcus Baumgart
Photography by Peter Bennetts
There is some magic being woven on a heavily treed site in Kew, Melbourne, the home of Make Architecture. A black-clad barn within this bucolic idyll on the banks of the Yarra is the place where a particular stream of carefully considered, highly crafted architecture is conceived and pieced together by founding director Melissa Bright and her skilled team.

And what of that architecture? The word “paradise” comes from the Persian words pairi, which means literally “around,” and daeza or diz, which can mean “wall,” “brick” or “shape.” Combined, pairi-daeza translates as “walled garden”: a traditional vision of paradise. Since its founding in 2006, Make Architecture has been crafting an architecture of paradise in the broader urban landscape of Melbourne and beyond. Walled gardens composed of bricks feature prominently in the oeuvre, it is true, but perhaps of greater significance is the alternating sense of surgically precise engagement with and separation from the urban environment in each project, stitched together with all the psychological moment that those opposing states can muster.

Such is the prodigious output of Make that our interview focused primarily on some works of the last few years. However, the experiments undertaken in the early years are still bearing fruit. Mel began with a mere bathroom-and-bedroom renovation. She and her collaborators have built their catalogue through a constant process of reaching beyond the constraints of each project, always extending out toward the city, confronting the issue of density at every turn. Hungry young architects of talent learn to translate constraints into opportunities, particularly with modest projects, and this was perfected as an art form by the early Make methodology.

A selection of houses Mel shared in our conversation demonstrates the Make ethos, personifying its quintessential art in different settings, with subtly different aims.

Local House, completed in 2014, took one of the banes of the inner-urban architect’s life, the statutorily required privacy screen, and reimagined it as the defining trope of the house. As with all of Make’s signature moves, the screen is exquisitely detailed and it serves more than one purpose. In addition to addressing overlooking requirements, it filters light and creates a unique outlook for the main bedroom and from the living room below. The walled garden is present and accounted for in this project, bookended by Mel’s favourite part of the house, the combined garage and studio. This part of the project is where the Make story really reveals itself, in the form of a neglected laneway. Mel started her career working on urban-scaled projects and she remains fascinated by the life and texture of the city. The perimeter of the walled garden in each project is explored to test its capacity to screen the private realm – the paradise beyond – while providing tantalizing points of engagement between private and public. In this case, the engagement lies in the client’s ability to open the garage to the laneway and allow local kids access to play on the ping pong table. The adjacent studio also directly addresses the laneway and yet, like the garage, it can be totally shut down and made private.

The “hose out” quality of Local House, with its robust concrete materiality and porous spatial engagement with the walled garden, is amplified in the 2016 Myrtle Tree House in Balaclava, Melbourne.
04 At Myrtle Tree House, old and new elements are carefully stitched together, sometimes distinct, sometimes overlapping.

05 Myrtle Tree House weaves around two significant trees existing on the site.

06 Perimeter House is bound on all edges by a vibrant industrial context of brick buildings.

07 Inside the industrial-inspired exterior of Perimeter House are spaces of refuge, seclusion and calm.
A long kitchen bench at House to Catch the Sun joins the dining area to the living room and emphasizes the length and size of the space.

1. Entry
2. Living
3. Kitchen
4. Dining
5. Study/bedroom
6. Laundry
7. Bedroom
8. Main bedroom
9. Verandah
10. Courtyard
11. Laneway entry
The defining challenge of the brief was to keep two significant trees and weave the house around them. Once again, the walled garden features prominently in the scheme, in this case formed by new walls as well as borrowing existing walls of varied texture and finish, with old and new carefully stitched together, sometimes distinct, sometimes overlapping. The house creates a series of interconnected internal and garden rooms that deftly wrap around and protect the two trees. The point of contact with the surrounding urban environment is expressed here by the curving cut-out of the rear wall, which allows a lower limb of a tree to reach beyond its yard.

The 2017 Perimeter House in Melbourne’s Abbotsford heightens the tension between a protected, private realm and robust, outward-looking urban engagement. The side wall of the dwelling contains a peephole window at child’s eye height, which can be opened from within to provide contact with the domain beyond the walls, while the kitchen window can be opened to the context entirely or visually shut down by a simple sliding panel. A seat is built into the wall on the exterior, providing amenity back to the neighbourhood, while the resident’s rooftop terrace extends a screened private realm. With these features, the occupants continually make choices, operating their dwelling like a machine – now open, now closed.

The 2016 House to Catch the Sun is carefully shaped to do what it says on the tin – stepping up to catch sunlight – while maintaining a low profile on the boundaries, once again turning a planning constraint into an expressive feature.

The 2017 Amado House is a contrast to many earlier Make works, which have demonstrated virtuosity with the humble brick solo, in that it is translucent, crafted of timber and other lightweight materials with expressed structure. With a client whose heart may still be in Kyoto, the Japanese influence on this house is explicit and entirely intentional, notably in the inclusion of an interstitial engawa (what an Australian might call a verandah of a distinctive type) wrapped around a skin of the eponymous amado (screens like shoji screens, but for external screening). In one fell swoop, Make demonstrates with the Amado House that it is not just all about tricky bricks as such, but about the exploration and expression of materials and their plastic capacity in a more general and searching sense.

If we see the trajectory of Make Architecture as holding these two things in exquisite balance in each project – the public life of the city and the private domain – then it seems essential that the practice continues to grow into larger projects of different types, while simultaneously never letting go of the design of individual private residences. Such projects are in the works even now. Seeing how the lessons learnt in one translate into the enactment of the other will remain a subject of fascination.

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