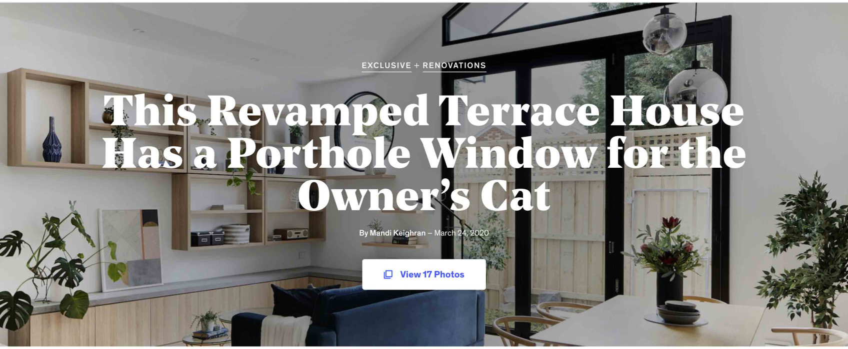


EXCLUSIVE + RENOVATIONS

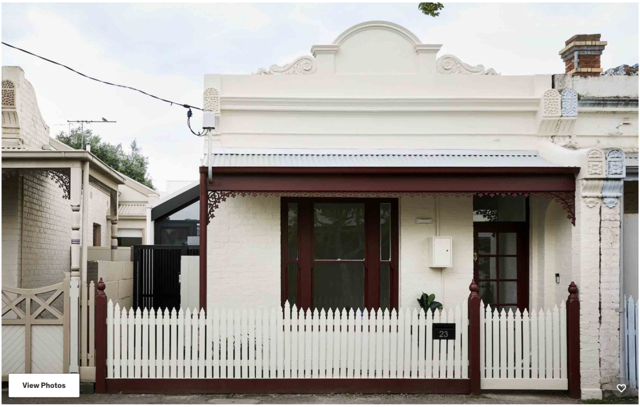
This Revamped Terrace House Has a Porthole Window for the Owner's Cat

By Mandi Keighran – March 24, 2020

Atlas Architects crafts a sanctuary for a librarian and her cat in Melbourne, Australia.

In the 1980s, a librarian bought a heritage Victorian terrace house with her sister in Fitzroy North, an inner-city suburb of Melbourne. Forty years later, she called upon Atlas Architects to dramatically reimagine the home as a sanctuary for her and her cat, Dot.

"The house had deteriorated significantly over the years," says Aaron Neighbour, the director of Atlas Architects. "The client came to us with the hope of building her dream home, but questioned if the building could still be restored and improved—or if she was better off selling the property." For the renovation, the firm retained the heritage front facade whilst rebuilding the rest of the house to suit her lifestyle.

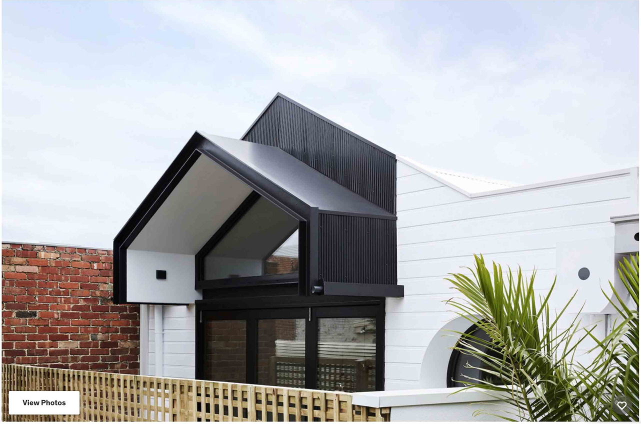


The original building had been painted red and the client initially wanted to expose the old brickwork. After removing the paint, however, it was discovered that the entire facade was coated in tar. As a result, the decision was made to repaint the facade in cream. The new volume is hinted at by the portion of black framing that is visible at the side of the home.

Tess Kelly

Photo Categories: exterior, house building type, glass siding material, metal roof material, brick siding material, gable roofline

The original house had a lean-to structure at the rear and a front fence that the client had built with her father. Given the sentimental value of the original building, the architects made the decision to keep the heritage front facade and build a new addition to the rear. "This approach introduces new building elements without interrupting the facade rhythm of the street," says Neighbour. "The reinstated elements of the original house, such as the front porch, retain the identity of the heritage place."

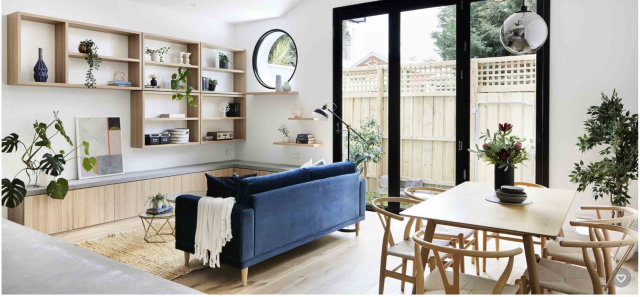


From the rear laneway, the parapet and veranda awning echo the original pitched roof, carrying the essence of the old house through to the addition.

Tess Kelly

Photo Categories: exterior, gable roofline, brick siding material, house building type, glass siding material, metal roof material

A key part of the brief was to provide a comfortable home for the owner's pet cat, Dot. Joinery shelves are spaced at climbable heights to allow the cat to traverse between the units, and a series of carefully located internal cat doors allow direct access to the cat litter tray in the laundry.

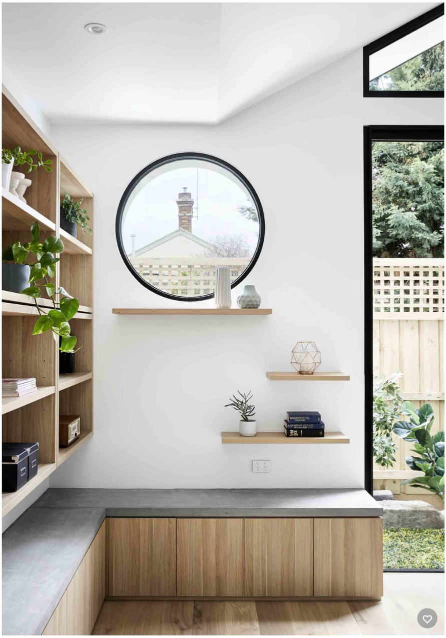


The living area's cathedral ceiling extends outwards to become the northern veranda awning, which helps to shade the interior.

Tess Kelly

Photo Categories: living room, chair, ceiling lighting, recessed lighting, storage, shelves, pendant lighting, table, coffee tables, sofa, medium hardwood floors

"The circular window awning adds an irregularity to the contemporary interpretation of the heritage place, creating a point of interest," says Neighbour. "But, most importantly, it provides a porthole out to the world for the 'queen of the castle'—the cat, Dot."

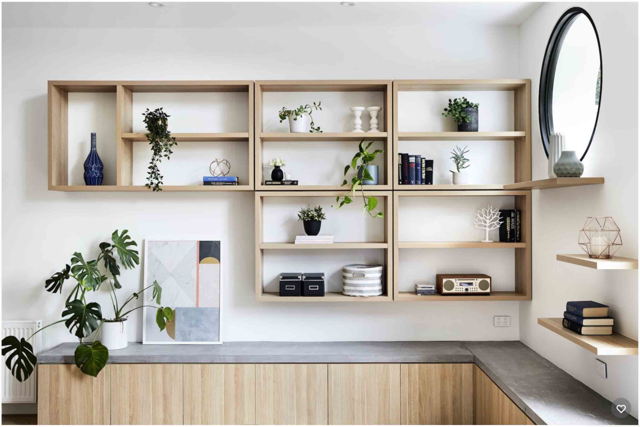


A timber display positioned below the porthole window in the living space offers a lookout for the owner's cat.

Tess Kelly

Photo Categories: living room, bench, medium hardwood floors, ceiling lighting, recessed lighting

Another essential requirement was that the home have space for all the "luggage of living"—objects and possessions that the client has collected and accumulated in her lifetime. In response, the architects created either concealed storage or display space for every item in the home.

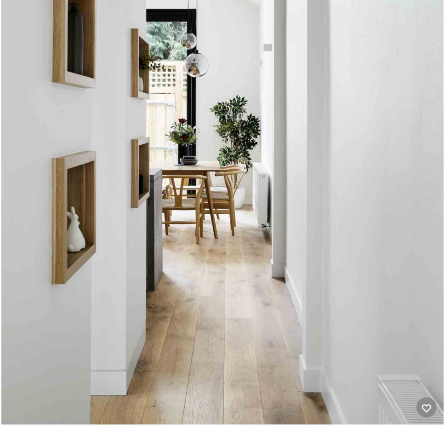


The built-in timber storage units in the living room feature the same concrete top as the kitchen bench and the desk in the study nook. The rawness of the concrete contrasts with the refined oak timber joinery and minimal white walls.

Tess Kelly

Photo Categories: living room, shelves, storage, recessed lighting, ceiling lighting, medium hardwood floors

"We underwent a vigorous process of cataloguing and measuring the client’s belongings that she would like to bring into the new house," says Neighbour. "The storage is zoned and allocated throughout the house according to its function, size, and frequency of use."



Timber shelves in the hallway and the living room frame knickknacks and books that the client has collected over time—described by architect Aaron Neighbour as "fragments of the owner's story".

Tess Kelly

Photo Categories: hallway, medium hardwood floors

The recessed shelves in the hallway feature spotlights that showcase the precious objects displayed within.

Tess Kelly

Photo Categories: storage room

The site is narrow, with party walls on both sides, which presented challenges when it came to providing the interior with adequate natural ventilation and light access. The site does, however, have a north-south axis, with the heritage facade on the southern side. This created an opportunity to maximize the northern aspect by locating the living spaces toward the rear of the home.

A "cathedral" roof above the open-plan living area creates a sense of volume in the small space. The storage is all contained in carefully planned bespoke joinery units.

Tess Kelly

Photo Categories: living room, chair, ceiling lighting, medium hardwood floors, pendant lighting, desk, storage, recessed lighting, coffee tables, table, sofa

It was important that there was enough space for a dining table with six chairs, as the client wanted her home to be a welcoming space for guests.

Tess Kelly

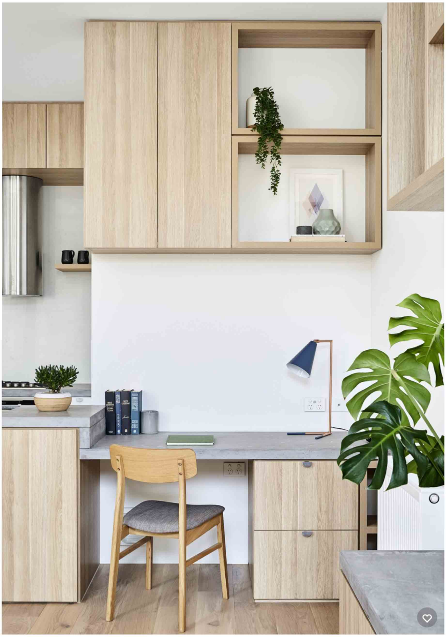
Photo Categories: dining room, table, medium hardwood floors, chair, pendant lighting, recessed lighting, ceiling lighting

This open-plan space encompasses a living room with a study nook, a dining area, and a functional kitchen in which everything is concealed behind sleek oak cabinetry. A black rectangular feature light above the concrete bench echoes the black-framed glazing in the living area that offers views of the surrounding neighborhood.

A graphic black lighting feature hangs above the kitchen bench, which conceals storage space behind oak doors.

Tess Kelly

Photo Categories: kitchen, ceiling lighting, concrete counters, cooktops, range hood, medium hardwood floors, refrigerator, wood cabinets, recessed lighting, drop in sinks



A study nook with a concrete desktop adjoins the kitchen bench, making clever use of otherwise dead space.

Tess Kelly

Photo Categories: office, shelves, study room type, lamps, chair, medium hardwood floors, desk

This large, glazed bifold door and highlight window create a connection between the interior and the small backyard, and help to facilitate natural ventilation and light.

This large, glazed bifold door and highlight window create a connection between the interior and the small backyard, and help to facilitate natural ventilation and light.

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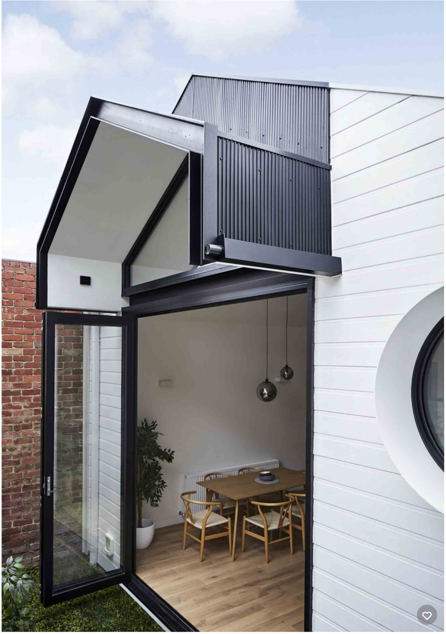
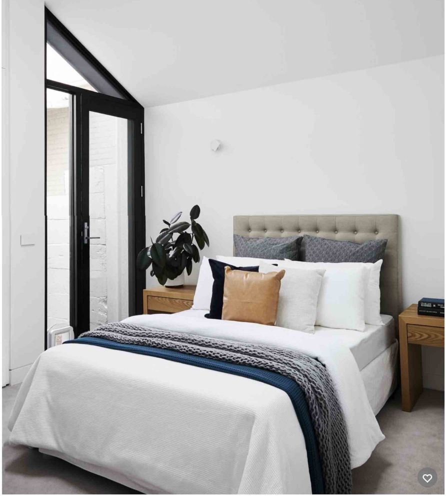


The living space extends out into the small backyard through large bifold doors. Horizontal weatherboards and vertical Mini Orb steel cladding creates a graphic, minimal rear facade that contrasts with the surrounding inner-city environment.

Tess Kelly

Photo Categories: exterior, house building type, gable roofline, brick siding material, glass siding material, metal roof material

The wet areas are grouped in the center of the home, and a new guest bedroom features a glazed wall overlooking the street. Skylights were instrumental in creating quality natural light in these internal areas.

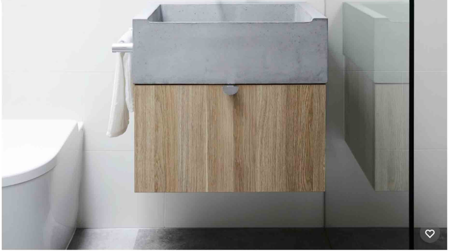


The guest bedroom is located at the front of the home, and it features both a skylight and a glazed wall section overlooking the street. A glazed door provides access to the front porch.

Tess Kelly

Photo Categories: bedroom, carpet floors, bed, night stands, recessed lighting

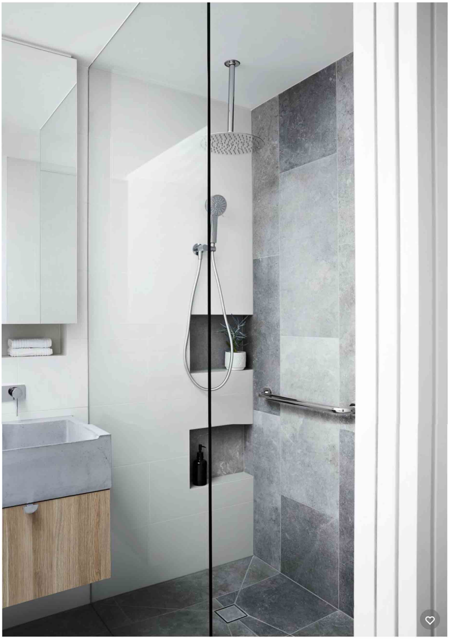
Inspiration for the clean and minimal material palette of concrete and light timber came from the texture of the urban fabric in the inner-city neighborhood. The raw aesthetic of concrete—found in the tiles in the shower, the bathroom basin, and the kitchen and living area countertops—is contrasted and softened by the abundance of light timber used for the floor and joinery.



The custom bathroom sink is cast from concrete, echoing the use of concrete on the countertops in the kitchen and living area.

Tess Kelly

Photo Categories: bath room, concrete counters, recessed lighting, vessel sinks, ceramic tile floors, one piece toilets, corner showers



The home was designed with future accessibility in mind. The spacious shower has a grab rail, and the home is laid out over a single story for easy access.

Tess Kelly

Photo Categories: bath room, corner showers, concrete counters, ceramic tile walls, ceramic tile floors, recessed lighting, vessel sinks

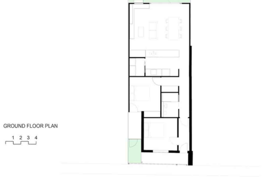
The laundry is tucked away beside the kitchen. A skylight floods the small space with natural light, and cat doors provide the resident feline with easy access to the litter box kept here.

Tess Kelly

Photo Categories: laundry room, stacked, laminate counters, wood cabinets

The elegant exterior materiality is designed to contrast with Fitzroy’s messiness and the richness of the urban texture. This was achieved through the use of a monochromatic palette, horizontal weatherboards, and vertical Mini Orb corrugated cladding.

"This is a house that is functional, low maintenance, and welcoming," says Neighbour. "There are no grand statements or bells and whistles, but it gives the client pleasure because it works and flows well and has a place for everything."



Floor plan for Dot's House by Atlas Architects.

Atlas Architects

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