

The living room of a house in Melbourne by architect Michael Leeton features a Cassina sofa, a rug by Behruz Studio, a dining table from Format Furniture, and a custom-designed cabinet; the floor is poured terrazzo. See Resources.



NATURAL INSTINCTS

For an avid gardener and his family, architect Michael Leeton creates a house in Melbourne, Australia, that brings the outdoors in

ELLE DECOR: Park House is just outside of Melbourne. What is the surrounding neighborhood like?

MICHAEL LEETON: It's in a suburb called Hawthorn, but it's close enough to the city that you can see the skyline from the back of the house. Hawthorn is a mixed area with original Edwardian cottages and later homes and apartment buildings, particularly from the 1950s and '60s. We razed an old cottage on the property.

ED: Who was involved in the project?

ML: Leeton Pointon Architects + Interiors—which includes my wife, Kate Pointon, along with our contractor—as well as the interior designer, landscape architects, and the people who fabricated all the custom features. It was very much a collaborative effort.

ED: How do you design a house for such an eclectic neighborhood?

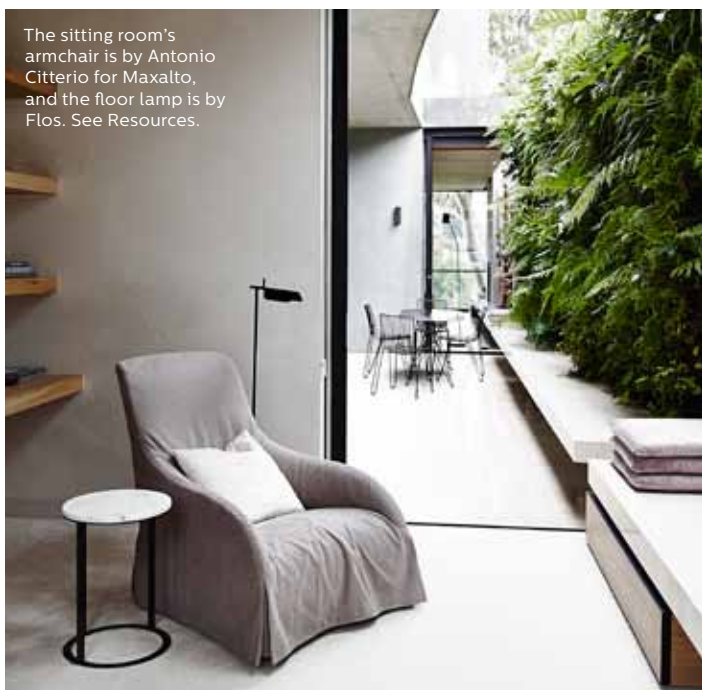
ML: Naturally, anything you put up has to have some relationship to the existing buildings in terms of scale and proportion. As for style, you want to acknowledge the time in which you live. With ▷



Handmade Spanish tiles line a wall of the kitchen; the table is made of black pepper granite, the pendant lights are by Produzione Privata, the stools are by Basam Fellows, and the oven is by Lacanche.

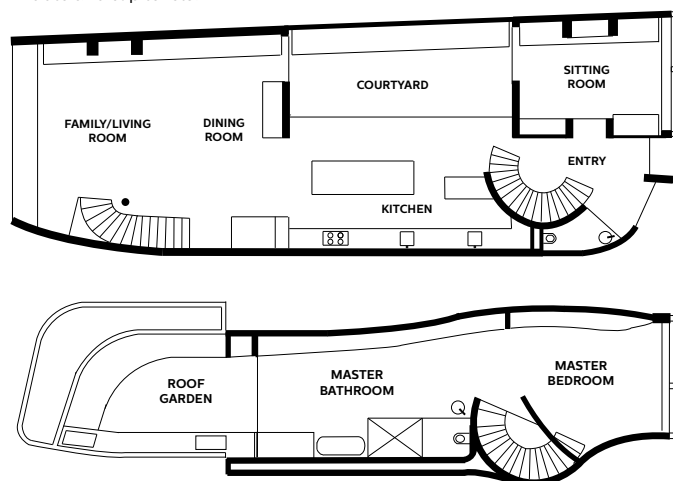


A sofa and side table by B&B Italia in the sitting room; the artwork, made of pigment on bark, is by Djirrirra Wunungmurra.



The sitting room's armchair is by Antonio Citterio for Maxalto, and the floor lamp is by Flos. See Resources.

FROM TOP: Plans of the middle and top levels.



a contemporary home, you add another layer to the neighborhood.

ED: How big is the house?

ML: It's about 3,600 square feet over three levels. The lot is only around 40 feet wide, but it's almost 180 feet deep, and it slopes down to the Yarra River. The neighbors are close, but the house still feels private and connected to nature.

ED: How is it laid out?

ML: The top level contains the master suite and adjoining roof garden. The main rooms are on the middle level, and the remaining bedrooms are on the ground floor below. The couple has four sons, so they need four bedrooms down there at the moment, but they may not always need that many. We designed the spaces with sliding partition walls so the configuration is flexible; maybe someday there will be two bedrooms with adjoining sitting rooms.

ED: What did the clients ask you for?

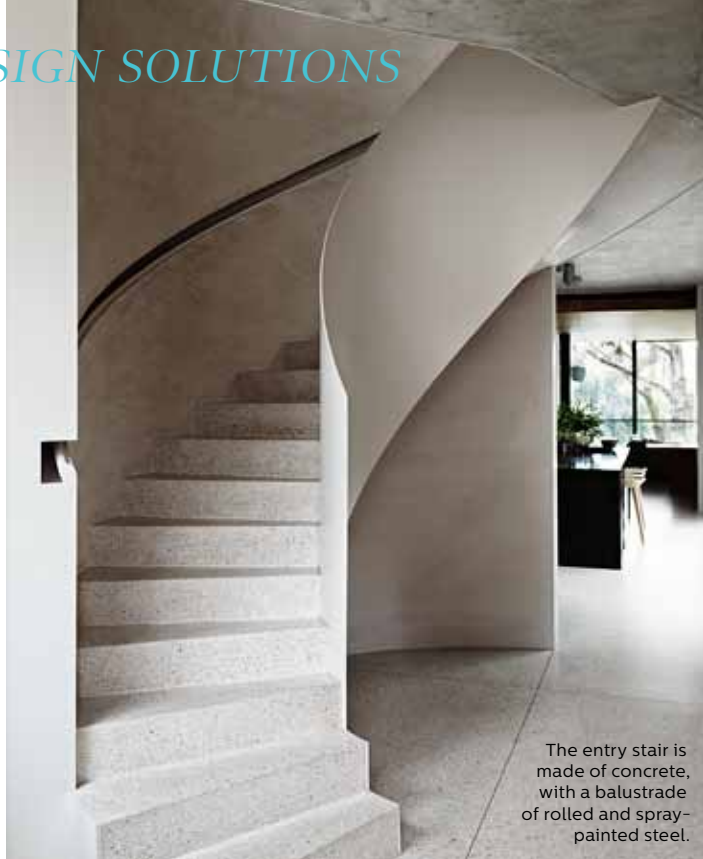
ML: The couple has a particular interest in horticulture, especially the husband, who took a course at Burnley College of Horticulture, which is nearby. The class was taught by Andrew Laidlaw, the landscape architect at Melbourne's Royal Botanic Gardens, who ended up joining the project. The husband said, "I don't care about the house—I just want as much garden as possible."

ED: And you gave him a garden on every level!

ML: At the front of the house, the lower level looks out on a Wollemi pine gorge, designed by Laidlaw. The top-floor roof deck has a garden with its own small fishpond. The middle level has a courtyard off the kitchen with a living wall, which can be seen from every room on that floor. There's a beautiful old eucalyptus tree in the backyard that we didn't want to disturb, so that's where we ended the house.

ED: What were your thoughts in choosing the palette of materials?

ML: We wanted to use materials that invoke nature, so we featured concrete, timber, and blackened steel. They will mature over time. When I design a house, I like to think of how it will look in 10 years—how it will age, and how the patina will form. ▷



The entry stair is made of concrete, with a balustrade of rolled and spray-painted steel.

ED: What are some of the sustainability strategies in the house?

ML: There are concealed solar panels on the roof and a 10,000-gallon storage tank under the house that gathers runoff to water the gardens. There are external sunscreens, hidden blinds, and large overhangs that provide protection from the sun, as well as energy-efficient glazing in the windows. In terms of ventilation, both ends of the building can be opened to cool the house at night.

ED: Did you design all the kitchen cabinetry?

ML: Yes. I wanted the kitchen to be industrial and sensual at the same time, so the cabinets are oak, stained black, which ties them into the Lacanche range and the steel exhaust hood over it. The countertops are honed Indian granite. I chose handmade Spanish tiles as a backsplash wall to face the open courtyard, with its wall of greenery.

ED: What other nods to nature did you make in the house?

ML: We took the opportunity to frame views of the landscape from every room—some large and expansive, some more inward and intimate. At the end of the back garden we used a steel-rod fence, although a timber fence would be typical here in Melbourne, so that instead of a wall between the property and the adjoining park, you can see through the garden into the natural landscape beyond.

ED: How did you apply the natural theme to the interior design?

ML: We worked right from the beginning not only with our builder but also with interior designer Allison Pye. We wanted to create a finished home where all the elements work in harmony. So the interior features linen curtains, silk rugs, and wool upholstery, along with alpaca and bamboo, materials that soften the architecture. We didn't want the architecture to seem more important than the interior design. We wanted to balance the interiors with the exterior vistas and the construction shapes and materials with those of the furnishings, pieces found in nature as well as those made by man. ■

WHAT THE PROS KNOW

- Michael Leeton installed poured terrazzo as flooring both indoors and out. "There's actually quite a bit of color in terrazzo," says the architect. "It also reflects light in a way that makes it softer, which is important in parts of the world where light can be harsh."
- In the kitchen, a wall of handmade Spanish tiles in a muted shade of green maintains the sense of craftsmanship the architect wanted to carry through the house. The tiles, being handcrafted, are not all the same size and shape, nor are they perfectly square. The entire wall had to be laid out for fit before the pieces could be permanently attached.
- The concrete ceilings required detailed planning for the lighting. "Installing fixtures in a concrete ceiling is not a problem as long as you've made sure to place the wires correctly before you pour the concrete," says Leeton. "You can't change anything after the fact, so you have to know what you want."
- Leeton used five-inch-wide oak floorboards to create timber ceilings in the living room. "I like the width and the deep texture, which is very softening," he says. "They're prefinished, which saves a lot of work on-site. The custom-made front door was designed to echo the ceilings."

In the master bath, a Moroso armchair, Rogerseller tub, and Danskina rug. See Resources.

