AUSTRALIAN RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN
Houses
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Perimeter House by Make Architecture

Melbourne, Vic

An addition to a two-bedroom house in Abbotsford reflects the area's industrial aesthetic while working hard to offer sanctuary and suburban amenity.

Words by Hannah Wolter
Photography by Peter Bennetts
An inner sanctum offers protection – but not exclusion – from the urban environment.
Perimeter House is sited on the fringes of an industrial precinct in Melbourne’s Abbotsford, just a stone’s throw from both the hustle of Victoria Street and the lush Yarra River, and bordered by a carpark, a laneway and roads. The surrounding buildings are a fragmented mix of industrial, commercial and residential. This tricky junction doesn’t exactly exude domesticity and I can imagine that the existing 1900s house must have felt slightly out on a limb, enveloped over the past century by buildings of a more imposing scale. Homeowners Antony and Nicole and their two daughters had resided in the existing two-bedroom period home for six years before seeking an addition that would accommodate another bedroom and a new kitchen and living space. They perhaps got more than they had bargained for, but the result is a unique home that they are proud of.

As it now stands, the house acts as a mediator, making sense of the surrounding incoherent building typologies. A new two-storey volume at the southern end of the site is connected to the existing dwelling by a narrow volume, curved in plan, with a garden terrace on top. The overall effect is of a home that wraps around the boundaries of the site, protecting an inner sanctum complete with a pool. It’s a clever negotiation of competing requirements: to shield residents from the harsher realities of the urban environment but also to engage with the wider community. Such challenges suit Make Architecture’s modus operandi, and constraints were tackled opportunistically.

In its planning application, Make Architecture contextualized the addition in relation to the adjacent industrial brick building, so the design was not confined by the setbacks that one would usually have in residential zones. The architects saw opportunities for social exchange in the facade alongside the footpath on the western edge of the site, and by taking cues from non-residential buildings such as cafes, this brick facade is “activated” in multiple ways. An alternative entry in the centre of this long edge encourages interaction with passers-by, and devices such as operable windows allow the girls to chat with their peers from inside the house.

The character of the family’s existing home has been treated respectfully. While a lot of work has been done to the original house – new walls and windows included – it doesn’t look like the architects have really been there. However, when standing at the threshold between the old and the new, the curvaceous extension unfolds. I wonder what inspired the sweeping form of the narrow volume, which runs from the existing house, circumnavigates the pool and connects to the new wing. It’s a chicken-or-the-egg sort of question, as from this vantage point the pool appears to be the
While considerable changes have been made to the existing home, its character remains intact.

The brick facade draws on non-residential design to create opportunities for social exchange.
Yin to the building’s Yang. I’m told that the plan arose from the forces of the site, a desire to capture northern sunlight, to create a space that does more than connect the two main volumes and to retain the ability to see each member of the family from most spaces in the house. This proximity was a quality of the original dwelling that the clients were fond of. The volume works hard to achieve multiple outcomes – it’s a corridor, a music room, a homework space, a storage space and a place to sit.

A similar efficiency extends to other elements, including in the kitchen, where the pantry is housed under the recycled-cork and mesh-lined staircase, and at the pool, where balustrade regulations have been approached resourcefully and the pool edge doubles as a bar. As director Melissa Bright says, “Our job is to make it look like we didn’t have anything to comply with.”

The inclusion of a roof terrace is not always achievable, but here the neighbouring property is a carpark, so there were no issues with overlooking. The roof terrace provides a restful retreat. Hit-and-miss brickwork with graduated openings creates varying levels of opacity and depending on where you sit, this space can feel like you are right in the thick of it, with views to the city, or a secluded spot in the sun, among the treetops. The terrace was designed to hold an abundance of edible plants, and the bougainvillea will work its way over the ledge and spill out toward the street.

On this inner-urban site, the clients wanted to obtain a level of amenity that is similar to what they could get from a quarter-acre block in the suburbs. For Antony and Nicole it was important that the generous outdoor living area they had previously was retained. For Make Architecture, this was a design challenge that they had embraced before, with House Reduction (see Houses 94), which provided a model for achieving suburban amenity on an urban block. Locating the bulk of the addition at the southern end of the site and connecting it with a narrow volume effectively doubled the outdoor amenity, with outdoor living at both ground and roof levels.

At various moments during my visit to Perimeter House I’m reminded of the manifesto-like objectives that popped up on Make Architecture’s website as I perused their projects. These demands, both modest and ambitious, form a consistent ideology across the practice’s oeuvre of work, and they came together in my mind to form a mental checklist: Make a place to read a book (tick); make it catch the sun (tick); make it engage with the street (tick); make it part of the city (tick).
A resourceful solution to barrier regulations sees the pool edge double as a bar.

The roof terrace offers secluded areas, views of the city and a place to grow edible plants.

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Practice profile
A Melbourne-based practice focusing on design that responds to the site and the way people live.

Project team
Melissa Bright, Rob McIntyre, Emily Watson, Todd De Hoog, Grace McKellar, Bruce Rowe, Pei She Lee, Maia Close

Builder
Basis Builders

Consultants
Engineer: Hive Engineering
Landscaping: Make Architecture and Tim Nicholas Landscape Architect

Products
Roofing: Fielders Nailstrip cladding in ‘Monument’
External walls: Adbri Masonry concrete architectural bricks in ‘Ebony’; recycled bricks in Dulux ‘Tranquil Retreat’; timber screen and details in Dulux ‘Black Caviar’
Internal walls: Recycled bricks in Dulux ‘Natural White’
Windows: Breezeway aluminium louvre windows
Flooring: Concrete Colour Systems floor slab; Tretford ‘Silver Birch’ carpet; Comcork Walk Easy stair flooring
Lighting: La Lampe Gras light and bedside light from Luke Furniture; Anchor Ceramics Potter light; Menu Bollard lamp; downlights from ECC Lighting and Furniture and from Brightgreen; external lights from Richmond Lighting

Kitchen: VP Surface Solutions American white oak quarter-cut veneer joinery; polished concrete benchtop; Artedomus black mosaic wall tile; Fisher and Paykel integrated fridge; Whispair rangehood; Siemens oven, steam oven, integrated dishwasher and cooktop

Bathroom: Academy Tiles blue penny round mosaic (bathroom) and navy penny round mosaic (ensuite); Classic Ceramics Serizzo floor tiles; Arq fittings in ‘Chrome’ (bathroom) and ‘Graphite’ (ensuite) and Catalano Projections 90 basin (bathroom), all from Rogerseller; Vitra Mineralcast basin (ensuite)

Heating and cooling:
Cool Breeze Cascade C160 airconditioner; in-slab hydronic heating

Other: Hepburn bed and Artek Chair 66 chairs from Luke Furniture; Vitra Polder sofa; Frama Adam stools from Great Dane Furniture; Tait Jil dining table; Cado Teak System shelving

Area
Site: 264 m²
Floor: 195 m²

Time schedule
Design, documentation: 1 year 4 months
Construction: 10 months