

DOMAIN ARCHITECTURE

A client with an open mind and a creative spirit gave the architect free rein, writes Rachael Antony.



A bold bachelor pod

FACED with the task of building on an empty block on a heritage-listed street in St Kilda, architect Richard Kerr had a choice: integrate, or stand out. He chose the latter.

The client, a young, single male kept the brief minimal: it specified accommodation requirements (two bedrooms, two bathrooms and a study) and a preference for a contemporary approach. Any guidelines relating to how the house might manifest itself architecturally were deliberately kept out of the brief, with the client restricting his instructions to, "I don't mind if other people hate it, so long as some people love it".

At the designing stage, Kerr decided to split the approximately 190-square-metre house into two, essentially creating a house with two faces. Facing the street is a double-height east-facing study Kerr describes as a "pod", which was conceived as part-building, part-landscape, and acts like a contemporary interpretation of a glassed-off sunroom. Book-ended by walls of painted cement sheets, the street-facing glass wall is sheathed by an external curtain of woven stainless steel, a German product more commonly used in commercial projects,

such as car parks, which require screening and ventilation. In the morning, an easterly light reflects off the screen, transforming the pod into what Kerr describes as "a shimmering veil" that resists penetration from prying eyes. But come nightfall, the room lights up, the mesh disappears from view, and life inside the pod is illuminated to passers-by. Inside, the cement sheets are painted in gum-tree greens that, combined with the grey mesh, references bush calm but stops short of Australianism.

Combined with the landscaping, the screen is supposed to replicate the layering, or what Kerr describes as "feathering" effect of looking at a tree, whereby the "trunk" or central construction is obscured by more intangible foliage, in this case, landscaping to mesh to glass.

"I joked that it wasn't his space, it was his contribution to the community and we might put tarbark on the floor rather than carpet," laughs Kerr. That didn't happen. In fact, concreting installed up the drive after construction has undermined the effect, decreasing the landscaping and sense of surrounding space and making the facade harsher than intended.



The street-facing "pod" (above) gives way to a light-filled entry and open-plan kitchen (above, left). Glass doors open onto a stylish barbecue area at the back (left).

The rest of the house is more conventional. Downstairs is the entry, hidden laundry area, open kitchen with integrated cabinets and appliances, and dining area. A stair leads down to the living room that converts into a "home theatre", thanks to remote-controlled plasma screen and wrap-around curtain. The glass walls open into the garden with barbecue and entertainment area and a striking black lap pool.

Upstairs on the mezzanine level to the left of the white reconstituted stone feature stairs (one suspects they would be hazardous after a big night out) is a walk-through wardrobe and toilet area that opens onto the large main bedroom, floor-level windows, and views onto the yard. Behind the bedhead is an ensuite featuring a manly palette of hard glass and deep brown cabinetry.

To the right of the stairs is a large second bathroom with spa bath positioned under a skylight; next door a mezzanine-style second bedroom, which enjoys views and light from windows in the north-facing mansard roof but not much privacy, which

seems a pity, unless the intention is to deter long-term guests.

Features of note include a massive structural steel beam painted chocolate brown and the French mansard-style roof. In his written statement to the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA), Kerr explains how the roof formation is designed to

and the odd spot — clean but not immaculate).

Reflecting the desires and interests of a single, status-conscious man, the house is gadget-heavy, from the coffee machine recessed into the kitchen wall, to the home theatre, bedroom plasma screen and spa bath, oversized barbecue and air-conditioning.

The finished house was built for about \$2000 a square metre, not including home-cinema technology, the external mesh screen, the pool or landscaping. Its key achievement is the sense of space and light that permeate it and lend naturalness to an otherwise rather formal living arrangement. In the yard, an original brickshed wall was retained in an attempt to salvage some historical layers of the site. In autumn, the red of the brick goes beautifully with the coloured leaves of the deciduous trees, making for a lovely winter garden.

The house has been entered in the residential category of the 2006 Victorian RAIA awards to be announced on July 14.

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"scoop light into the more introspective dining/kitchen over the north boundary wall (while) the portion around the (main) bedroom folds in the reverse to allow light into the living and pool and provides the ideal overhang for summer sun protection". Kerr has re-interpreted the style in Aussie galvanised iron punctuated by windows of solar, so-called self-cleaning glass by Pilkington (six months later, there are rivulets on the window edges

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A sleek black lap pool makes use of the side of the house.

