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NEW WAVE DESIGN

PAGES 8-9

AVANT-GARDE ARCHITECTURE IS COMING TO A STREET NEAR YOU

6-7

PRIVATE PROPERTY:
EMILY POWER and
MARC PALLISCO

10-11

HOUSE OF THE WEEK:
ST KILDA
LOU SWEENEY

14-15

EASY LIVING:
FITZROY
KATHERINE TOWNSEND

16-17

NEIGHBOURHOODS:
COLLINGWOOD
KARIN DERKLEY

19

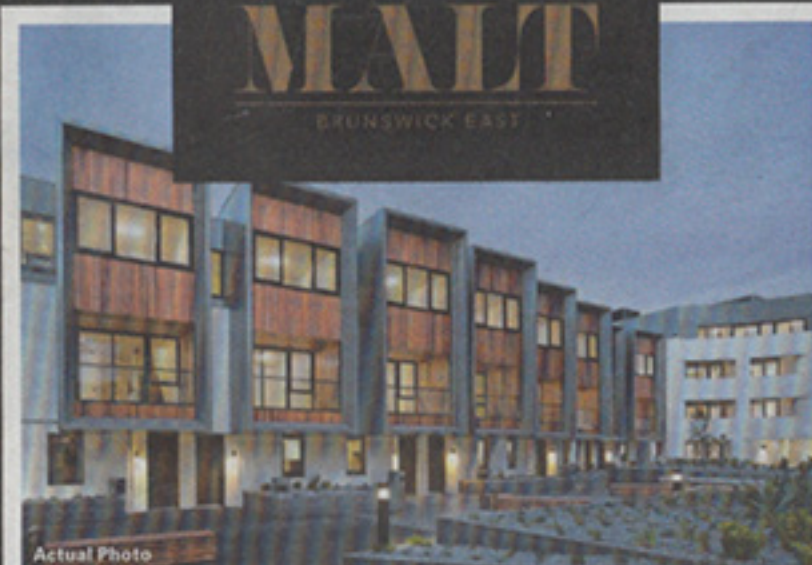
RENOVATION:
POINT LONSDALE
JENNY BROWN

20

PET PROJECTS:
ABBOTSFORD
CLARE BARRY

MALT

BRUNSWICK EAST



Actual Photo

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PROJECTS



PET PROJECTS

CLARE BARRY

Bright stars with big ideas in small packages

The playful use of a standard building material created a retreat and helped a family remain in the inner city.

Melissa Bright's Little Brick Studio is a creamy confection angling out of the back streets of Abbotsford, where it has drawn the attention of neighbours and peers alike. Bright, who is owner and founding director of Make Architecture, was named Emerging Architect of 2014 by the Victorian Institute of Architects. She spoke to Clare Barry:

We talk about this idea of delight, that a building might surprise you, and I don't mean another architect but just someone walking past. It's about playing with materials and trying to get them to do something unexpected or a different take on a pretty standard material that makes special or surprising moments in the street or in a house.

This project was part of a house "reduction" that was all about helping a family stay in the inner city. How do you create suburban amenity on an urban-sized site? The first part involved reducing the house footprint and opening it to outdoor space. The Little Brick Studio is a garage with a flexible studio space up top, initially for a teenage retreat but it could be a home office, a guest room or a granny flat. They wanted a house their teenage boys wanted to be in so they could live together and feel happy and connected but have the space to get away.

I've got this thing about bricks. It's a beautiful material, and even as a student I admired brick railway signal boxes and that kind of thing. I've done a couple of design competitions using brick, done tests with texture and designing brick screens. I've wanted to do a brick building for many many years and this was the first client I could convince. Obviously it was a really appropriate place for it and it was fantastic to get some of the "brick" in us out.

We call it almost our first public building. We've done a lot of house renovations in backyards but the second frontage and corner site were a great opportunity to do something that engaged a bit more with the larger context of the street and allowed us to do something more public. It has a lot of backs of houses and fences and garage doors and we didn't want it to be another garage that turned its back on the street. A lot of it came from engaging with the big brick commercial buildings on the other side of the road but being sympathetic to the houses behind. It angles down so we still get sunlight into the house and the neighbours', and bricks were about being inspired by the brick factories of Abbotsford and wanting to make our contribution to that.

There was always this desire that our projects would do more than just fulfil a brief, that they might be activators of change or engage with a larger context or make a contribution. Maybe the neighbours start to go "oh, maybe this is an address, a street, it's not just the back of a house".

There are a lot of planning rules and these can produce some not very attractive architecture. One of the things we try to do is use these constraints as a way to do something good, as the drivers for design. With the Little Brick Studio we had to reduce overlooking, so we put in vertical "fins" on the windows and deck so you can't see into the neighbours' backyard, but they create a cohesive form that engages with the street and also angles back down to the house.

I drive down there whenever I'm going in that direction just to see how it's going and it's lovely to see it still sitting there and being used by the family.

I've worked in quite a few practices, in Melbourne, the UK,



A different take on brick: the distinctive Little Brick Studio in the corner of an Abbotsford backyard was designed as a teenagers' retreat. It's a garage with a studio space on top and the materials are inspired by the local factories. Architect Melissa Bright (right) admits to having "a thing about bricks".

Photos: Simon O'Dwyer, Peter Bennetts



Kuala Lumpur, mostly on more civic, public projects, including with Lab Architecture in Melbourne, big apartment projects in China and five-star hotels in London. Those bigger projects have informed our work at Make, we talk about thinking big and building small. To us, sustainability might mean the idea of a "loose fit" – maybe a space can be recycled, growing and changing with a family's needs – and building small, quality things that are made to last.

The Little Brick Studio was packed with as many ideas as we could get in there, and now they're coming out in our other projects.

'The Little Brick Studio was packed with as many ideas as we could get in there, and now they're coming out in our other projects.'
Melissa Bright, architect

We're doing an extension to a house nearby, it's heritage at the front but wraps around the corner to the other street where we've created a new entry, bringing in that idea of activating the street. We call it social sustainability, creating neighbourhoods, maybe making a little porch or space to interact with



neighbours and the community. We've just finished a house in St Kilda with a studio-garage that has a porch that opens right onto the back laneway.

I really like doing houses, especially in the inner city on these tight, constrained sites, I find them really interesting. We have amazingly just won a new job designing a large apartment building in Sydney that has been given to us as a "significant" and emerging practice, and we're hoping to do it in brick. It goes to show that as a small practice you've got to make the most of all opportunities, even if it's a little garage.

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