

Green Street Houses, Richmond, Neil & Idle, 2005

This inner urban three-house development by Neil & Idle Architects can be seen to embody a dual desire for suburban and inner urban life, and stylistically alludes to the car – that symbol of suburban expression and modernity. There are elements of the *moderne* in this project, and Chris Idle describes it “as something automotive, with a big stripe, and the raking glazing gives the building a streamlined effect... like a big vehicle”

The recessed painted green metal stripe also registers in negative the floor level of the building, and makes evident the veneer nature of the construction - as if the cavity were all green. The green go-faster stripe also makes reference to Green Street – the corner building hinting at a role akin to that of a street sign.

The project says much about the nature of urban infill housing in Victoria today. At the corner of Green and Adelaide Streets, Richmond this building celebrates both the corner and ambiguity inherent with urban infill in complexity suburbs such as Richmond – with its combination of light industrial, former worker housing, commercial buildings and rail infrastructure.

An engagement with the corner can also be seen in Neil & Idle’s own office development on the corner of Balmain and Dover Streets also in Richmond, where the commercial nature of the project is exhibited in the use of translucent polycarbonate cladding – here at Green Street a more solid treatment reflects the privacy that perhaps typifies a house on a corner.

Like the offices of Neil & Idle, this development is a project initiated by the architects themselves and in this way can be seen as grounds for experimentation. It provides two different house types – one a compressed villa, suitable for a growing family; and two more apartment-like townhouses, with upstairs living areas and external space. This manoeuvre of ‘upside-down’ houses has become popular with architects, and makes a great deal of sense in tight urban infill areas where the living area can gain aspect from the elevation of the first floor. The ground floor becomes the zone of servicing – car-parking, wet areas and bedrooms.

The larger villa house of three bedrooms has a north-facing courtyard and living area on the ground floor in a more traditional mode suiting family life. Openness of living areas to the decently sized courtyard enables a sense of the suburban house, but within the inner urban context. This developing type is perhaps for the generation of inner-urban dwellers now having children who do not wish to leave the inner urban ring for the traditional ‘leafy’ suburb. This courtyard also enjoys an L shaped deck around it, giving a vertical dimension to the house garden. Balustrading around the deck is a generic robust steel rod system, and is capped at the western end with an unfinished piece of timber. This adds to the suggestion of the industrial in this otherwise domestic space.

A varying quality of opacity is enabled by the building changing from a more sculptural solid form at the corner end to a more glazed 50s type house at the eastern end, suiting the variation of house types within – the east-end house having kitchen and dining area facing into the street through angled mullions.

Innovative use of materials have typified Neil & Idle's work and here both Bituminous Shingles and ModWood are used extensively on the façade. Near black shingles, common in and imported from the US, wrap the corner and first floor level and then taper down on the long façade and expand out on the short Green Street façade to become the fascia on the north façade of the building. Bituminous shingles are lapped as with all shingles (normally used as roofing) and are applied to a Plywood substrate. Historically, timber shingles made their way onto gable ends of Californian Bungalow style houses in Australia in the inter-war period, as well as being used on roofs for many years. Chris Idle points out the connection of Bituminous shingles with the suburban *Pizza Hut*, and that the material is relatively cheap and "dumb". The normal domestic application of the material is transformed here, as they become one of the materials that give the project a non-domestic, but scaled and linear sensibility.

ModWood is an Australian composite product made from ground non-virgin sawdust (or woodflour) and recycled plastic milk bottles, normally used as decking. Here, it has been used as both decking and cladding of horizontal stripes. The 'zero-maintenance' material is considered environmentally friendly and has a bleached colouration. Intended as an emulating material, the architects acknowledge the material's synthetic nature.

Suppressing the expression of individual dwellings is key in this project, "it doesn't reveal too much", Idle suggests, as does the choice of a generally non-domestic street face to the project - "Given that it was on the industrial fringe, it seemed appropriate to give it a commercial or industrial feel - it's that kind of context – there's a guy making joinery opposite."

Deliberate rounding of the corner of the building, also used at the Neil & Idle offices, makes clear the importance of the corner, "It's something Peter Cook has written about, the way the corner can make two facades read more as one wrapped façade, one gesture" Idle adds. This slight fillet of the corner is not generated by the rectangular site, and is further developed with the recess cut in the top wall at this corner, creating a break and focus at the parapet, further registering this urban corner.

Does this building look like a house? Or a warehouse or small factory? Play on typology within this project was helped by the lack of heritage overlay on the site, and an uncontested planning permit application. The result is a styled and cleverly ambiguous building that captures recent and upcoming problems in inner-urban housing.