

Daydream believer

Architectural designer Luke Middleton thinks green above all – but not at the expense of inventive design.

THE house that environmental architectural designer Luke Middleton drew up and built for his mother, Faye, in Prahran, is a residence of subtle deceptions.

A two-bedroom house with a large upstairs studio, it fits seamlessly into a streetscape dominated by weatherboard Victorian cottages.

As one who emphasises site-responsive design, Middleton married the facade with neighbouring buildings by respecting local vernacular materials, setback and veranda lines. The facade is radial-cut silver-top ash, stained to look seasoned and to not need painting for decades. In both respects, the material is environmentally sensitive.

So is much else about this thoughtful house.

Middleton, 36, studied architecture but became frustrated that his learning reduced building design to graphics rather than environmental responses. He left the course “at the three-quarter mark” with enough skills to get on with the main game as he saw it.

“I wanted to work out houses that dealt with bigger environmental principles as the foundation stone of the building,” he says. “I also wanted to focus on how clients really lived in their space.”

“By doing that, I figured I could come up with unique designs that were not solely stylish. I’m more interested in content and process than form.”

“I am also fascinated by multifunctional ideas so that we need less stuff to live with. I’m a daydreamer. I can’t understand why people need so much stuff.”

A sort of meditative, on-site daydreaming process is how Middleton starts his ideas. In the four years since he went out on his own as EME (Ecologically Motivated Environments) Group, he has dreamt up buildings including multi-unit townhouses in Brighton, a classroom in Baxter, a day spa in Berwick, offices, auction auditoriums and houses.

Using his mother’s two-storey house as an example, Middleton illustrates some guiding ideals.



He sited and consolidated the exterior green space at the rear so it was exaggerated by neighbouring gardens. “Views are important,” he says.

He concentrated thermal mass to capture free heat. The walls have an inner structure of hebel bricks, which are made of aerated concrete and have high thermal efficiency. The striking concrete bench and fireplace hearth is set before north-facing windows.

The ground-floor concrete slab also has thermal properties and is visually softened by an overlaid timber floor of 60-millimetre-wide spotted gum from an outfit called Timber Savers. Kitchen benchtops and contrasting wider feature floorboards are honeyed English oak, salvaged from the 1980s storms that tore down ancient forests in England.

Rainwater is stored on site in a 5500-litre fibreglass tank that is 70 per cent submerged below the back deck. The water is used for watering, toilet flushing and washing.

A shallow, rectangular pool of water (1.5 by 5.5 metres) is a feature of the entry. The void and pool at the entrance are not only picturesque, but cool the house in



summer. The void is surrounded by cross-ventilating windows and breezes that blow across the pool then cool the interior. Tested during a series of 35-degree days last year, the natural air-conditioning kept the internal temperature at 26 degrees.

All through the house, windows are strategically set for light, framed outlooks and to encourage “direct cross-ventilation to all rooms”.

Where heating is needed, it is either dramatic, as in the “folded open fireplace”, that dominates the huge but understatedly elegant living, dining and kitchen area. Otherwise, the heating is hydroponic and concealed.

Light sources are not featured. Middleton says stashing low-energy fluorescent lights into ceiling recesses, kitchen cupboards and other unexpected places, gave rooms a dramatic, sculptured quality at night. The light source is more environmentally conservative and creates “a softer wash of light”.

While environmental responsiveness is uppermost in the brief, it is not at the expense of pleasing spaces and inventive design.

The main bedroom suite, for example, has a deck view to the west and an internal site line to the south of 16 metres. The interior view looks through an open wardrobe corridor, a cleverly disguised laundry, through to a vanity area and shower. Cohesion and flow is achieved throughout by a washed white wall finish.

Articulated rooflines give each space a different volume. Downstairs, even though the living space is open and flexible, the roofline changes. Upstairs, the floorlines also step up and down to subtly designate the territories of a second bathroom and bedroom suite, and a big, open studio that could be enclosed to create a third bedroom.

The main rooms upstairs have access to a deck that, apart from louvres looking to a city view, is walled for privacy. Another multifunctional area, the deck works as an entertainment area and herb garden.

Middleton says that being sensitive to the

1 Luke Middleton says he wanted to design houses that dealt with bigger environmental principles.

2 The pool at the entrance creates natural air-conditioning.

3 Rainwater is stored in a tank below the deck.

4 Radial-sawn timber is used on the exterior.

5 Bricks made of recycled paper.

PICTURES: MELANIE FAITH DOVE





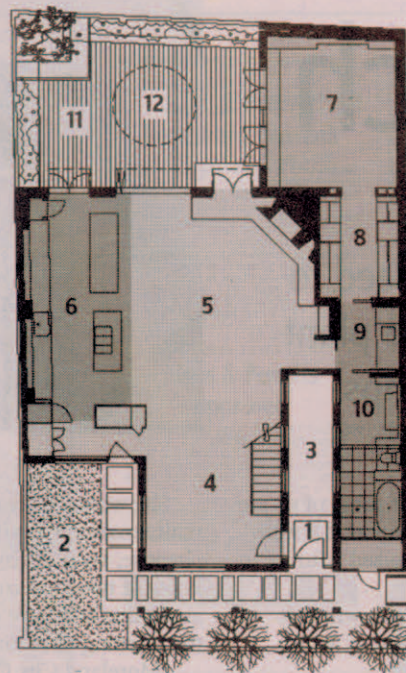
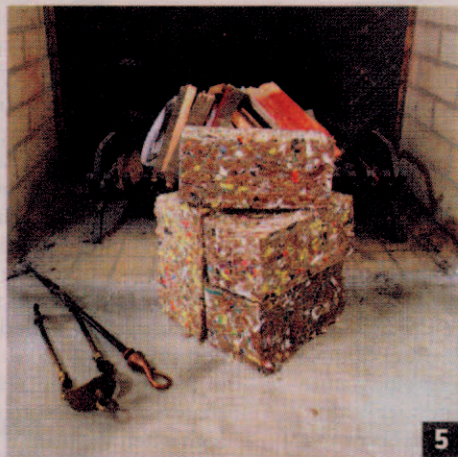
sane options makes the building more organic and pleasing than an imposed architectural design.

He agrees with Danish architect Jorn Utzon's ideal "that we should be seeing inspiration in the task itself."

"You don't have to sacrifice good architecture to deal with environmental concerns," Middleton says.

EME Group; 9699 4688.

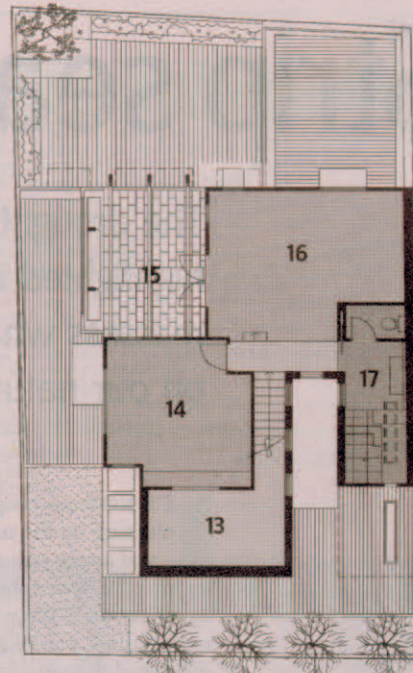
As part of the annual Solar House Day open house scheme, 41 Wrights Terrace, Prahran, will be open on Sunday from 11am until 4pm. For more information, visit www.solarhouseday.com



GROUND FLOOR

- 1 Entry
- 2 Car space
- 3 Light court and pond
- 4 Dining area
- 5 Living area

- 6 Kitchen
- 7 Main bedroom
- 8 Walk-in wardrobe
- 9 Laundry
- 10 Bathroom
- 11 Courtyard
- 12 Water tank



FIRST FLOOR

- 13 Void
- 14 Bedroom
- 15 Courtyard
- 16 Studio
- 17 Bathroom

