

## director's cut

rob mills house — vic, australia

ROBERT MILLS ARCHITECTS



# NO FRONT DOOR

Converting a warehouse into a home is to enter into an ongoing story.

*Megan Morton* reports that Melbourne architect, *Robert Mills*, has embellished his story in a very personal way.

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It is fascinating to see how architects choose to live and what they choose to live with. A real moment of truth – where budgets have no real bearing and their personal acquisitions and decisions say more about them than anything they build for the enjoyment of others.

At the core of architect, Rob Mills' house is a narrative. It is an eight-year story encompassing collections, talismans, artwork and family memories. His objects take precedent over any architectural gestures and make their presence felt from the front and right to the back door.

In this case, it is really the other way around. You see, Mills' house presents from the street frontage as normal, but its real entrance is from the back door, leading you into the slightly worn arms of a semi-sunken kitchen, adjacent to a two-acre park. So his front door, to all but the postman and first-time visitors, becomes the back and vice versa. Understanding the value of the double entrance is the key to understanding the house and the way Mills and his partner, Lucinda Marshall, use it.

Mills believes in building communities around shared parkland, akin to an English Common, so the generous park adjacent becomes both his front and back yards. Rows of established Plane trees protect a café, a tennis court and shared grounds, without of course, any ownership maintenance. "Space is one of the greatest luxuries," says Mills, so choosing a warehouse built almost boundary-to-boundary over a suburban sprawl requiring weekends full of upkeep was a no-brainer.

Furniture *orientation*,  
*specific* task lighting  
and a change of *tempo*  
in fabrics, aid this  
invisible *transition* from  
room to room.

Originally a wool store, the warehouse's major overhaul was undertaken by Melbourne architect, Charles Salter, via commission from the previous owners. This was eight years before Mills took ownership and what Salter conceived has turned an industrious factory into a family home. An internal central tower contains all utilities that run up the two floors, leaving generous open areas in all other



03

01 The entrance to the converted warehouse.

02 Antique French farmhouse dining table; white Paton chairs by Vitra; plywood custom-made light fitting.

03 Chinese stools; English armchair; Spinning light by Benjamin Hubert.

directions. Turning what could have been an imposing internal structure into something really viable, Mills went on to make it truly liveable. Taking the architectural shell that Salter had left him, Mills simply refreshed the paint when he took residence and promptly returned to his office to focus on the building of other people's houses. So, what had been left on a slow simmer of sorts over seven years is an authentic and honest culmination of indigenous artwork, personal treasures, antique artefacts and memories piled high in every room.

The lack of internal walls has meant the design of the space and the lighting has had to be strategic. Furniture orientation, specific task lighting and a change of tempo in fabrics, aid this invisible transition from room to room. The darker eastern end of the house is used during the evenings with moodier lighting – all on dimmers, thicker textiles and more demanding artwork. While at the opposite northern end, caramel leathers, shots of copper, exposed slate and more accessible artwork keep the morning end generally bouncier in tone. A dining room,





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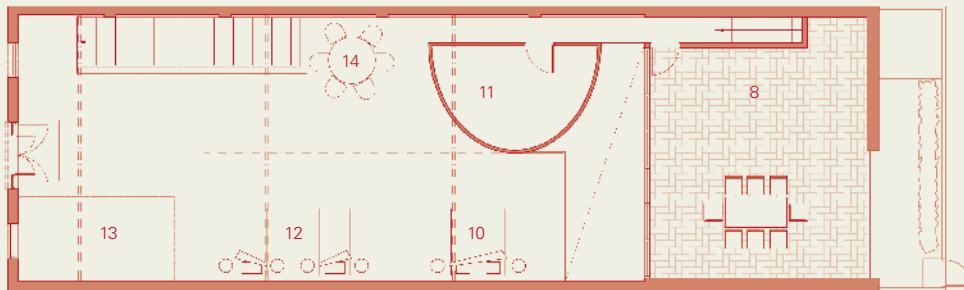


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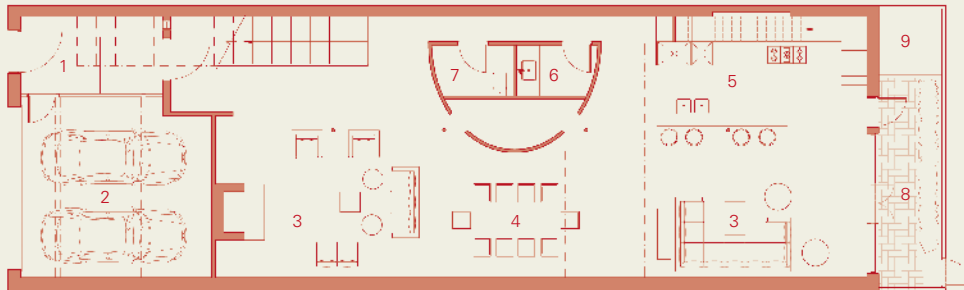
book-ended by hunting apparatus known as 'payback spears', sits dead in the centre, ready for service morning, noon or night.

The upstairs bedrooms are accessed by two entry points – the first and most logical one, from the official front door and the other, sneakily up past and over the kitchen. The latter option offers a meandering promenade over steel stairs and a semi-exposed walkway, with a full line of sight to the magnificent Plane trees. A cavernous master bedroom then appears with little privacy but for the curved veneer bathroom wall. It's flooded in glorious afternoon sun and borrows its vista from the beautiful neighbouring parklands. Altogether, upstairs is over 200m<sup>2</sup> of space, and Mills' daughters' shared room is carved up by a curtain system and robe. Then, showing Charles Salter's delight in the surprise, around the corner is a secret turret hidden at the highest point of the house, for guests' quarters.

"It was absolutely disconcerting when I moved in" says Mills of the vast, open-plan spaces. "It took a lot of getting used to, especially with such a vast bedroom." It has, though, become a powerful insight to his



- 1 Entry
- 2 Garage
- 3 Living
- 4 Dining
- 5 Kitchen
- 6 Laundry
- 7 Powder Room
- 8 Terrace
- 9 Services
- 10 Master Bedroom
- 11 Bathroom
- 12 Bedroom
- 13 Mezzanine Bedroom
- 14 Study



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A *cavernous* master bedroom then appears with little *privacy* but for the *curved* veneer bathroom wall.

work and he knows all too well the benefits of losing walls, re-formatting traditional internal structures and questioning the pre-conceived ideas of individual rooms. “Living in the warehouse amongst all this space has definitely changed my work. I’ve come to know how special it is to live in a large space and how you really, over time, only notice the space immediately around you.” Citing the fact that we have all grown up with designated rooms, like the ‘family’ room, the ‘play’ room, and the ‘dining’ room, Mills is now in a position to question the shared space and how to improve it. For instance, he believes that an open-plan kitchen and dining is best separated with a lounge area in between, much like his downstairs set up. “The mess, clutter and noise of the kitchen has a bit of breathing space in between it and the dining table, which in a busy house, can mean a lot.”

Warehouse living has pushed him to question clients over a myriad of pre-conceived ideas, down to practical things like unnecessary standard doors. Placing sliding, hidden solutions that temporarily divide the space without permanently shutting it down is a simple intention, but can help the overall space immeasurably. He’s more likely, thanks to his own dinky hidden kitchen, to attempt to place a kitchen around a corner, or out of sight. “This is the best part of my job,” he admits, “rising to the ongoing challenge of thinking of new ways to use allocated space, in a modern dialogue.”

His own warehouse walls are covered in artwork – mostly, but not exclusively, indigenous – and Mills treats the shell as his own makeshift gallery. Paintings are rotated often, some on loan to friends, clients and family, while firm favourites are being constantly re-jigged to make room for new acquisitions. The indigenous work finds an ideal setting in the expansive warehouse, encouraging Mills to continually indulge. Ever faithful to what he likes, it is hard to imagine works that could fill the space with such verve. The combined energy of the paintings, the Boxer Milner and the long Makinti, in particular, seem to fill their immediate spaces



08

04 Custom made leather sofa from Furniture Inspirations; Christmas Tree (hanging from ceiling) is designed by Louella Potter.

05 White Eames Rocking Chair by Herman Miller; Saarinen Tulip Coffee Table by Knoll; an antique French table.

06 The children’s room: vintage poster from Vintage Posters Only.

07 Ground floor plan (bottom) and first floor plan (top).

08 Rustic ladder from Miguel Meirelles Antiques; Clip Bed by Molteni&C.

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and then some. The overall effect takes on a mediumistic quality that has works pushing outwards, defying their actual dimensions.

“I am humbled by the work of masters like Boxer Milner and Patrick Oloodoodi” says Mills. A visit to an important exhibition William Mora held nine years ago kick-started his life-long affection for Aboriginal art. He remembers the exhibition well. It was a couple of weeks after his mother had passed away and Mora had cleverly shown important paintings in combination with antique furniture. Instantly calmed by the show’s totality, he bought his first of many Emily’s<sup>1</sup> then and there, without hesitation. Scott Livesey and Jan Murphy are other dealers that have helped fuel his education process. “What I find so mesmerising about the work in general is that it all responds to Australia and the artists’ connection with the earth,” says Mills. “It is, by its simplest definition, just so unique.”

“What has been truly incredible about living here is the proximity you feel to nature. The connection to it is energising, and witnessing the seasonal changes is this house’s secret gift.” Sometimes, when it comes to houses, the outsides are just as vital to a house’s spirit as its insides.

<sup>1</sup> The late Emily Kngwarreye is regarded as one of Australia’s finest Indigenous painters.

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09  
Harry Bertoia Bird Chair  
and Footstool by Knoll;  
main artwork on wall by  
Rob’s daughter.



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