

SLEIGHT OF HAND

The designer of this spacious dwelling on a compact site conjured a polished home using tricks of the light and space-saving wizardry.

Photographs DEREK SWALWELL Words CARLI PHILIPS Styling RACHEL VIGOR

These pages A Bruno Leti work leans on the wall in the ground floor living area. Gubi 'Semi' pendant light from Cult. Johansen dining table and Kai Kristiansen dining chairs, all from Great Dane Furniture.



With a small space you have to use as many tricks as possible," says architect Ray Demkiw of Schulberg Demkiw Architects about the deft techniques he employed in the design of a compact dwelling in Melbourne's bayside. From the street, the understated property appears merely as a driveway gate, but behind its double doors lies a small forecourt leading to the entrance. Indeed, like all good magicians, Ray has his audience fooled, for based on first impressions there's every reason to believe this residence is going to accommodate nothing more than in-your-pocket living.

Building three levels on a narrow site just nine metres wide and 12 metres deep was no easy feat, but Ray and his builder, Frank, were confident in its possibilities based on a preliminary sketch they drafted for the client just 40 minutes prior to auction. "A lot can be accomplished on a small site and the amenities it affords," says Ray. Indeed, this spacious, sunlit, tactile home fulfilled the client brief of "quality space with storage, flexible spaces and to welcome light into what otherwise seemed destined to be a very dark environment".

From the outset, a decision was made to avoid the use of plasterboard which "can be an overused product and easy solution in many cases." In its place? A top-to-toe materials palette of contrasting concrete and timber that "establishes a warm yet polished atmosphere throughout", says Ray. Salvaged from an old bridge in New South Wales, recycled tallowwood was used on the floors, window frames, cladding and balustrade, which also features burnt imperfections. The flawless effect of hoop pine on the walls and ceilings was achieved by a slow, steady process that involved mitring at every junction. "It's so seamless that the overall structure doesn't even feel like a house anymore. It's more like one big piece of joinery because of its refined detail," he explains.

This page, from top 'Dune' sofa by Carlo Colaninno for Poliform. Stone, by Moona Williamson. 'About a Chair' desk chair by Hee Welling for Hay. Opposite page Ligne Roset 'Ottoman' armchair, 'Atollo' lamp by Vico Magistretti from Euroluce. Mineral by Moona Williamson.





These pages, clockwise from left
imperfections in the balustrade
timber make a "nice foil" to
the flawless timbers used
elsewhere, says the architect.

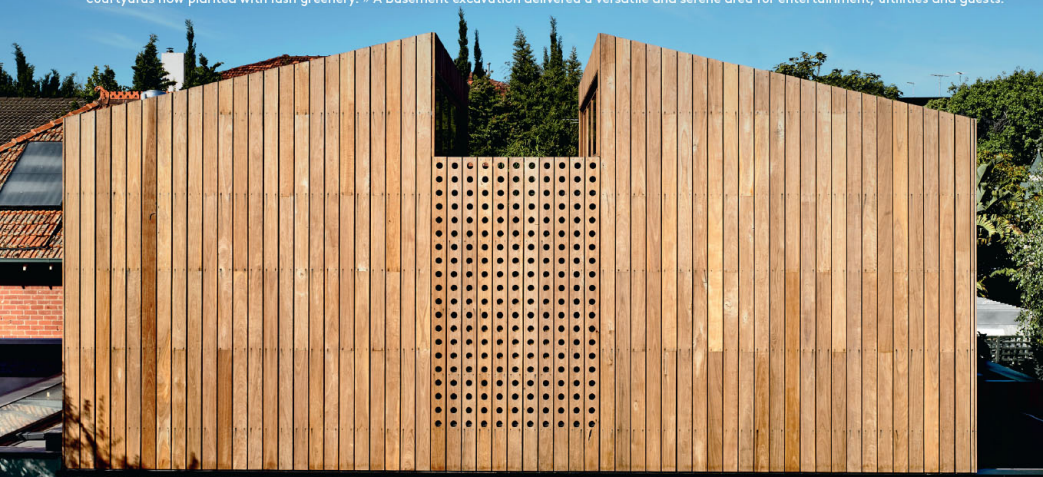
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SPEED READ

» Architect Ray Demkiw of Schulberg Demkiw Architects designed this spacious three-level home on a pocket-sized block in the Melbourne beachside suburb of Elwood. » Timber and concrete used throughout create a warm zen-like ambience further softened with sculptural furniture, tweedy fabrics and floor rugs. » Light was maximised inside and out: external timber screens provide filtered light, ventilation and privacy, semi-opaque curtains separate the two bedrooms and ensuites, and a central light well is divided by a perspex floor that floods the house with light and creates two internal courtyards now planted with lush greenery. » A basement excavation delivered a versatile and serene area for entertainment, utilities and guests.



This page, from top The bathroom and bedroom are separated by a gauzy curtain. A child's sunny bedroom. Opposite page, clockwise from top left The beds were custom made by Distinct Joinery. A pendant light by David Trubridge hangs in the void. Punched timber screens for privacy also allow in breezes and light.

The site's size was both a "constraint and generator" for the design. "Working on small projects can sometimes be easier because regulation means there's no choice," says Ray, "so we had to do things a certain way." This project also required innovative thinking to make functional and aesthetic design choices within the size limitations. Maximising light in the dense location was partly resolved by timber screens punctured with circles that embrace filtered light, facilitate cross ventilation and address privacy concerns. Clerestory windows in the bedrooms reach the ensuites, separated by Kvadrat's semi-transparent 'Zulu' fabric. A light well running through the first and ground levels is separated by a thick perspex floor creating two glass-enclosed courtyards and affording a rush of light throughout the house.

Courtyard bamboo, low timber beds and a life-sized terrarium of sorts separating the two sleeping areas add to the home's nod to contemporary Japanese design and its clever use of humble, unadorned small spaces. As well as Tadao Ando, the owners cite David Chipperfield and Frank Lloyd Wright as inspiration. They also enlisted Pomp's Jennie Goble to advise on the colours and materiality for the interiors. In the relaxed basement, a quilted Ligne Roset 'Ottoman' armchair is paired with a 'Ploum' settee, its soft edges perfect for the casual look.

Boundary-to-boundary construction on the modest block was difficult and the basement excavation a challenge. Yet Ray says the basement is the property's greatest success, the quality of the diluted light evoking serenity and affording "unparalleled amenity" by way of a generous area that boasts a theatre, study, powder room, laundry and pull-down guest bed.

Insistent that no space be wasted, over-designed or needlessly detailed, a network of screens and sliders work cleverly yet effortlessly. Oversized bathroom tiles are seamless, cantilevered benches appear light, bathroom basins integrated and floor-to-ceiling frameless windows give the illusion of height. Spaces are divided with light curtains in place of heavy doors and fixtures are kept minimal, with Astra Walker fittings used throughout.

The use of American oak and restrained concrete has created a rich, internalised warmth and zen-like atmosphere. "We didn't want any fussiness. The result is simple and uncluttered," says Ray. Indeed, there's nothing to hide. Literally. ■

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