Local House

Knitting a house into its context connects it visually and socially with its neighbourhood. This house extension in Melbourne’s St Kilda was an opportunity to open the backyard with its local laneway to enrich the private and public experience. MAKE Architecture discuss a more civic approach to housing in the suburbs, and how lessons from the city can be applied at a smaller scale.

Architect MAKE Architecture
Photographer Peter Bennetts
Location Melbourne
Opening shot: Around the kitchen bench are three kinds of seating: barstools, a corner sofa seat, and, on the opposite side, the built-in dining-table seating. The kitchen ceiling and walls are painted black to reduce their presence, placing the focus of the room on the social activities within the space and outdoors.
nspiration for this project came from the way our clients live and enjoy life. Spaces are playful, conceived more like a favourite local café than a private house, reflecting a desire to connect frequently with friends, family and the local community. To this end, context and permeability were the focus when designing these new living and play spaces. And not just the built context – a given for any good building – but also its social milieu. What opportunities could we engineer to connect this family with their neighbours? And how could we create successful spaces for larger gatherings without building overly large rooms?

Working with an existing brick California bungalow, we have clipped a two-storey addition onto the back and built a garage and studio along the rear laneway boundary. The form and materials of the old are echoed in the contemporary gable of the extension and in the new brick and concrete work. However, beyond these formal connections, the new architecture is free to make the most of the site and orientation, and to fulfill its programme and brief.
Above: The north elevation of the addition is setback from the boundary to allow an L-shaped yard to wrap around the new living space. An indoor/outdoor fireplace creates a focus at the social heart of the house.
Below: MAKE Architecture create of client space-saving plans. In this kitchen and dining room, dining-table seating is built directly off the kitchen bench. Pushing the seat up against the bench saves the corridor space that exists around a free-standing dining table and chairs. And the connection between the table and kitchen is more social and informal. Dining chairs: Seb chairs from Jardan.
Creating new connections between the house and laneway meant we had to work against a cultural obsession with privacy. Residential town planning rules enforce building setbacks and screening, but this can result in isolation and unusable strips of land between the house and fence. When a site is inward-looking, walls and gates are often built for security. But, contradictory as it may seem, as soon as you open a site up, the neighbourhood becomes a safer place because of outlook and overlook between private and public spaces.

We believe that building closer and more connected communities has more benefits to residents than does maintaining total privacy. Architects and planners have been activating laneways to great success in the city centre, but not so much in the suburbs as yet.

The great opportunity on this site was the rear laneway. With a busy road in front, the lane offered an alternative entrance and pedestrian route to local shops and cafes. Our clients felt the same way, and were incredibly open as to how we might reinvent this edge. They wanted a sociable and welcoming home, and to treat the rear of the house as another site frontage.

This meant the new studio/garage would become an important part of the project, elevated beyond the standard residential solution. We have designed flexible rooms, where the garage can double as an activity room, openable both sides with large roller doors. Adjacent, and part of the same structure, is a self-contained studio with its own porch and neighbourhood seat right on the lane. A large picture window makes it appear more like a shopfront than a private space, and there is a familiarity developed quite naturally between resident and neighbour.

To reinforce this blending of public and private, we have continued bluestone paving from the lane through the garage and into the garden beyond. The family often leave the garage door open, and neighbourhood kids now casually pop by for a game of table tennis. There has been no graffiti on the lane walls to date. The neighbour opposite is so encouraged by its success that they are considering replacing their tall, fixed boundary fence with one that slides away.

With this new site entrance, we conceived the house extension as an open garden pavilion for living, with deep window seats and internal/external fireplaces, and
From the black and yellow kitchen, there is a long view through the studio and garage at the end of the garden to the laneway beyond. The visual and physical connection with the laneway turns a previously underserviced space into an amenity area, over time, neighbours may also open their backyards to it and make it a safer place.
The upstairs ensuite is a combination of yellow mosaic tiles, soft grey ceramic tiles, white porcelain fittings and a timber wall cabinet. The skylight floods the shower with daylight while the rest of the room has more of a cave-like quality.
Below: This view from the living room takes in a fun, geometric timber and steel staircase to a new loft bedroom. There is a built-in bookcase on the stair wall, and the room beyond is a second living room or media room.

a new bedroom suite upstairs. The extension is shifted off the north boundary to allow the garden to wrap around two sides. We have used off-form concrete to define a solid base, a reference to the masonry of the original bungalow. It serves as a heat sink for summer and winter, and reflects the desire to have a robust family space.

On level one, a decorative timber screen fills the end of the upper gable roof, giving warmth and contrast to the concrete, and shading the bedroom inside. The angled panels of the screen mediate the sun and control overlooking to the neighbours, while still providing distant views over the rooftops beyond. The gable reflects the form of the bungalow, but minimises the impact of the two-storey volume by treating it as an upper roof attic. Wrapping the roofing down makes it feel smaller while still providing all the internal amenities for the family.

At ground level, the kitchen/dining space opens completely to the backyard. The black ceiling and kitchen joinery recede into the background so family activity becomes the focus. The use of whiteboard paint turns a painted wall into a family noticeboard. Notes and lists in bright neon markers on the black wall enhance the feeling of a local café. Design elements encourage social interaction and engagement, such as the indoor/outdoor fireplace, pizza oven and landscape seat edges. This family loves having people over, so we wanted to make it a place with lots of ledges and spots to sit and relax.

To maximise backyard space, we have made the plan as small as possible. The only way to make all the rooms as small as we do is to activate all the edges. So instead of having a dining table in the middle of the space with circulation all the way around, we push it against the bench and make the bench part of the seat. Similarly, by making the whole façade edge deeper, we can fit a day bed and corner window seat, thus turning the kitchen into another living room.

The careful layering of the site has been achieved by two simple but key ideas: ledges to sit on, and views through buildings between public and private spaces. These two devices link the whole scheme together. From the laneway, a bench in one form or other traces its way right into the heart of the family home. This simple act of hospitality has a generosity of spirit noticed by all who pass along the lane.
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WEST ELEVATION:

CROSS SECTION:

PROJECT INNOVATIONS:

- Creating new relationships with suburban public space.
- Rethinking traditional patterns of privacy versus social connection with neighbours.
- Bringing civic concepts to a single residential dwelling such as built-in landscape seating, shop windows on the laneway and café-like spaces.
- Efficient floor planning to minimise built area and maximise yard space.
- Turning design constraints into design opportunities, such as the mandatory upstairs screen conceived as a design feature.

PROFILE:

MAKE is a Melbourne architectural practice with a strong focus on quality and a passion for good design. Our buildings are designed to respond to the seasons, and careful thought is put into how spaces are occupied. Believers in quality not quantity, we look for efficiencies and focus on ways that our buildings can make lives better.

Floor area: 216 square metres (house), 68 square metres (studio)
Site area: 474 square metres
Builder: 4AD Construction

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