

NOTE PERFECT

This modern Melbourne home doesn't skip a beat with its stirring composition of subtle tones, focal points and sweeping arcs.

BY ANNEMARIE KIELY PHOTOGRAPHED BY LISA COHEN

THIS PAGE in the entrance of this Armadale home, linen curtain from Clearview Sun Control; polished plaster walls; limestone floor tiles from Stonetile Ind.; *In the Flesh* (2018) artwork by Jonny Niesche.





“I wanted an organic sense of flow, and so made all shapes irregular or asymmetrical”

MICHAEL LEETON

THESE PAGES a view of the facade;
landscape design by Ayus Botanical.

IN THE INNER-MELBOURNE SUBURB

of Armadale, where mock historic homes join in melodious tribute to the grand estates from which their land has been carved, one house blows a wildly incongruous tune. It is the concrete distillation of jazz; all improvised lines shooting in random directions in accord with the Miles Davis dictum: “Don’t play what’s there, play what’s not there.”

AND WHAT WAS NOT THERE, in a pocket where the housing stock fizzes with all the period fluff of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, was the architecture of now, a nuanced response to a warp-speed world and all its attendant worries.

Michael Leeton, director of Leeton Pointon Architects, is happy with the parallel drawn between the structured unpredictability of jazz and this project — a “big program” family home that hunkers and hovers, in errant L-plan, above a site big enough to constitute parkland.

It replaces a 1980s red-brick residence, one worth saving in wall section and slab to meet the budget of a new-house build. He recalls it had a ‘keep-out’ front fence and a building bulk that pushed to perimeters and begged the grab-back of garden. “We worked for one year to make sure that the client got everything they wanted within the parameters of price and place,” says Leeton of the accommodation he shaped for a family of five. “Interestingly, they didn’t express their design aspirations in terms of scale or stuff, but rather sound. They wanted a complete removal from the noise.”

He qualifies that dissonance as a full sensory phenomenon, suggesting that the hyper-stimulation of digital has redefined happiness as silence across the haptic, the visual and the aural. ‘Quiet’ is the new luxury, he intimates.

Leeton was fully attentive to the power of absence, removing the existing front fence — “giving the house back to the street” — and instating a minimally detailed circular driveway to steer passage to a porte-cochère capped with a giant concrete dish. He bent it like Niemeyer — the Brazilian architect who built the bossa nova into habitable form — and flanked this sculpted declaration of arrival with swaying concrete walls that worked to conceal the bulk of residence behind. He afforded a street-peek through a pivoting glass door into the property’s pearlescent entry foyer, a cloistered void of ghost-gum grey with an arching drape of like-coloured linen to both amp up the theatre of arrival and augment privacy. This monasticism instantly conditions the dial down in volume of voice and activity. »

THIS PAGE the spiralling staircase near the entrance with a view of the formal living room. In the formal living room, Oluce Superluna 397 floor lamp; *A Shallow Breath* (2018) artwork by Jonny Niesche from Station Gallery.





“We worked for one year to make sure that the client got everything they wanted within the parameters of price and place”

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THESE PAGES in the formal living room, Moooi Bart XL sofas; Gubi fringed poufs, enquiries to In Good Company; Atlantis Tavoli Bassi coffee table from Glas Italia; Fairy Tales side table from Valsecchi 1918; Enoki side table from E15, enquiries to Living Edge; Surface Sconce lamp (on shelf) from Studio Henry Wilson; sheer linen curtains from Clearview Sun Control; artworks by artists unknown.

“Interestingly, the owners didn’t express their design aspirations in terms of scale or stuff, but rather sound. They wanted a complete removal from the noise” MICHAEL LEETON

« Leeton pulls back the sweep of pooling linen to reveal a sequence of living areas that connect like clustering soap bubbles down the tiered fall of land. They froth large around a spiralling steel stair that he painted in the ubiquitous pale shade to match polished plaster walls and pitted limestone floors. This unilateral blanching (save for a select oak section and a study antithetically plunged into black) confounds the start and end of surface and seemingly casts the stair as an organism intent on colonising space.

Its migrating lines order into shapes suggestive of the port side of a ship — one sailing into the subliminal space of dreams — on the upper level, where private sleeping pods peer down to a rear garden set with wide-reaching golden elms and a raised swimming pool (solution to the reduction of ugly regulation fencing).

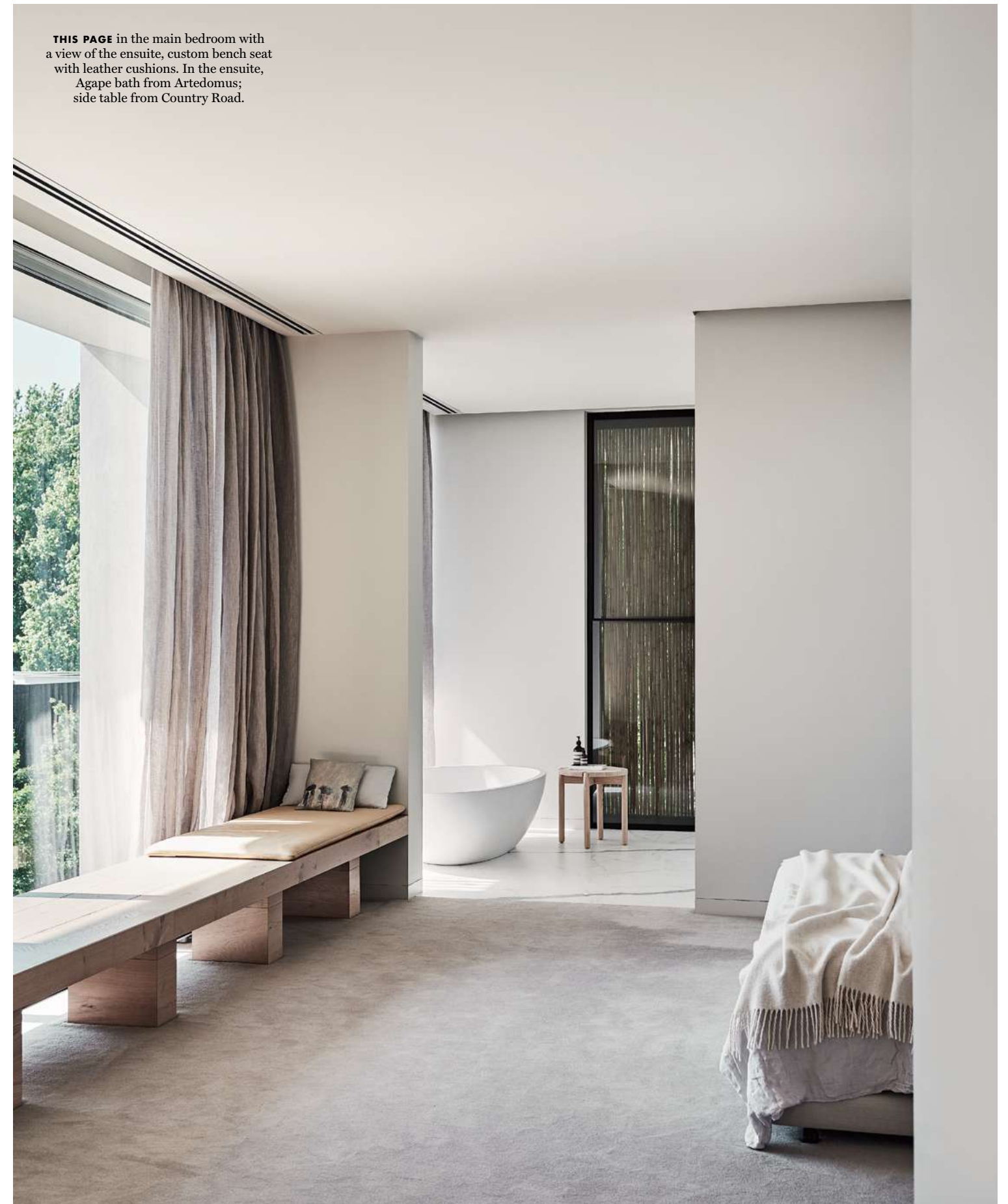
Leeton cites the emotional serenity of built work by Mexican architect Luis Barragán and the twisting formal elegance of sculptures by Clement Meadmore as sources for his scheme. “I wanted an organic sense of flow,” he says, “and so made all shapes irregular or asymmetrical.”

But how can so many circular hyperboloids meet so seamlessly across such a large structure? The question elicits a deep sigh and headshake from Leeton, who talks of “old-school handcrafting and fine-tuning on site” to melt the monumentality of the steel stair imperceptibly into adjacent surface.

Intrinsic to the success of the resultant architectural harmony is a tight ensemble of talent; a band of players that includes the percussive genius of interior designer Allison Pye (her syncopating beats judiciously colouring composition) and the base rhythms of builder Len Bogatin, who twists concrete like it was treacle. Their collective response to the orchestration of Leeton, who played “violin and alto sax in the day”, makes sublime melody of the seemingly accidental pleasures of sun and silence — sharp black notes on white playing across major and minor scale.

The virtuoso impact of the whole condenses into the philosophising words of the Victorian-era art critic John Ruskin: “We don’t want our buildings merely to shelter us; we also want them to speak to us.” Or, in this instance, we want them to resound with all the unpredictable dynamism of, and defence against, the world we now inhabit. leetonpointon.com
As featured in the Sept/Oct 2019 issue of Vogue Living.

THIS PAGE in the main bedroom with a view of the ensuite, custom bench seat with leather cushions. In the ensuite, Agape bath from Artedomus; side table from Country Road.



THESE PAGES in the dining area and kitchen, Mattiazzi She Said dining chairs and bar stools from District; Tambootie table from Agostino & Brown; Gubi Semi Pendant lamp, enquiries to In Good Company; limestone island; splashback in handmade tiles from Stonetile Ind.; custom steel rangehood; Architect Collection floorboards in White Smoked from Royal Oak Floors (also used for the curved wall behind the staircase).



THIS PAGE in the sunken lounge room, custom bench seat with cushions; Prostoria Cloud sofa, enquiries to Stylecraft; Diesel by Moroso Cloudscape armchair from Hub Furniture; Offcut stools from Tom Dixon; Counterbalance wall light from Luceplan; ceiling feature in Architect Collection floorboards in White Smoked from Royal Oak Floors. **OPPOSITE PAGE** the curved volume of the house's cantilever wing as seen from the pool terrace.



CONCRETE PLANS

It's hard to imagine the stuff of pavements can be transformed to create a nurturing family retreat, but this award-winning Melbourne home proves that, in the right hands, it most certainly can.

BY ANNEMARIE KIELY PHOTOGRAPHED BY EARL CARTER

THIS PAGE: in the LIVING ROOM, Arflex Jules (left) and Jim armchairs by Claesson Koivisto Rune from Poliform Australia; Cassina 194.9 coffee table by Piero Lissoni from Space Furniture; custom black steel bench and fireplace; Scenes on the Death of Nature IV artwork (1986) by Anne Ferran. OPPOSITE PAGE: in the ENTRANCE, polished plaster walls, oak floorboards and custom sculptural painted steel stairs. Details, last pages.



OPPOSITE PAGE: in the FAMILY ROOM, *Arflex Ben Ben sofa* by Cini Boeri from *Poliform Australia*; *e15 CM05 Habibi tray tables* by Philipp Mainzer from *Living Edge*; *B&B Italia Harry ottoman* by Antonio Citterio (used as a coffee table) and *Fat-Fat tray* by Patricia Urquiola, both from *Space Furniture*; *Lumina Flo floor lamp* from *ECC Lighting & Furniture*; *blue-and-white Two Stools* by Doug Johnston from *Criteria Collection*; *Silkyway rug* by *LE Limited Edition*.

Raw concrete architecture can, in the hands of the unpractised designer, look like a “mildewed lump of elephant droppings”, to pilfer one of Prince Charles’ disparaging remarks about London Brutalism. Especially when the requirements of formwork (the moulds that set the concrete) and the reaction of composite to site conditions are not expertly controlled. But when placed in the hands of a master, and Japanese architect Tadao Ando must be the undisputed sovereign, concrete radiates a timeless sanctity that few materials can match. Is there a more perfect example than the Pantheon in Rome?

Melbourne architect Michael Leeton is a consummate manipulator of the medium, as shown in this Melbourne citadel badged the ‘Twig House’ — a structure whose woody name, worked from the eucalypt battens that filter light into its inner chambers and the woven wicker folly at its door, belies its ballsy constitution and colour. This building’s massing of grey forms, behind a curved wall cast with the texture of a tree — the outcome of oak formwork — tells that the stuff of pavements can embed sensory thought.

“Yes, it does seem contradictory that something so gritty and pedestrian can feel so nurturing and natural,” says the architect, standing within the entry cavity of the house he conceived as an inhabitable sculpture. “We love concrete and we did lots and lots of prototypes before the project started — trialling different mixes, using different formwork, building little walls.”

Using ‘we’ in deferential reference to interior designer Allison Pye and builder Len Bogatin of LBA Construction, Leeton says that he brought his long-time “collaborators” on board early to aid in the continual refinement of a complex construction premised on feeling cocooned. “The clients provided a meticulous, succinct brief,” he says, describing them as a visionary, socially engaged couple seeking immersive connection to landscape in an introspective structure. “The idea was that this ground plane looked inward — felt safe — and that the second storey exploited those amazing distant [city] views.”

According to Leeton, the clients had occupied the sloping site for three decades but had latterly determined its 1980s architecture too inflexible for the ebb and flow of extended family. Rather than renovate, they decided to raze it and start again. “They’d built houses before, so they’d been through the process,” says Leeton. “We did some loose sketches, showing how the house might look and flow. They loved it, fully entrusting the team once engaged.”

Attributing this trust to a business acumen that knows how to make decisions and privileges the artist — the clients, who wish to remain anonymous, are committed philanthropists — Leeton explains that the three-level house came together quickly in an L-shape plan that positioned a tower at each end of its arms. Of the curved monoliths that now coset sleeping quarters in their turrets and sitting rooms at ground level, he says, “They are the foundation of the house. They sit autonomously within the building and are expressed with tapered edges, as if weathered over time — a sense of archaeology expressed in their elemental monumentality.”

Between these pillars, the architect sequenced living rooms in a layering of positive and negative space — “meant to feel like moments” — that never allows the full scoping of building scale but directs sight lines into a landscape designed in collaboration with Taylor Cullity Lethlean (TCL). Leeton fashioned “transition zones” to frame vistas onto TCL’s painterly plantings — coral-bark maples fluorescing against beds of scalloped slate — stitching both public and private space into a seamless organism that secretes stairs into its labyrinth of polished cave.

“It represents hours and hours of keeping form blank,” says Allison Pye, lifting her eyes to a floating timber ceiling in the front salon that conceals a tangle of technology and mechanics. “Everything is hidden in this house.”

That diligent concealment and ubiquity of concrete demanded a restrained hand from Pye, who furnished with a transparency and barely-there tone that took nothing away from the art content or its container. The one anomalous flash, or ‘flesh’, is found in the kitchen, where a piggy-pink dining suite seemingly derives its palette from an adjacent Dale Frank painting. “It’s just a happy coincidence, a bit of softening,” says Pye. The interior designer then shows its “quieter” two-tone, two-table counterpart in a neighbouring dining room that defers all colour to a wall-draped stretch of art painted on-site by Fraser Anderson. “If this was one table in one colour, it would consume the space,” she says. “There’s something so uninviting about the endless spread.”

Asserting that “it is not an ostentatious trophy house, but a real family home”, Pye directs passage to an intimate study dressed with artist John Kelly’s 37-piece opus, *Red Rocks* (2015–16) — a master-work recording the same stretch of coast over a 12-month period. It is the perfect full stop to a tour of architecture that brushstrokes an empathetic buffering of monumental form by extraneous forces. “Each one of Kelly’s investigations is spectacular,” the designer says, likening the individual intensity to Leeton’s time-loaded detail. “But the magic emanates from the whole.” *VL*

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THIS PAGE: *in the GALLERY, looking towards the kitchen and family room, linen curtains by Clearview Sun Control; Mask 3 sculpture (1979) by Joel Elenberg; Nexus sculpture (2016) by Jason Sims in background.*
OPPOSITE PAGE: *in the KITCHEN, Mattiazzi She Said dining chairs by Studio Nitzan Cohen from District, with custom colour-matched Tambootie table from Agostino & Brown; artwork by Dale Frank.*



**“We love concrete and we did lots and lots of prototypes before the project started – trialling different mixes, using different formwork, building little walls”
– architect Michael Leeton**



THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT: in the KITCHEN, *Mattiazzi She Said* counter stools by Studio Nitzan Cohen from District; custom joinery by Planera Joinery; glazing by European Window Co; Barazza cooktop and V-Zug steam oven with Qasair rangehood. On the OUTDOOR TERRACE, custom dining table made by Motto Furniture & Cabinetry; Potocco c37 Egao chairs by Toan Nguyen. OPPOSITE PAGE: in the STUDY, e15 Sloane table by Philipp Mainzer from Living Edge; Hay About a Chair desk chairs from Cult; Matter Made Discus 2 pendant light by Jamie Gray from Criteria Collection; Red Rocks artwork series (2015–16) by John Kelly.



THIS PAGE: in the ENSUITE, *Apaiser Haven* bath; *Vola* tapware; *Barbera Bronze* table in background. OPPOSITE PAGE: in the OUTDOOR ROOM, *Paola Lenti* Swing seat by Edward van Vliet from Dedec; *Riva 1920 Clessidra* cedar stool by Mario Botta from Fanuli; *Gervasoni InOut Ghost Out* armchairs by Paola Navone from Anibou; *Massproductions Tio* dining table from Luke Furniture; *Potocco 037 Ego* chairs by Toan Nguyen. Details, last pages.