

PLAT 8.0 *Simplicity*

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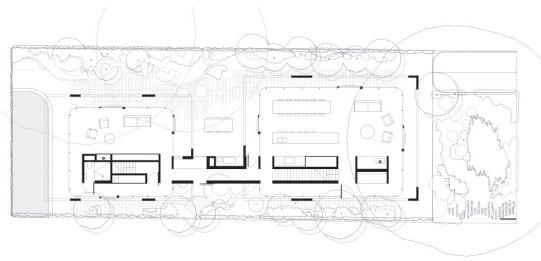


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Double Trouble

Jimmy Carter



Upper floor plan, top, and ground floor plan, bottom. Drawings and photographs of Hawthorne House courtesy Edition Office.

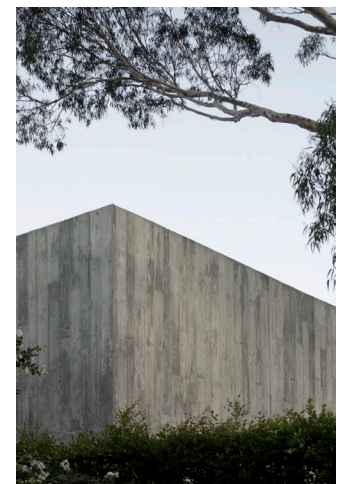
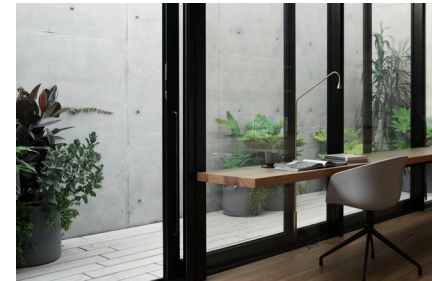
With tube in hand, I lean in close to the circular mirror and carefully paint each lip violet—top, then bottom. The spark of color within the grey expanse of the bathroom elicits something out of place, something improper but much needed. The room's rectangular shape is all covered in the same tile, directing attention to the animated openings at either end. At one, the skylight above the shower frames a clear blue sky and a gumtree. At the other, a wooden door suggests a corridor beyond. Strange, but for a room which only I inhabit, its focus is always somewhere else. This circular mirror is the one point of eccentricity, an image to stop on for me and my violet self. I pucker my lips. It's time to get out.

Disconnected from my parents' part of the house and separated from the living areas below, this bathroom is in one of two in the apartments where my brother and I live. Reflected along a central line of wardrobes and study areas, each apartment is made up of a bathroom and a bedroom perpendicular to its corridor. Together with a rumpus room, they sit between two exterior deck areas on opposite ends of the floor, dividing the level into doubles: two bedrooms, two bathrooms, two apartments and two deck areas for two siblings. The same doubling continues throughout the house: two stairs, two fireplaces, two living areas and two floors, all split between two elevated concrete blocks for two children and two adults. With only the underground garage and gym without a double, this house can often feel like a set of twins. Yet, like many relatives, physical resemblance isn't always enough to foster strong connections. With so many parts of the house broken down to a relationship with an other, it's the small distinctions that matter, not similarities. I check my makeup in the reflection. Making sure my face is right, I move out onto the deck.

I cross the threshold to outside and turn to slide the glazed door behind me. As the door glides, I see the reflection of the concrete behind me. Enclosed by three walls of grey and one wall of glass that reflects it, I have no choice but to look up towards the sky. Up is where the world is, around me is where my home is, and they don't necessarily interact. Within our half of the house, the long shower skylights and the tall deck areas are like telescopes that capture four picture frame views of the world above. With no windows on the walls to look out from, the only real "window onto the world" is my hand-held device, educating me about my own suburban street hidden below. Sitting atop one of the potted plants on the concrete paving, I crane my neck to the sky and tree above. Like camping at night with nothing to do but stare at the stars, this deck area disconnects me from the immediate context and focuses my attention on an environment much further away. Much like camping, the harsh ground doesn't offer enough comfort to stay for very long.

Noticing the two patterns that texture the grey walls, I take heed of concrete's irreversible youth. Blemishes acquired in its formation are part of its permanent texture and image; the holes and lines created by the formwork can't simply be smoothed over with anti-pore cream. These holes remind me of a boy from school whose pimples often run in perfect unison across his forehead. Four rows high, the wall's dimples cover these three planes of concrete in precise formation, never aligning, yet, never touching the formwork lines either. In this open cavern of concrete and its reflection, even defects appear designed, their incongruity precise. The two patterns seem to form one surface of meticulous inconsistency, like an unlikely cosmetic treatment that hides blemishes by blending them together. Against the purity of the fading sky, the surface of the concrete treats accident as opportunity, avoiding perfection and opting for happy, coordinated failure. My phone lights up and jolts in my hand. Jessie is texting me about tonight. I best get out of here, lest Mum and Dad catch me getting ready to leave.

As the gumtree in the front yard swings into view again with the afternoon wind, I know just how close I am to the front entrance. This gum is one of three large trees found on the north and east sides of the property. Their tops are captured in various locations by the house's vertical shafts (skylight and deck areas) and establish a direct relationship between specific tree and specific space. Where I am now, it's this gumtree; on the other deck, it's the oak tree; on my parent's deck, it's the black walnut tree. Like some sort of plant-based global positioning system, these trees mark my position and direction in the outside world, even if I can't see it myself.



Within these upper floors, you may not know what's going on around you, but you know where you are. Both tree and phone make that unavoidable, but only one is actually a part of this house. My phone is buzzing again, and I best make a dash for it. Daylight's wasting.

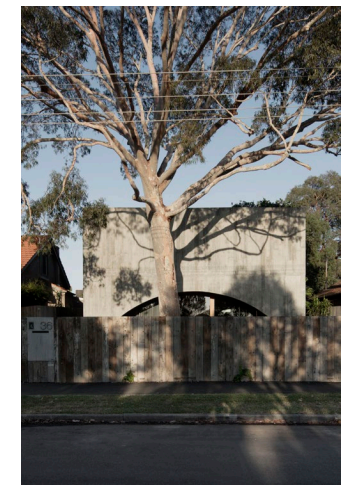
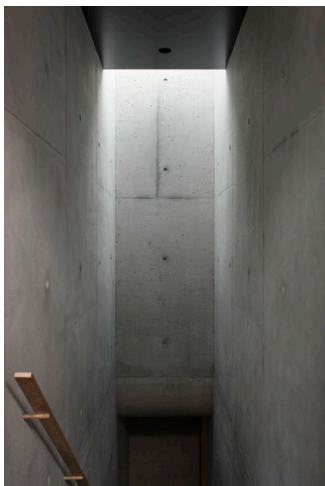
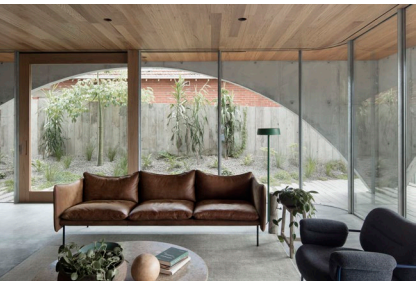
I move back inside, walking quickly through my apartment. Passing my bedroom and bathroom, I am confronted with the other deck area topped by the overhanging oak foliage. Light is streaming through it. I note that our level lends itself to the outside. Inside, movement flows between sources of external light, resulting in a true sense of repose at each terminal space. You are always moving inside, but you are always stopping outside. It's different downstairs. One moves freely around centralized stairs, kitchens, fireplaces, laundries, and cupboards, never being confronted with an end point until you reach the property's fence line. The huge concrete archways that hold up the second level of the house are set out from the continuous glazing, creating long awnings that frame low views through the house and garden. Like a glass house sandwiched under a cloud of concrete and wood, you can see everything, except what's above you. In opposition to upstairs, these low views allow only the bases of the large trees to be seen. In this way, both levels fabricate different polarized worlds; top and bottom, near and far, foliage and trunks, sky and ground, domestic life and foreign stars. You're either out there in the world or inside at home; there is no middle ground. Our suburban surrounds are never considered. Perhaps it's for the best. Hawthorn isn't Fitzroy.

I turn to go downstairs, knowing that leaving the house will be easy as long as Mum or Dad aren't on this side of it. The consistent doubling of space has sliced up the house along lines of age and privacy. Split vertically between communal and individual areas, and horizontally between children and non-children areas, the house has compartmentalized everything. Mum and Dad have their space, we have our space, and the four of us have a third. Privacy can be sacred, especially when you're sharing it. This may seem normal, but the simple determinism makes venturing outside one of your spaces nearly impossible, and any intrusion into my own realm a real affront. At seventeen, "still not adult enough" doesn't get you anywhere new. It's time I find some freedom where I can—outside. I'll have to get downstairs without being noticed.

I enter the stairway and am surrounded by concrete. The stairways are the true caves of the house. Totally grey, they are lit by small skylights that only frame the big blue. They are the disorienting transitional spaces between levels. I walk down and pop out near the front door. Here, surrounded by glass windows, I am in the open and my presence can be paren-

tally detected. I turn my head to look into the living room. There is no one. I venture further, and see Mum on the other side of the house playing piano and Dad in the pool. Even if I'm seen now, there is no chance of them catching me. The glass enclosures may suggest openness and extension throughout the two blocks, but the heavy framed doors don't make light work of it. The two interior areas on the ground level are visually open, but physically disconnected. I walk back to the front door and unlatch it. Slowly, I step out from under the concrete archway and into the sun.

From the front of the house I look back at the concrete facade. The perfectly imperfect holes and lines are gone, replaced by vertical bars of wood, like floorboards. Stopping half way up the façade, they cut the house horizontally between the impregnable upper level and the open ground floor arches. Out here, the concrete stands opposite its maker; the original Oregon pine formwork boards surround the house as the fence around the property. This house is two years old, and finally its landscape has grown in. I realize now that the exterior of the house has always been paralyzed, like a baby looking in the mirror, unsure whether the image in front of her is in fact *her*, or some sort of fiction. As I stand between fence and façade, I inhabit this spatial mirror, about to find my own way out of the puzzle. I look down at my phone and see my reflection on the screen. I'm happy with my lipstick. I open the gate and step outside.



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PLAT is an independent architecture journal produced by students at Rice Architecture. Its purpose is to stimulate relationships between design, production, and theory. It operates in a call-and-response format by curating architectural work into an open and evolving dialogue that varies from issue to issue. PLAT is a speculative catalyst for architectural discourse, a student-run platform on which the important issues in architecture today can be addressed and advanced.

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