

MODERN HEART

A Melbourne couple collaborated closely with architect and interior designer on their new home. The result is an unusual mix of styles and materials that harmonise to create this unusual beauty.

PHOTOGRAPHS SHANNON MCGRATH WORDS JACINTA LE PLASTRIER ABOUKHATER

THIS PAGE In the living room, the pebble fireplace is part of the anthracite plinth. A Dale Frank painting hangs beside a sculpture by Missy Baillieu. An Eero Saarinen Womb chair and ottoman sit on top of the reindeer-skin rug. OPPOSITE PAGE Robert Mills's staircase spirals upwards. The Wishbone sculpture by Nicole Durling was a gift from Sarah to Marcus. The vase is from Hub.







THESE PAGES In the foreground, a Minotti coffee table and Still side table share the reindeer-skin rug with the Womb chair and ottoman. The Tulip dining table and chairs are by Eero Saarinen. At the rear is the kitchen's overhanging concrete island bench.



Marcus Freeman says he's not joking when he describes the original garden of this Toorak site's "falling-down" Edwardian house as a "jungle". "It had six-foot-high grass and I literally needed a machete to get through it," he says. "We had to take a demolition ball to it all."

In the old building's place is a modern home of remarkable qualities, a sublime harmony of exterior and interior design. Its clean, modern lines are created by an unusual mix of synthetic and organic materials – anthracite, concrete, high-gloss white joinery, limed American oak joinery, and mirrors in both restrained and overblown proportions. Each element rests peacefully with the other within an expansive space. The ground floor is one open room, floating from the front entry through to the limestone rear terrace. The design – a collaboration between owners Marcus and Sarah Freeman, architect Robert Mills and Hassell interior designer Scott Walker – reminds one of a painting in which each element has been put just so, and could not easily be replaced by another. The result is rigorous yet light.

At the heart of the home is a staircase, a signature element of the architect's projects. Stepped in anthracite – Scott's idea – its coil is like the core of the nautilus shell, whose internal spiral is known for its perfect mathematical ratio. At the top is a huge circular skylight, which is the central source of light for the largely open-plan first floor, devoted to a master bedroom suite, guest bedrooms and separate bathroom. "What Sarah and I wanted," says stockbroker Marcus, "was to design our own home with the assistance of a remarkable architect."

The couple met "for hours each week for months" with Robert. Marcus says, "We would scribble ideas on see-through paper over the plans, then take those home and work them further before the next meeting." The owner had already, in his early 20s, completed a three-unit warehouse project in Richmond with a sister. "My friends all refer to me as a frustrated architect," he says.

This process created the spatial bones of the new house, using the open-plan model inherent in warehouses. "We wanted the character and the sense of space and feel of those buildings," says Robert.

Within this lofty space, a strong horizontal line is created with the use of a 'floating' plinth that runs from the front of the living room, right through the glass wall at the rear, along the way acting as a shelf, fireplace, kitchen joinery and external cupboards (even a dog's kennel is incorporated at the rear). The plinth effect, says Robert, "allows the eye to 'float' through the space; it doesn't stop and start".

Because of the relationship between internal and external elements, the interior designer also had an influence over the home's architectural forms: the staircase steps; doubling the skylight size from original plans; and specifying that the plinth be the same height off the ground as its width. Scott says he "deliberately minimised the palette of materials" in response to this architectural purity, specifying pale



THIS PAGE TOP In front of the polished concrete kitchen bench is a Pasmore chair with deerskin throw. BOTTOM LEFT The study at the front of the living room can be revealed or concealed via huge pivot doors. The glassware is from Hub and the chair is Eames. RIGHT The kitchen opens to the rear and side gardens through electronic sliding doors. The Tolomeo lamp is by Artemide. OPPOSITE PAGE At the top of the staircase the hall leads to the guest bedrooms and bathroom.





THIS PAGE TOP A limestone bath, backed by a large mirror, sits opposite the couple's bed. Tapware is by Vola. BOTTOM A double basin and shower wall in limestone is part of the ensuite. OPPOSITE PAGE With lighting by Kreon throughout, the house glows at night. Sitting on the white concrete terrace is a Bertioia Diamond chair. Inside is a Minotti sofa and artwork by Graham Fransella and Brett Whiteley.

concrete floors, mixed effectively with its organic visual sister, anthracite, used on sections of the plinth as well as the steps. Walls throughout are rendered plasterboard in Dulux Vivid White. He also suggested the substantial overhang on the kitchen's massive concrete island bench, to accommodate the couple's entertaining. "It's meant to be chunky, not too pretty," says Scott. And he designed the huge floor-to-ceiling glass walls of this room, which include automatic sliding doors. A study at the other end of the space can be fully opened or closed using 180-degree pivot doors made from limed oak.

"Upstairs we used the same sort of materials as downstairs," the designer says. In the master bedroom suite, a hand-hewn limestone bath sits against the wall opposite the bed. The eye is then drawn along to a broad rectangular basin, showering area and walk-ins. It's an exquisite yet relaxed and airy space. "Marcus really believed the upstairs shouldn't be the poor cousin of downstairs," Scott says.

Marcus is keen to point out that none of these stunning ideas would have been realised without builder John Morley. "It's great in theory to have these ideas but unless you have a builder who can execute them to perfection, you can't get the right result," he says.

In the end, though, a home is given its life by the people who inhabit it. The Freemans commissioned their hand-stitched reindeer-skin floor rugs. Decorative French urns given by Sarah's antique dealer godfather sit poolside. And a large sculptural cast of a wishbone by artist Nicole Durling sits on the plinth. "It was my wedding gift to Marcus," says Sarah, "I was so nervous it would break before he got it." It's an unusual, inspired spousal gift, one which is an apt motif for this couple and their home, which is modern yet earthed and appreciative, experimental yet aesthetically elegant. 15

SPEED READ

Self-described “frustrated architect”, Marcus Freeman and wife Sarah demolished this site’s dilapidated Edwardian house to create an entirely new home. • The couple collaborated with architect Robert Mills and interior designer Scott Walker to create a building of sophisticated harmony. • The house has the open-plan scheme of a warehouse space across two levels. • The builder used concrete, anthracite, limestone, and high-gloss white and oak joinery to create the home, which houses modern art and furniture.

