

VEILED AMBITION

Architect Richard Kerr's flamboyant insertion into a St Kilda heritage streetscape is masked by a curtain of stainless steel mesh that is opaque by day and translucent by night.





PREVIOUS PAGE: Uplights add a striking sheen to the stainless steel mesh facade. **ABOVE:** The rear living space opens out to a small landscaped garden and outdoor deck. **OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT:** Glazing punched into the mansard roof allows natural daylight to spill into the kitchen and dining area. **OPPOSITE PAGE, RIGHT:** The two bedrooms on the mezzanine are linked by a slim walkway located above the kitchen.

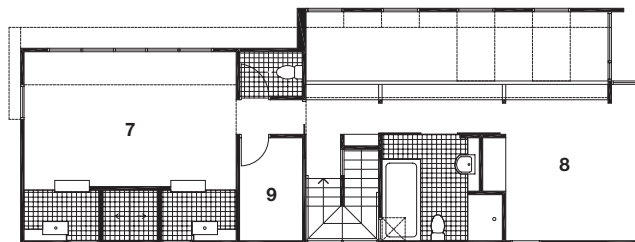
THE TENSION BETWEEN edgy design and heritage streetscape has been well resolved by architect Richard Kerr in this St Kilda residence. Constructed on a vacant block amidst a long line of Federation frontages, Kerr's two-storey townhouse stands out for all the right reasons.

"I'd done a previous house, in Armadale, which was in a heritage streetscape, and we'd tried to push the boundaries there. I figured that this one had the potential to push them even further," says Kerr, a Melbourne-based architect. With a largely open brief and a client prepared to take aesthetic risks ("He essentially said, 'I don't care if my parents hate the house; in fact that would be good'"), Kerr was able to create a house that is at once livable dwelling and architectural showpiece.

Its street face, an elevated "pod" structure that prefaces the more solid building behind, is its signature feature. Constructed of HardiFlex, with aluminium T-sections and a timber-clad base, the pod's external front wall is sheeted in a semitransparent stainless steel mesh – a German-made, predominantly industrial material that had not been used before in Australian residential design. Ironically, it was this innovation that ensured planning approval.

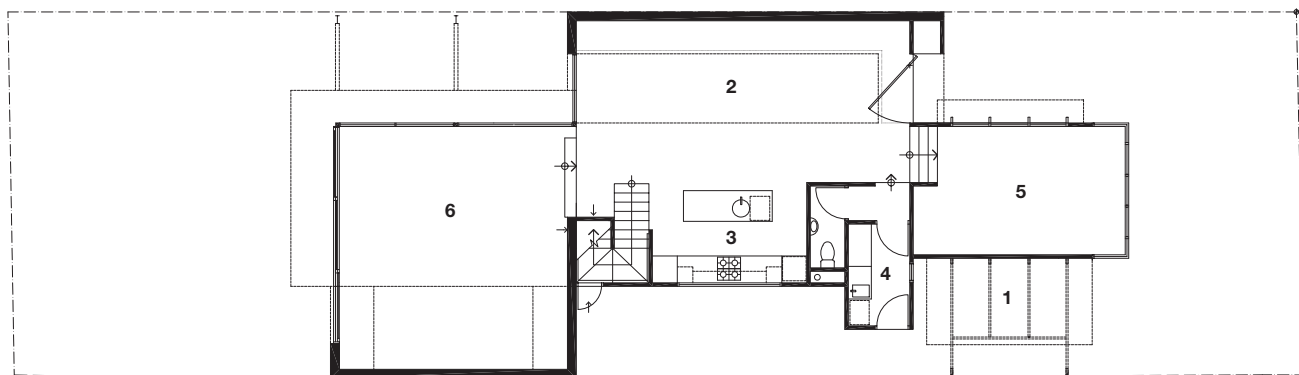
"What we argued was that the private home actually started at the back of the pod, and that the pod is in fact as much landscape as it is house," says Kerr. "This all came from consideration of the heritage issue. If you scan down the row of Federation townhouses and get to this, there's no building there, just a veil. With the mesh, it's as though there's a face behind, but it is largely hidden. And the planner just got it. She could see that there wasn't a building to deal with in terms of streetscape."

While daylight plays on the mesh, creating the illusion of a denser fabric, it turns translucent at night, confirming a sense of the house's openness to the street. A strip of film around the bottom interior of the window ensures privacy for the client and his partner (they use the pod as a study), but is imperceptible from the outside.



First floor

- 1 Carport
- 2 Meals
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Laundry
- 5 Study
- 6 Living
- 7 Main bedroom
- 8 Bedroom
- 9 Robe



Ground floor



LEFT: When internal lighting is switched on after dark, the stainless steel mesh facade becomes translucent.

When I arrived at the house on a hot summer afternoon I was struck by this collusion of revelation and discretion: an almost flirtatious promise in the gently quivering veil of cool and shadowy spaces within. On entering, however, I discovered that the ground floor is actually light-filled and spacious, with the galvanized steel and painted plywood front door leading directly onto a combined dining and kitchen area. This is the epicentre, from which the house entire opens up.

Rather than a generic open-plan layout, Kerr employed subtle levels that articulate the pod and the living room from the kitchen/dining area. “The client didn’t want big, bland spaces,” he explains. The intention, according to Kerr, was a vaguely cubist arrangement in which different spaces interact without recourse to regimented logic. A prominent white staircase rising from the dark wooden floor of the kitchen is an additional effect. “It’s that little bit of decadence in what is otherwise a relatively small house.”

Clean lines guide the visitor towards the rear of the building – a horizontal mirror and open display cabinet painted a yellowy-green run the half-length of the northern wall, paralleled by a graceful and austere steel girder that marks the height of the mezzanine floor. Light slants in from above through the large windows of a mansard-style roof to the north, while floor-to-ceiling glass windows and doors frame two sides of the living room, offering an immediate and enticing view of a black-tiled lap pool that runs along the property’s boundary. “We liked the Grecian effect of a pool encased in walls,” says Kerr. The sun’s reflection off the water turns it a vivid green, and throws a shifting, dappled pattern onto the living room’s ceiling.

Here the personality of the client seems most evident. A willingness to explore spatial and visual effects – “He thought, you can’t get this far and choose light blue tiles for the pool,” recalls Kerr – is coupled with a desire for entertainment and comfort. The glass doors that open to the

pool and garden can be enveloped at the touch of a button by a curtain on an electronic track, while a sizeable cinema screen drops down from an alcove in a fake internal wall. A surround-sound system completes the home theatre.

Upstairs in the main bedroom, a wall-mounted flat-screen television and stereo continue this theme. The two-person ensuite and walk-in wardrobe add to the list of conspicuous mod cons. For all this, though, the mezzanine floor, like the spaces below, maintains a sense of serenity. Despite east-facing windows and the heat outside, it is relatively cool.

A slim walkway runs between the guest bedroom at the front of the house and the main bedroom at the back, the two rooms separated by a large second bathroom replete with spa and skylight. A sliding door to the main bedroom is a striking addition that is coloured to pick up the green of the horizontal shelf and complement the blues, oranges and reds in the artworks downstairs. Behind it, floating glass bedside shelves, discreet dark-timber-veneer cupboards and a queen-size bed, which seems to hover above the ground, recall the weightless character of the pod structure.

Outside, the building’s muted grey and timber-brown colours, framed by the smoky tones of a tall gum tree in a neighbouring property, suggest that an indigenous garden might have been the most appropriate landscaping solution. However, the small backyard displays a faint Japanese influence, with white pebbles and young maple trees arranged around a square patch of lawn. A pre-existing section of red brick wall at the rear of the property visually anchors the space and provides a rustic backdrop to a neat timber-decked dining area.

Looking back at the house from here, the architect’s achievement is indisputable. In the eclectic mix of St Kilda architecture, Kerr’s design is an impressive addition, and his client (and, reportedly, the client’s parents) could not be happier with the result. **EMILY POTTER**



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PRACTICE PROFILE

Small practice with a primary focus on residential work ranging from alterations and additions to new single and multiresidential dwellings.

PROJECT TEAM

Richard Kerr, Andrew Beaumont

BUILDER

Burnside Builders

CONSULTANTS

Structural engineer

BHS Consultants

Quantity surveyor Newton Kerr

Building surveyor

Rod Bethune and Associates

Landscaping

Spirited Gardens

PRODUCTS

Roofing Galvanized, corrugated steel

External walls Grey ironbark; GKD Lamelle ss mesh

Internal walls Rendered brickwork; plasterboard; Dulux 'White Swan' and 'Sunny Green'

Windows Breezway louvres; Pilkington Activ self-cleaning glass; Capral 300/400 series aluminium frames

Flooring Bluestone tiles; Prestige 'Platypus' carpet; True Grid floating timber floor

Kitchen Granite Transformations 'White' benchtops; Miele appliances; Laminex 'Stainless Steel' laminate and Dulux 2-pac 'White Swan' cupboards; Abey undermount sink; Gessi mixer

Bathroom Gessi mixers; Parisi sanitaryware; Whitestone and Caroma basins; Milan spa

Heating Samsung ducted reverse-cycle aircon

External elements Stained Cypress decking; bluestone paving

Other Pool by Dolphin Pools; 12 mm glass balustrade

PHOTOGRAPHY
Dianna Snape (pp. 101, 102, 105)
Andrew Beaumont (pp. 103, 104)

LEFT: A "Grecian-style", black-tiled lap pool occupies the space between the glazed living area and the side boundary.