

The Old and the New

Old House, Jackson Clement Burrows

Rarely does a house have an effect as this one does upon first seeing it, either in the flesh or in a photograph. Indeed this new project in Richmond, Melbourne by Jackson Clement Burrows (JCB) is centered around the photographic - the images on these pages describe this new building with a photograph of the old one laid upon it. The large image is both of the house that was demolished on this site, and it is reproduced full size; at 1:1. This superimposition of old building onto new building is unresting, particularly in the matching of details such as the side wall of adjoining house to the left, the image of which meets the end of the parapet and the front perfectly. Similarly, the gum tree that still exists behind the house is now both photograph and real, monochrome and colour. When looking at the façade from Tyson Street, you look, read, and look again and the mind tries to work out what is there, what is not. After being to the house and studying the photographs, I still keep thinking there is driveway running down the left hand side of the new building.

The decision to make the photograph black and white is engaging – it does not seem to diminish the literal overlay effect and confusion in reading what is going on – it may indeed add to it. When asked, Jon Clements stated the desaturated image was both better terms of UV stability for the photographic film and produced a greater sense of an archived photograph. The glazing system uses reverse printed photograph film mounted on the back of the glass panels, which are then mounted into propriety aluminum T sections and siliconed in. As the light conditions on the façade change, the degree to which the reflection in the glass shifts; a certain points the reflection of the houses opposite comes into the overlay to further makes ambiguous what is figure or ground. The idea of literal reflection as a contextual device had a run in the late 70s and into the 80s when modernist buildings used mirror glass to accelerate their modernity and to show context. Norman Foster's Willis Faber and Dumas Building, Ipswich, England (1975) is a case in point.

The clear recent local precedent of a house with screen image was Cassandra Fahey's house for local Melbourne football identity Sam Newman (2000), which used the image of a more well known international celebrity Pamela Anderson on its box like façade. It made it to the front page of the Melbourne *Herald-Sun*, and this JCB house was also in the local tabloid, a testimony to the potency of the idea. This project however had a low level of objections when it went through planning, and was supported by local council, the City of Yarra. As result the project did not have to go through the tribunal process in Victoria (VCAT), unlike many contemporary domestic projects. This both demonstrates initiative of behalf of the architect, and a positive attitude to creative restrictions by Council, within their own culturally located restrictions. The idea of an image of the existing on the proposed came after discussions with Council, and shows resolved by both parties to use the normally frustrating planning process to make good work.

JCB openly acknowledge the immediate precedent of the Newman House, and the image film on glass is the same system used by Fahey in St Kilda. That house was genuinely radical, and this one takes the idea further. The architects draw on the street elevation the image as outline – breaking the traditional rule that a line shows either a change of plane or material only. This drawing makes clear the building is two storey, as the recessed upper floor is not visible from the narrow street.

An image of one building on another is not the only aspect to this project; it is more than a billboard. The nature of the idea does not immediately suggest what the rest of house is like, for it does not necessarily lend itself to being interpreted three dimensionally. This was question also raised of the Newman House; the rest of the house, even though well handled seemed mute – possibly entirely appropriate. This brings the idea closer to (traditional) pre-modern façadism - all the effects on the front, the back/sides being simpler. JCB fold back the top right corner of the façade, crimping into the roof plane, so as to be touched like a sill when traveling from the first floor roof deck to the top deck.

The main street façade features both the garage and entry. The car entry is concealed in plane, the regular entry features a canopy in a more conventional façade moment. Here the graphic approach solves two desires of council – the need to provide double carparking and to engage with ‘character’ of the street. Interestingly, the internal planning results in no windows from the street façade into rooms behind; on the first floor the main façade forms a balustrade to the first of two roof decks. A staircase sits behind the entry and is roofed by the aforementioned chamfer to the façade. In this way, the façade is for a moment like a fence to a house behind, a some sense of what that is like is given to the viewer on the first floor roof deck; a cranking white polycarbonate form with black framed glazing. The use of white polycarbonate roofing as the interior wall lining as well in the stairwell gives the space a sense of the light industrial, which is another context to Richmond more widely. In addition the project can be read as part of series of housing innovations in Richmond, with firms such as Six Degrees and Neil & Idle, who have wrestled with the crossover between domestic and industrial, authentic and modern.

The kitchen features joinery with a coloured laminate checker pattern, and the space is a circulation point into the main living area of the house. Its prominence is reinforced by the colouration – are these the pixels of a super large image showing its distance from the front? Does the treatment become ‘low-res’ as it goes back, and is the more tectonic rear façade a couple of bigger pixels, one dark and one light? The mailbox at the front cleverly enlarges the front image to exaggerate the depth of forecourt.

It has been a cliché in architectural ideas for a long time now for new to be different to the old. This is normally to not confuse what is from which period historically; as if to suggest architecture is made up a series of clear styles that follow one another, and that buildings are not continually added onto, changed and reworked, and sometimes made better because of it. Here, JCB have overlaid new and old directly and challenged this - avoiding the notion of the ‘contemporary interpretation’, where the new is derivative of the old only terms of envelope and openings. This is both a striking and well handled project that can be seen as a prototype for the new technology of image glass and for the contradictory desires of local councils.