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by Daniel Arsham

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Located in the inner city suburb of Windsor, Eastop Architects' Eastbourne House features a slanted front door accessed via a rough granite step

ZEN DEN

We've found the perfect retreat in this Japanese-inspired Melbourne house

PHOTOGRAPHY: WILLEM-DIRK DU TOIT
WRITER: STEPHEN CRAFTI

This modest house in Windsor, Melbourne, sits quietly in its streetscape. Its concrete, steel blade walls and charred-timber first floor could easily be found in Tokyo. 'We have always admired the beautifully crafted homes you find there, in a tight urban context,' says owner Hamish Cant, who has travelled extensively with partner Maria Rinaldi-Cant and their 16-year-old son Sebastian. Cant, who worked as an architect for many years (but is now in IT), and Rinaldi-Cant, a fashion designer, were looking to build a truly unique new home on a modest, 160 sq m site. They found a kindred spirit in Liam Eastop, director of Eastop Architects.

Eastbourne replaces a three-bedroom, Californian-style bungalow from the 1920s, while almost doubling its floor area. 'The bungalow didn't provide us with sufficient space and the main problem was that it lacked natural light,' says Cant. He and his family were keen to live in a house that was bespoke and not targeted simply for resale. Rinaldi-Cant took a similar approach to the interiors as she does with fashion. 'I wanted the house to be sophisticated but effortless, with furniture that can be easily moved, rather than restricted to one place,' she says.

One of the first design features in Eastop's initial schemes was a 6m-high void at the core of the floorplan, with a glass and crucifix-shaped plaster-beam ceiling allowing natural light to permeate the core. Loosely inspired by the work of American artist Bruce Nauman, this void, framed by a textured stucco wall, brings the open-plan spaces together. Equally, the steel and glass bifold doors, separating the kitchen and living areas from the courtyard, allow the Japanese-style garden there to appear as an 'outdoor»



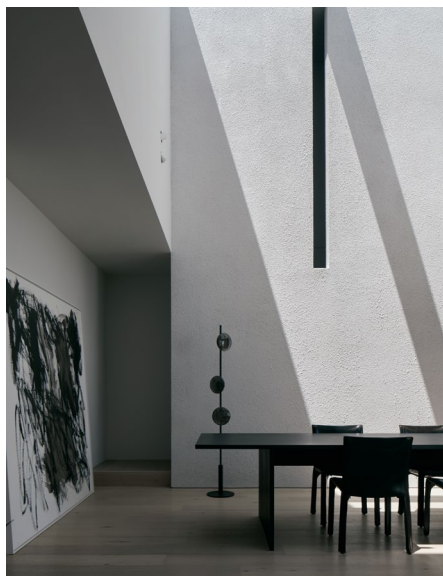


‘When you’re working with relatively small spaces, every moment needs to count’

room’. ‘The idea was to play with light and texture,’ says Eastop, pointing out the long opening cut into the stuccoed dining room wall. Walking up the staircase allows for a controlled, almost theatrical view of the dining area through the gap.

Texture is prevalent throughout this house, whether it’s the large pivoting door in reeded glass and steel adjacent to the carport (designed to protect the undercroft at the front of the home from the elements, and allow it to be used for entertaining), or the almost leathery feel of the quartz benches in the kitchen. And one can’t be blamed for caressing the 4m-long dining room table, made from stained oak and treated as an extension of the kitchen joinery. Steel also appears at the entrance, forming a wall that conceals a powder room and laundry.

The first floor contains two bedrooms, including the main bedroom, dressing area and ensuite, along with a separate Japanese-style bathroom for Sebastian. A multipurpose area at the top of the stairs currently features Sebastian’s drum kit, but could easily be used as a study nook, with a built-in oak desk. Here, one also witnesses Eastop’s ability to orchestrate the light, using operable external timber floor-to-ceiling shutters to diffuse the sunlight. ‘I could have automated the shutters, but part of the appeal is continually



Top, bifold doors in the living area open onto a small courtyard garden

Above, a graphic vertical opening allows views from the staircase to the dining area

touching materials and feeling part of the architecture,’ says Eastop, who used a heavy cord to manoeuvre the shading.

The bespoke and handcrafted appear at every turn, whether it’s the stained oak plinth in the lounge that morphs into a stone bench in the pint-size courtyard, or the beautifully embedded spotlights in the void (framed in circular plastered openings, they look as though appearing from behind the curtains). The built-in mirrored shelves separating the kitchen from the dining area create a ‘breathing’ space between the two and act as another point of reflection, not only literally, but psychologically. ‘When you’re working with relatively small spaces, every moment needs to count,’ says Eastop. To the rear of the home, a series of polychromatic Victorian chimneys appear to be ‘floating’ above the high brick wall in the courtyard garden.

‘There is that sense of the “moment” when you reflect, but I was keen to create something of the unexpected, as well as giving back to the street,’ says Eastop, who created a Japanese-style garden at the front of the house too. And instead of a traditional step, there’s a slab of granite on which to place one’s feet, just before discovering the front door, slightly angled to one side. ‘It’s all part of the experience,’ adds Eastop. ★ eastop.com.au