

**Pollyanna Sutton** finds a sophisticated open-plan design that makes good use of a pokey block.



# Modern tricks of the light

**D**ESIGNING compact urban living spaces doesn't often leave room to move. However, a smart row of inner-city townhouses on the corner of Rose and Rooney streets in Richmond has used maximum site coverage to create an illusion of spacious living.

The original concept was to build four three-storey townhouses. But the proposal faced objections at council so architects Chris Idle and Cameron Neil decided on six two-storey dwellings. This allayed concerns about building height and made maximum use of the land.

The architects reclaimed a former car park and designed the buildings to extend right to the boundary. They used a palette of materials and colour to create two distinct levels.

Idle says Richmond's topology needed careful consideration. As industry was replaced by inner-city housing, building facades were an important element.

Neil and Idle used simple, striking external features such as timber battening on the lower-level brickwork and garage doors, and folded Colorbond sheeting to clad the upper storey.

On the end buildings, a translucent, corrugated fibreglass box glows when lit at night, creating an interesting street

corner in this inner-city, semi-industrial setting.

Idle says the use of texture and form added a sculptural quality to the exterior, reminiscent of old farm tanks. "It has a machine aesthetic," he says.

The architects used another visual trick to create a sense of separation and space, pushing the building back 300 mm and creating narrow garden beds along the exterior. Front doors were also recessed to create a formal sense of entry.

Idle says this small concession pushed the building back from the footpath enough to avoid creating a flat, rendered

sleeping quarters downstairs and living areas upstairs.

He says this upside-down living makes a small space feel big by using high ceilings and high windows. "You have a view outside over the roofs and the skyscape rather than over the back fence," he says.

Downstairs is a bedroom, bathroom and study, tucked under the stairs. Although the exterior walls sit on the boundary of the site, the architects included a small "light-well" garden between the bathroom and bedroom to add a sense of the outdoors. The materials are simple: polished concrete floors,

**You have a view outside over the roofs and the skyscape rather than over the back fence.**

STUART HOLMES, resident, project member

box. "It is effective. You only have to look at what the Victorians did on their buildings with 300 mm — they mastered fenestration."

Primary colours were used on front doors and in tints for upper-storey windows, to separate each dwelling in the row. Idle says these were some of the smallest townhouses they had designed: the challenge was to deal with high density while having the greatest level of amenity.

The floor area of each townhouse is 100 square meters including the garage, leaving in effect only 77 square metres of living space. It was crucial to create an efficient layout for one person. This was achieved with plenty of storage and hidden workspaces so the visual planes were simple, clean and minimal.

A member of the project design team, Stuart Holmes, lives in the development and is impressed with the utility and simplicity of the design, which uses "inverted living" — with

finished in black epoxy, white joinery, and neutral tones in the bathroom.

Upstairs is one large, open room with a smaller anteroom to the side. Storage and work areas have been custom-designed and sit flat against the walls, leaving the centre of the room clear.

The aesthetic is minimal and modern, and lends itself to new technology, like the monitor that serves as a television, telephone and stereo. A Jetmaster fire, wine racks, shelves, storage and a day bed have been built in.

A bookcase designed from layered laminate and plywood is both a design feature and a piece of furniture. Its long, vertical book slots give a clean, almost Scandinavian aesthetic to the space and it serves as a boundary wall to the internal staircase.

The compact kitchen has a small island bench, which separates it from the dining area. White joinery and red details are complemented by polished particleboard flooring, which



Architects Chris Idle, below, and Cameron Neil, used timber battening and steel for the building's exterior, and made the interior as light and spacious as possible.



PICTURE: GARY MEDLICOTT

shows how inexpensive materials can have a big impact. Glass sliding doors lead to a terrace, where a high, angled wall of glass with an opaque panel as a balustrade ensures privacy.

The townhouses face north, have a five-star energy rating, and use sustainable elements like solar panels for hot water, tinted glass, party walls for insulation and cross-ventilation.

Since the project was designed, Neil and Idle architects have separated. Chris Idle now heads Idle Architecture Studio. Cameron Neil is a director of Neil Architecture.

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