

Reinventing the townhouse

September 5, 2014
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A new variation on the townhouse by architects David Carabott and Emily Gilfillan has resulted in a genuinely sculptural piece of residential architecture.



Visual texture and warmth: The courtyard at the core of the house is critical to its functioning, light and breathability.
Photo: Christine Francis

In the narrower backstreets of Toorak, where the help who worked in the big mansions once lived in modest weatherboard cottages, the decades of replacement and renovation by residents wanting to get their cars off the street, has led to streetscapes that, as architect David Carabott of Carabott Holt Turcinov observes, "are now typically dominated by garages".

Creating a large but submissive subterranean garage plus store, wine cellar and lift cavity underneath a new three-bedroom variation on the townhouse, was the starting point for a project that on a 300-square-metre site, has become a boundary-to-boundary benchmarking and genuinely sculptural piece of residential architecture rendered in concrete.

Carabott says the purposeful plainness of the street-facing facade, that has four dark and differently scaled rectangular interpositions for windows and doors as the only decoration, was influenced by the work of the fearlessly experimental Japanese architect Sou Fujimoto. In this case, "we were being minimalist and brutalist."



Photo: Christine Francis



Dramatically and daringly sculptural is this Toorak townhouse by architects Carabott Holt Turcinov.

Photo: Christine Francis

with what Carabott admits "is a very unexpected facade", was only marginally easier than getting the geometries of that street face to work.

"It was very complex to get the balance of the negatives and the positives right. We went through hundreds of tests and models."

How did they know when they'd nailed the arrangement that includes a projecting Juliet balcony that Gilfillan calls a "folly" and Carabott says works as a foil to anyone wanting to look into the master bedroom?

"When it stopped looking wrong," he confesses.

The give-nothing-away frontage was, he says, "about making a defensible facade" to a house that has no outlook but instead revels in a rich, open inner life focused on courtyards, double-level voids and flow-through spatiality.

Project architect Emily Gilfillan agrees that from the outside "it looks solid and very robust and it does have a strong presence on the street.

But inside, it has a great lightness and airiness.

"Basically, it's a big concrete cube out of which we've carved these beautiful internal spaces that all relate to each other."

The most critical space is a 4 X 3.5 metre courtyard set on the southern side of the building and on the same floor plane as the lower level interiors.

It allows all rooms to breath, casts interesting light into differently-volumed rooms and corridors and, Gilfillan says, is particularly lovely on dreadful 40 degree days.

"The building", according to Carabott, "is a journey through spaces and layers, and light and shadow."

The clients have wonderful collections of art and mid-century furnishings that, along with the touches of timber cabinetry, give the place visual texture and warmth.

Getting planning permission for this brave new terrace