

FREE FORM

An extended riff on influences ranging across early modernist architecture, art and cinema, a new house in inner-suburban Melbourne serves as a celebration of our eclectic contemporary culture.



Architect's Statement

The client, an art gallery director, asked for a contemporary home on a narrow inner city allotment. The house was to have two bedrooms plus an extra study that could be used for visiting artists to stay in, and was also to include a private subterranean gallery.

The house extends over three levels; the entry is on the ground level, where all the living spaces flow around a courtyard, a sliced circle, a hint of a possible larger courtyard in an expanded field of scattered architectural objects and events. The placement of objects on this level works much like the layout of a pinball machine, with each surface hinting at possible routes that one could take through the building, sometimes encouraging a certain movement, sometimes not. The front study is for visiting artists and has an adjoining bathroom. Downstairs is a basement gallery, indirectly lit from the north front garden via a concrete

light shaft/skylight, which also doubles as a seat/sculpture podium.

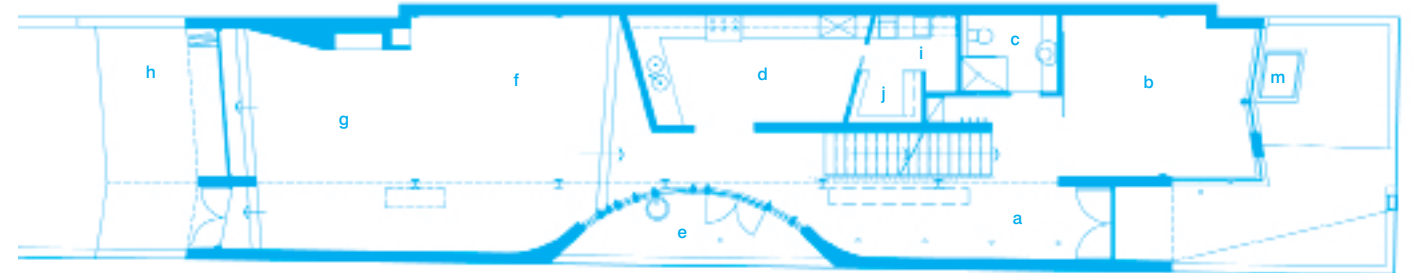
The house works a bit like a Rorschach test, enabling people to read into it what they like. Whether it be virtual (or actual?) images of a “?” or a number “2” seen in the front of the house, or other architectural images throughout the spaces, these reside as virtual and sometimes hidden images, like vague reflections in a crystal. The Rorschach test became a metaphor for architectural design and its relation to the supposed paradoxical duality of abstraction and representation. The house in some ways became an experiment in treading the line between representation and ‘pure’ abstract space/form. No matter how much one might endeavour to design pure space or form devoid of representation, it is impossible to fully eradicate it from architecture, as images always emerge like reflections, no matter how transparent.



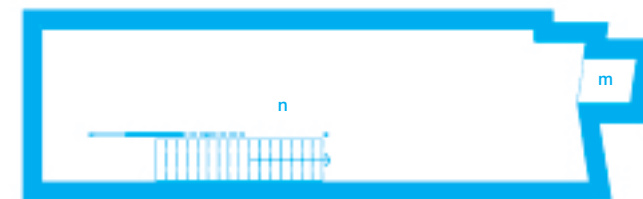
upper floor plan



ground floor plan



basement gallery plan



- | | |
|----------------|-------------------|
| a. entry | i. laundry |
| b. guest/study | j. pantry |
| c. bath | k. robe |
| d. kitchen | l. ensuite |
| e. court | m. skylight |
| f. dining | n. gallery |
| g. living | o. master bedroom |
| h. terrace | p. bedroom |

In this house for gallery owner Anna Pappas (for whom they have also refreshed a nearby gallery), Nervegna Reed continues its quest for an architecture that is imbued with Deleuzean multiplicities, containing every referent that they and their client bring to the project and delivering it in a way that impinges on us in a ‘felt’ rather than a ‘told’ manner. The ambition – fuelled by their involvement in the world of film – is as out of the ordinary in its comprehensive persistence as it is important in its implications for how we may deliver an architecture that is fully engaged with our current intellectual state of affairs.

The parti is simple enough: a terrace slice stretching from a road to a service lane; a section rising from a basement gallery, through a living floor to a withdrawing floor, with a balcony facing the road; a terrace overlooking a backyard. The basement is lit by a glazed-top sculpture niche or seating nook; the living floor presents a flowing sequence of spaces subdivisible by timber sliding doors, veiled from the see-through stairs by a full-height screen made of reo bars, defined by a large conversation pit and served from a cockpit kitchen which has a literal ‘V’ on its side opening, offering a ‘sliding scale’ of visibility. The upper floor has a

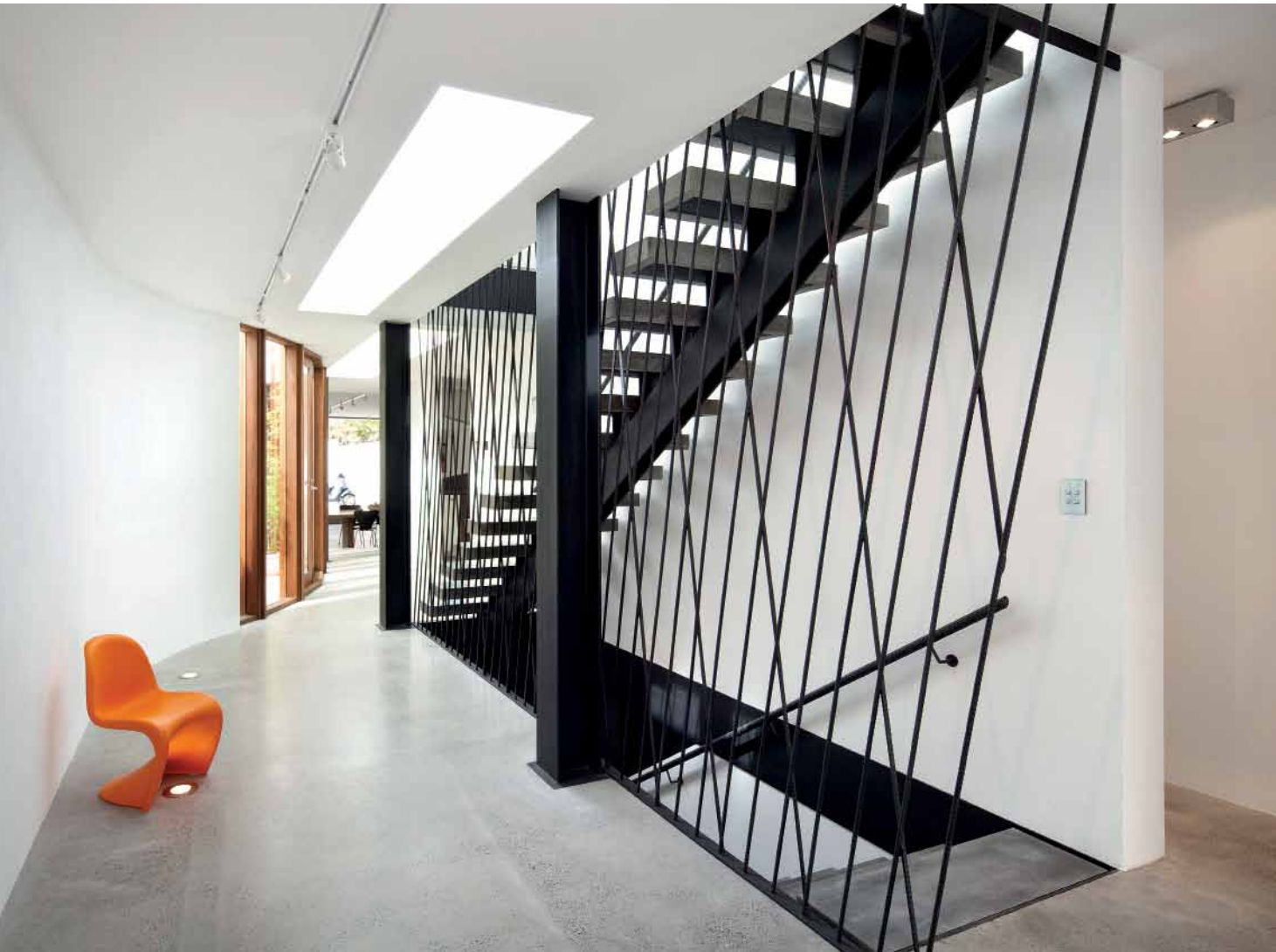
space at each end linked by a corridor of services, and can be variously opened and closed into a single or dual occupancy mode – as indeed can the ground floor. In mind was the pinball ricochet. In practice the eye is presented with multiple options, while the body moves easily through the throats between spaces. All of this is realised with a confined palette of materials: polished concrete floors contain the heating, stairs are polished concrete treads pivoted on a single inclined steel beam. The handrails are 40 millimetre diameter reo bars that are amazingly soft to the touch, and chime satisfyingly with the artful screen. Timber frames windows and doors, white render deals with walls and façades. This is the aesthetic of black and white film.

The architectural intentions are various and multiple. The arced light court is intended to evoke – as a fragment of a possible whole – a Roy Grounds courtyard. The veiled screen recalls the op art of Bridget Reilly or the early work of Frank Stella. The form of the building coils between Loosian anti-ornament façades and Le Corbusier’s exaggerated spatial grab in the Maison Citrohan, while the horizontal window bands in the front elevation channel Walter Gropius. The indented

01.

A stairwell screen of reo bars makes for a high contrast, high impact statement on entry.

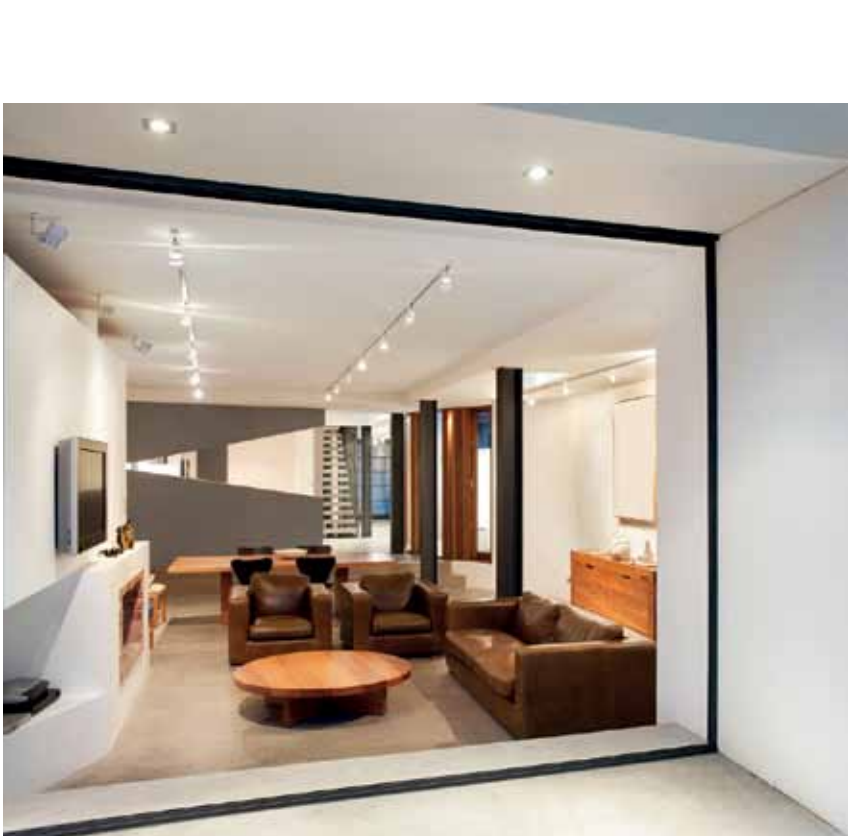
ar
066



01



02



03



04

02.
Living spaces wrap around a small light court, at right – a sliced circle faintly evoking the architecture of Roy Grounds.

03.
The ground floor presents a flowing sequence of spaces.

04.
A triangular reveal between kitchen and living area works to provide a ‘sliding scale’ of visibility.



05

This is an intensely humanist project, revelling in the complexity of our cultural makeup and embracing the contradictions of contingency that characterise our everyday lives.

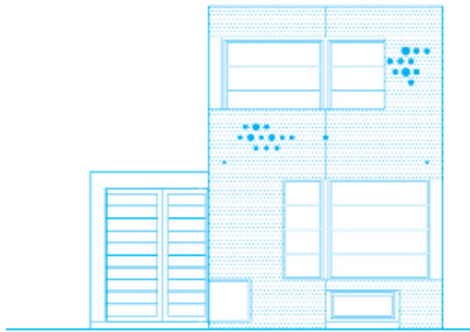
front façade is a homage to Gio Ponti’s Pirelli plan. How could all of this be carried in one far from over-blown artefact? The architect conceived of the house as a dispersion of objects on a virtual tabula rasa (another consciously challenging frame) that is then crimped by the constraints of plot size.

“Film teaches us about the way that we see objects and spaces,” says Toby Reed, fresh from five years of immersion in that world. “Humans are pattern makers. Nothing stops them interpreting everything, variously...” He describes how the front façade is seen as a giant “2” or a giant “?” Both interpretations are acceptable: no one can control interpretation. There is, believes Reed, arguing against Peter Eisenman (and Aldo Rossi), no ‘deep grammar’ in form. While working on the design, Reed played John Coltrane, thinking of his drive to purity. As Coltrane said: ^[01] “All a musician can do is get closer to the sources of nature and so feel that he is in communion with the natural laws.” But in spite of this, as he worked he was conscious all the time of making references, only recalling later what they were. Those characteristic clusters of holes in the façades, cunning de-scaling devices, also provide discreet outward views from the terrace without contravening overlooking regulations. They came floating into consciousness from Paul Schrader’s movie *Patty Hearst* (1988),

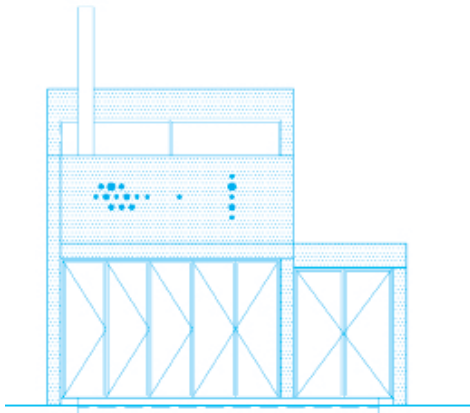
as well as the bullet holes in the Coen Brothers’ *Blood Simple* and Kathryn Bigelow’s *Near Dark*. For Reed, abstraction and representation exist on a continuum, not so much in opposition as two aspects of every situation. The references slide along other continuums, from international art, the canons of 1920s modern architecture, the post-war revival in Italy and a deep involvement in the local architectural culture, with much owed to the teaching of Peter Corrigan, Howard Raggatt and Ian McDougall. Reed’s practice has emerged in an appreciation of, and in contestation with, the admired achievements of peers: Rob McBride, Paul Morgan, Paul Minifie and Jan van Schaik, Callum Fraser – with Lyon Architects and Sean Godsell Architects as boundary riders.

Nerveгна Reed eschew narrative construction, striving for an inclusion of our cultural lives without labelling or sequencing. This reminds me of artist Richard Hamilton’s prescription for making a good collage: each image must be reduced to the point at which it is on the point of being unrecognisable. Then new combination is possible. The aims of this most emotionally and intellectually engaging house put me in mind of the practice of ‘post-production’ in film-making. In this house, the filmic achievements are so well judged that the combinations, the references, the objects and

north elevation



south elevation



spaces are experienced in delight. There does then seem to be a deliberately pragmatic cast to the architectural post-production. The Loosian purity of the front façade is capped off with a very practical flashing capping. The reverie of a Groundsian abstraction is halted by the sight of a Hopper head and downpipe of distinctly humble cast. The VCAT dictated off-axis setback of a skylight above the arced geometrical form forces a contemplation of its unfulfilled purity. What this indicates to me is the inclusivity of this approach to architecture: the intensity comes from parallel lines of post-production, a strong contrast to the obsession with architectural geometry alone that gives rise to concerns such as *The Poetics of a Wall Projection* – an entire book ^[02] devoted to the analysis of a fugitive wall in the house Wittgenstein designed for his sister.

This is an intensely humanist project, revelling in the complexity of our cultural make-up and embracing the contradictions of contingency that characterise our everyday lives. **ar**

Leon van Schaik is Professor of Architecture (Innovation Chair) at RMIT, from which base he has promoted local and international architectural culture through practice-based research.

FOOTNOTES

[01] Quoted by Jenniy Diski *LRB* Vol. 32, No. 16, 19 August 2010, p17

[02] Turnovsky, Jan, *AA Words Three 3: The Poetics of a Wall Projection*, Architectural Association 2009

06



ARCHITECT: *practice* Nerveгна Reed Architecture and ph Architects — *project team* Toby Reed, Peter Hogg, Anna Nerveгна — *project manager* Toby Reed, Peter Hogg — **BUILDER:** RM Building Services — **CONSULTANTS:** *engineer* Nettle Engineering — *landscape architect* — Pauline Enright *site supervisor* Daniel Alexander — **PROJECT:** *size* 364 m² — *time to complete* 12 months — *council* Stonnington — *client* Anna Pappas — *design software used* AutoCad, 3D Max, Rhino — **MATERIALS:** *walls* Double brick — *wall lining* Render — *cladding* Render — *paint* Dulux Vivid White — *paving* Brazilian slate — *windows* Double glazed steel framed Ironbark solid timber — *heating/cooling systems* Hydronic in concrete slab — *ceiling* Plasterboard — *internal walls* Render on double brick — *flooring* Polished concrete slab — *joinery* Concrete benches — *kitchen appliances* Viking stove.