

This pond in one of the internal courtyards acts as a natural air conditioner when breezes carry cool air into the house.

Keynote curves

From the streets, the two-storey facade presents as inscrutable planes of aerated concrete wall panels and square windows, unobtrusively blending in with the surrounding houses.



While looking
bare from the
outside, strong
lines give this
Melbourne home
a soft, sensual
ambience

As much as they are about energy economies, sustainable houses are very much about atmospheres.

With all the established sustainable design precepts of good insulation, design orientation that maximises and holds sunlight gain in winter, the capture and careful use of water, and the use of recycled or sustainable building materials, the best sustainable houses have a characteristic sensual ambience that makes them feel very alive.

They are internally quiet. Yet even in the hottest weather they breathe fresh air via cleverly-placed, cross-ventilating windows and heat chimneys that

encourage the release of unwanted warmth up and out of the house. This process is, of course, reversed in winter when their closed sun-drenched interiors imbue captured heat back into reliably temperate rooms.

This new inner Melbourne house belonging to semi-retired neuroscience academics, Jenny and Dexter, and designed by Zen Architects principal Ric Zen, is just such a house. While it may be new, it invariably has an uncanny established, settled-in feeling through being anchored so securely to the earth via the thermal-holding concrete slabs that form the basis of its structure. ■

“We let the sun determine the shape of the curves, because it was all about following the sun. Otherwise, we kept the building square and simple”



Jenny and Dexter experimented with light, grey and ochre-coloured stones to create the beautiful concrete flooring.

It is given an extra dimension of sensuality through the use of strong structural curves that coil through and define the downstairs rooms of this two-bedroom house with two upstairs studies, four courtyards and bookcases wherever they could practically be placed.

Ric Zen says that the house is basically square. And from the streetscape of Victorian villas, the two-storey facade presents as inscrutable planes of aerated concrete wall panels and square windows. It is new and different to the local housing stock but softly, unobtrusively so.

Once inside however, the curvilinear sensations

take over as a curved wall of vertical wood batten defines the master bedroom suite and leads along the hallway past a courtyard which has a curvilinear statement water feature.

In the open-space living/kitchen/dining area there is a curved kitchen bench set opposite a long sweep of curving glass windows that invite the greenery of the courtyard inside.

The sweeping wall of three-metre high, north-facing, faceted windows framed in Victorian style "was expensive to do" says Ric. "But it was all about capturing the sun."

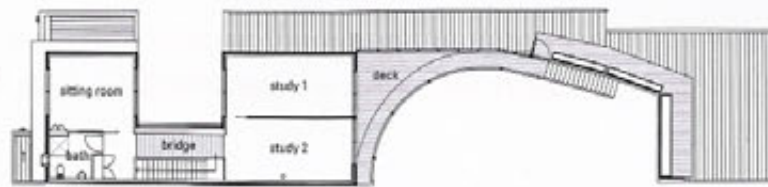
It was also about capturing the main tenet of the



which, apart from emphasising sustainability, or “a garden house that had open living spaces, privacy, ceiling height and light.” Having lived in a high-maintenance, south-house previously, Dexter says a bright, low-maintenance house was critical. Jenny says “we had to downsize but weren’t prepared for an apartment. It had to feel as though it had a lot of sun and light.” So it does. Courtyards take up one quarter of a building envelope and are planted with herbs, miniature citrus trees, grapevines, lea, native grasses and groundcovers.

The courtyards also work as natural heat sinks, absorbing heat when needed. Ferns and water plants feature in the inner courtyard to fully embrace the entire downstairs in greenery. An upstairs terrace that mimics the sweeping curve of the living room features planter boxes with tomatoes, lettuces, olive and lime trees. The architect, who has been focusing on sustainable design since setting up his practice in 1989, says that the house, which is built boundary-to-boundary on an 8.5 by 45 metre block “is very conventionally laid out.” “We used conventional construction throughout





Upper level



Ground level



Jenny and Dexter's desire for a garden house with open living spaces, privacy, ceiling height and light has been fulfilled.

in the utilitarian spaces such as the hallways and bedrooms to keep the costs down. Upstairs, the curve is in the deck and not in the rooms themselves," says Ric.

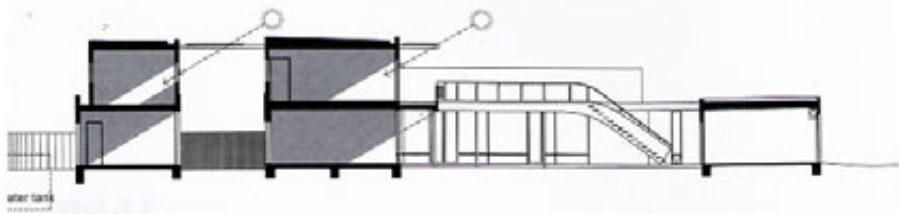
"We let the sun determine the shape of the curves," he says, "because it was all about following the sun. Otherwise, we kept the building square and simple." And, adds Dexter wryly, "almost to budget."

The curves are, however, the keynote. They are also fun to work with, says Ric, "because spatially curves are flexible. You can push and pull them where you like. They are less rigid and more free. And because there are fewer sharp corners, spaces

blend into each other more easily."

The curved wall which continues across the master bedroom doorway is created in slatted radially-sawn stringy bark from floor to ceiling. "The front fence is made of the same material," says Ric. The vertical wood wall "has a dramatic effect" and also serves to "minimise the use of plasterboard which can make a house cold."

The implicit thoughtfulness that defines most sustainable buildings is carried through in so many unexpected aspects. In Jenny and Dexter's house the considered detailing includes a vertical slatted screening feature placed on a potentially problematic western-sun exposed upstairs wall



“It’s a very peaceful house to walk into and you are always aware of the garden”

The curves of the home have been dictated by the movement of the sun to allow light and heat into the home.

n references the master bedroom wall “and the wall from getting too hot”.
g with diagonally “transparent rooms” with v placements that allow through-views from o back and that make the house appear than it actually is, the most immediately cable feature is the polished concrete floor fownstairs living area that gives the essential al mass to the implicitly ambient house.
ead of the floor looking like harsh concrete, ite beautiful and quite deceptively soft. More nything in the “bespoke house,” it took a lot asking to get right. To get the desired effect, turned out to be “like nougat,” the couple

The upstairs terrace that mimics the sweeping curve of the living room features planter boxes with tomatoes, lettuces, olive and lime trees.



Bookcases
abound in
any space
that is
available.



perimented with an aggregate pebble-mix of
ht, grey and ochre-coloured stones set in a blonde
ide-stained concrete screed which was then cut
d polished. It is pretty and "very forgiving," say
e couple. "It just doesn't show the dirt."
The whole house "works magnificently," they say.
"is a very peaceful house to walk into and you are
ways aware of the garden," says Jenny. "We so
rely close the back door that it is as though we
e actually living outdoors."
"The fundamentals are right," concludes Ric Zen.
could live here...I could live here tomorrow." ◀

Designer: Zen Architects (Ric Zen, Ben Callery, Shae Parker) www.zenarchitects.com

Location: Brunswick, VIC

Photography: Emma Cross

Features:

- 170 litre Ollin combi solar hot water and hydronic heating (note: Ollin no longer exist)
- 7000 litre Septech semi-submerged rainwater tank
- Pilkington double-glazed windows
- Hebel aerated cladding
- Air-cell ceiling insulation
- Autex Greenstuff Polyester batts
- Mentone Pre-mix concrete floor
- Foamular extruded polystyrene slab insulation
- Ambience low-energy lighting
- Caroma water-efficient toilets

- Hansgrohe water-efficient showerheads
- Natural cross-ventilation and lighting
- Pond provides natural cooling
- Thermal chimney releases heat
- Rooftop harvestable vegetable and herb garden
- Radial Timber Sales radially sawn sustainably-harvested timber
- Native, drought-tolerant landscaping
- Castlemaine slate stone wall