

HOUSES[®]

THE RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE

ISSUE 60
\$11.95

simple pleasures

**beach houses, urban pads,
family homes and a treehouse**

ALLAN POWELL IN PROFILE



Wilson / JLMA / Cox Rayner / Andrew Burges / Molnar Freeman
Contech / ITN / Carr Design / David Langston-Jones / Rowan Opat

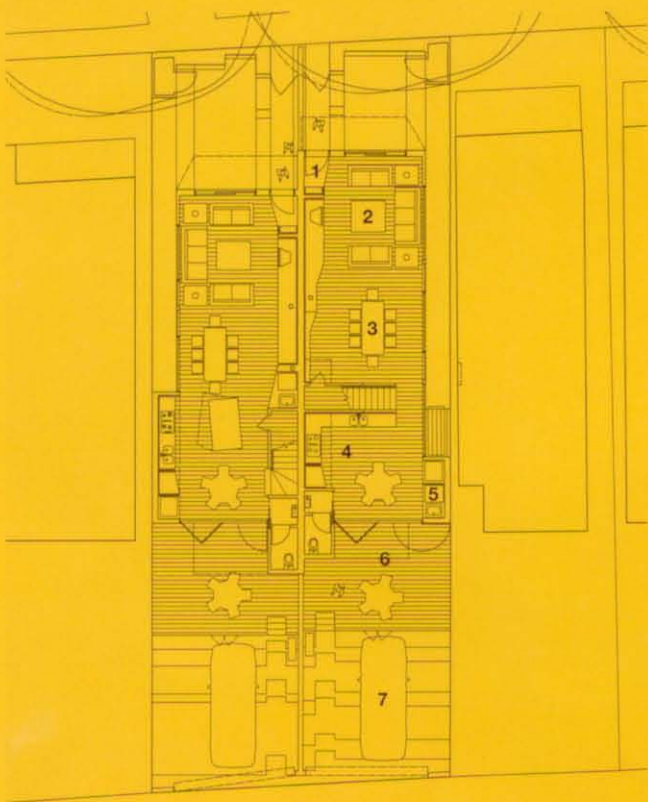
BRAND NEW FURNITURE



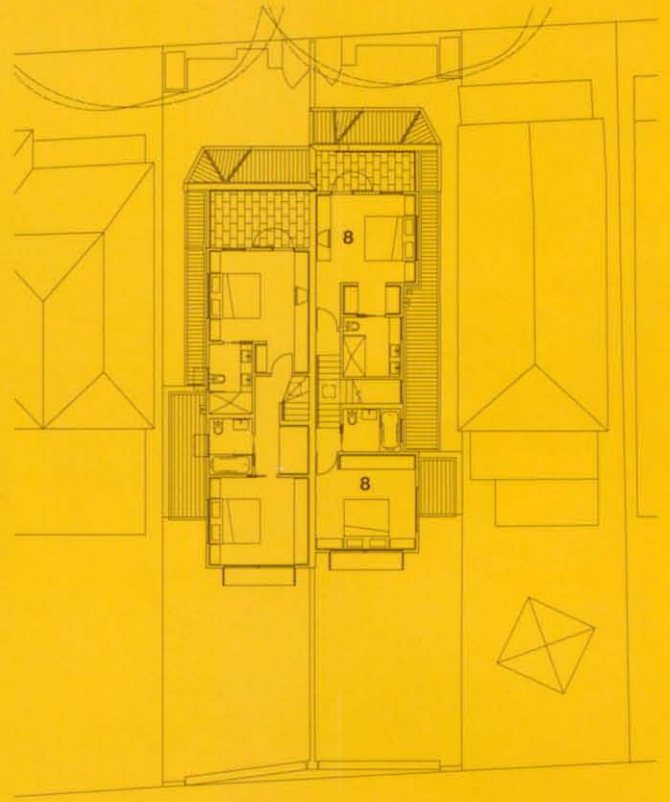


TWO COOL

Confronted by an unfavourable array of council-related limitations and a tight budget, Melbourne practice Rowan Opat Architects has designed two compact townhouses that are invested with uncommon character and some very inventive design solutions.



Ground floor



First floor

- 1 Entry
- 2 Living
- 3 Dining
- 4 Kitchen
- 5 Laundry
- 6 Deck
- 7 Off-street parking
- 8 Bedroom



PREVIOUS PAGE AND THIS PAGE: Perforated metal boxes surround the windows on the rear facade, providing protection from the western sun and mitigating overlooking concerns. OPPOSITE: The verandah angles up and then down as it passes across the front of the building.



IN JAPAN, urban residential architecture is often heavily restricted by local planning laws. To cater for strict height limits and building footprint restrictions, many houses in Japanese cities appear squeezed into a mould to fully exploit the possibilities of such prescriptive bureaucracy. Google architect Yasuhiro Yamashita's Mineral House if you want to get some idea of what I mean. Melbourne architect Rowan Opat was confronted with similar demands in the design of these two townhouses in inner-suburban Prahran.

"Initially, council contacted me with a picture of what the development had to look like," Rowan explains. "They'd pretty much decided what they wanted to see, and they wanted me to conform to that. But as an architect, I feel obliged to innovate, not conform." The architect's original idea was to set the project to the rear of the site, using the forecourt for garden space. Interestingly, this is the same basic program followed by a house built across the street, and Rowan thought that it would be a good model for the townhouses, given the mixed bag of largely unremarkable housing stock in the leafy street. The house immediately to the north is a heritage-protected timber Victorian, while the house to the south is also of a certain age but without explicit heritage protection.

Alas, despite the precedent, the local municipal burghers did not agree with the architect's thoughts. The council dictated that the setback for the new project must match that of its neighbours, that there must be a verandah across the front of the house that matches exactly the height of the two at either side, and that the verandah must be made of corrugated steel, like that of the neighbours. The council also required the upper level of the new development to step back further from the lower level, to avoid imposing on the older houses. It's a pretty tight brief of requirements to be imposed and it was not without hiccups.

"We went to VCAT [the Victorian Civil Administrative Tribunal] for an independent ruling on the requirements of the council," the architect notes. "They furnished me with a list of things that they supported and some things that had to be changed. I amended the plans and took them back to council, explaining how I had overcome every one of VCAT's requirements. They really had nowhere to go after that."

The resulting dual-occupancy townhouses are a curious twist from the obvious within the confines of these compromises. Rowan did indeed make a verandah out of corrugated steel that matched perfectly the height of the neighbouring verandahs. He also managed a modulation of that verandah, adding a rhythmic variation that angles up then down as it moves from one side of the project to the other. "Most people pass houses in a street in a car," he points out. "I wanted to create a variation that was almost peripheral as you drive past this facade. The line of the verandah just waves as you pass by it."

The house actually has four separate setbacks at the front. The two at the lower level marry up with the neighbours as required by council, and the two upper setbacks create balconies with glass balustrades that provide elevated private space for each townhouse. Rowan decided that, in keeping with the heritage-protected neighbour and, indeed, Victorian architecture generally, the lower level of the project would be finished in white – in this case, a gloss brick.

The upper level is corrugated steel finished in a deep green-grey that has the effect of further recessing the top of the building. The southern perimeter of the southernmost townhouse has another vertical articulation that is crenulated to step back from the fence of the neighbour, allowing northern light to reach the neighbour's window that faces the development.



Internally, the plan is reasonably straightforward, with open-plan living downstairs and bedrooms located upstairs. The spaces are fluid and practical, but this is a speculative property development, and the architectural rigour has really been applied most stringently to the external form and finish. One of the townhouses has a straight stair to the upper level, while the other has what Rowan calls a “Carlton terrace” stairway where the stairs rise halfway and then split into two. This allows for the crenulations in the southern townhouse.

At the rear of the townhouses, Rowan has offset the external walls of the two dwellings, with one running slightly longer than the other. As well as visually demarcating the two buildings, it also serves to straighten up the actual block. “Apparently in this part of Prahran, when the planning was originally done, however many years ago, there was an error in the survey, so all the east and west boundaries are slightly skewed,” Rowan laughs. “We decided to emphasize it here.” External window treatments in the form of perforated metal boxes encircle the rear windows, mitigating western sunlight and circumventing the issue of overlooking.

What Rowan Opat has achieved here is one of the most pure outcomes of contemporary residential architecture. It is one thing to have a huge budget, a wide brief, an exotic site and a client to indulge you – and some great architecture comes from these conditions, lest you think I am deliberately denigrating – but it is another thing entirely to extract the maximum architectural rigour from a tight budget, an ordinary site, a fiscally motivated client (as developers tend to be) and choking bureaucratic restrictions. But there is unmistakable rigour in these townhouses. When Rowan speaks of the process he went through to achieve this end, his frustration is obvious, but he can be rightfully proud of the invention in the final result. CHRISTOPHER MOORE

BELOW: The building's street elevation hints at the relationship between the two residences within – they are almost identical, but not quite. **OPPOSITE:** However, the double-return stair in the southern townhouse is a celebration of symmetry.







ARCHITECT

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PRACTICE PROFILE

Small practice undertaking residential, commercial and educational work.

PROJECT TEAM

Rowan Opat, Nathan Marshall,
Jon Henzell

BUILDER

Dwyer Builders

CONSULTANTS

Engineer Wallbridge and Gilbert

PRODUCTS

Roofing Lysaght Zincalume Klip-Lok 406 **External walls** Lysaght Colorbond Custom Orb in 'Woodland Grey'; Dulux 'Monastery Mantle' **Internal walls** Plasterboard; Dulux 'Grand Piano' **Windows** Capral 425 Narrowline double-glazed commercial windows with powdercoated aluminium frames in 'Night Sky' and 'Woodland Grey'; Atlite Envirolite skylights **Doors** Alspec Hawkesbury bifold and hinge doors; CS cavity sliders **Flooring** Victorian ash boards; Godfrey First Coreslan carpet in 'Jewel' **Lighting** Pierlite Zed cabinet light; Egoluce ceiling and wall-mounted lights; IXL Tastic heat lamps; Inlite fluorescent light **Kitchen** Rogerseller Cafe kitchen mixer; Abey Steel Queen undermount sink; Smeg dishwasher, oven and hotplate; Casair Universal rangehood **Bathroom** Duravit Starck3 toilet suite; Caroma Water Water cistern; Lanark Pandora 1800 bath; Rogerseller Logic tapware; Rogerseller Verso 50 wall-hung basin **Climate control** LG reverse cycle aircon **External elements** Radially sawn silvertop ash deck; Daniel Robertson tiles in 'Buff' and 'Tan'; Selkirk concrete pavers in 'Sandstone' and 'Bluestone'

TIME SCHEDULE

Design, documentation
6 months
Construction 6 months

SITE SIZE

371 m²

PHOTOGRAPHY

Peter Bennetts

LEFT: A single stairway curves up to the sleeping quarters on the first floor of the northern townhouse.