



## skin and bones

Neometro Architects wrapped the solid concrete-and-steel bones of an old South Melbourne warehouse in



a delicate skin of trellised deciduous vines, creating a surprisingly leafy inner-city apartment development.

**BUILDINGS ARE LIKE** sundials. They are static, passive instruments that need to be positioned carefully in relation to the sun, with the correct apertures and openings, to maximize their usefulness. With the Dow Street apartments, Neometro Architects demonstrates a visual language of environmentally sustainable design – the look of *northern orientation*, the look of *responding to light*. This building is a solar apparatus, and it shows.

But it didn't start out that way. The site was occupied by a solid-brick warehouse, which had small, unshaded window openings to the north, facing the street. Neometro's first act of surgery was to demolish the existing facade to a depth of around four metres. This set the building line back from the footpath and allowed for the creation of private, north-facing open spaces – balconies – with a shading screen of deciduous vines growing on wires. The new facade works with translucency, openness and light; there is skeleton and skin, steel portals and soft, folded fabric. The geometric network of diagonal wires that supports the organic growth is a play of structure versus softness, the artificial and the natural in harmony. For the occupants, it must be like living inside a constructed hedge, fringed by leaves but open and shaded inside. The building's skin is literally alive, and it also moves – the position of the awnings is controlled by the inhabitants in response to changes in weather. Bifold doors open out to this transition zone between public and private. The effect from the interior is the creation of a leafy paradise in the heart of inner-city South Melbourne.

Subtraction and addition – remove the front section of the old warehouse and replace it with a frame that sketches out the shape of the original box. The previously solid edges have been dissolved, evaporated. Glass louvres ventilate the facade. A small public garden space is created at the corner. Plants provide a soft, relaxed feel, as do the fluidly draped awnings and billowing curtains. This apartment building exudes relaxation. It is an invitation to enjoy indoor–outdoor living. It *looks* comfortable. And, as a speculative development, the look of the place is also a marketing point, a sales pitch.

Neometro is not just an architecture firm – they develop, design and build their own projects. What results when the architect is also the client and the builder? With any luck, the ideal design practice, one that is informed by specialist building expertise during the design stages – surely the best way to achieve beautiful and practical results. One thing the architects at Neometro have discovered over the years, however, is that they also need external clients. They find that taking on traditional commissions from real clients, not just in-house developments with imaginary ones, is a good way to test their design skills and expose them to new challenges.

That is not to say that an in-house project like this one doesn't come with its own tests and challenges. Converting an existing warehouse to apartments was never going to be straightforward. The first step was to

create a basement car park level under the building, which was achieved partly by demolishing the existing slab and digging down, and partly by raising a new ground floor up a flight of steps from the street. This new floor is positioned to squeeze every inch of habitable space out of the allowable envelope. The existing roof of the warehouse was demolished and recreated as a sawtooth facing north, providing light to four two-storey apartments. The complex houses seven apartments in total.

For the Dow Street development, Neometro selected a warehouse site that had one very interesting attribute – column-free space. Its very long spans are supported by reinforced concrete beams that are over one metre thick. This meant they could divide the space any way they saw fit, without regard to columns or load-bearing walls. Heeding northern light, the apartments are oriented north–south, perpendicular to the direction of the existing structural beams. The beams make their presence felt in a powerful way: they become visual devices for breaking up the skinny floor plans, without obstructing physical movement. In effect, the ground-floor apartments have coffered ceilings. The linear planning creates long internal vistas, and the coffers create veils above the spaces; they form a series of proscenium arches, frame after frame after frame, with the theatricality of a stage set. As you move through a ground-floor apartment, you experience a rhythm of compression and release, compression and release, above your head.

The ready-made quiriness of the existing warehouse shell is balanced against slick and smooth surfaces, sharpness, clarity of detail and texture in the joinery. Neometro's close involvement with the building process has resulted in neatly controlled junctions – it consistently demonstrates a good understanding of the nature of the materials being employed. Natural stone, full-height doors, precise alignments, smooth and rough textures – there is a comfortable fit of the necessary introduced elements and spatial dividers that make up each apartment, a strategy of allowing diverse materials to slide up against each other. The use of careful detailing and a restricted colour palette is evident throughout. Viewed from the street, the building's materials are rendered almost entirely in tones of black and white. An aesthetic of “assembly,” rather than merging building elements with each other, is on show. The original building exterior employed just two materials, brick and glass. Now there are many materials, but carefully orchestrated in terms of colour and proportion.

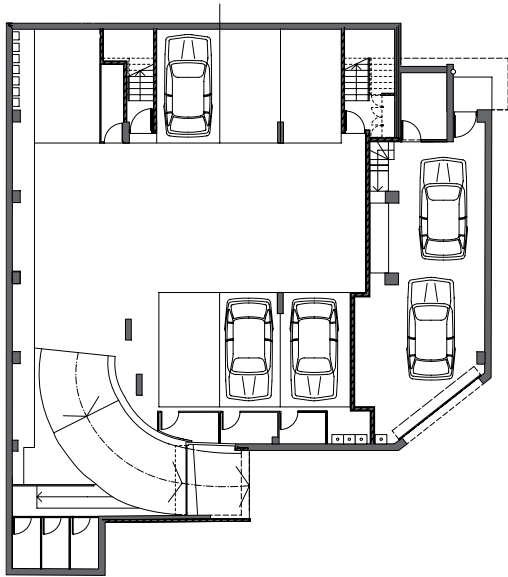
A four-metre-thick veneer of new architecture transforms the street presence of this old warehouse while retaining its scale and proportion. There is an interesting tension set up between these heavy concrete masses inside – the floors and deep beams – and the lightweight tracery outside. The concept of frame has replaced mass – what was once a solid-brick pile is now an occupied, open, breathing, living, light-modulating machine. The Dow Street project is a solar instrument, and one that is finely tuned to its Melbourne location. **TOBY HORROCKS**

**PREVIOUS PAGES:** The solid brick shell of the warehouse, which abutted the street, has been replaced by a black steel portal frame, trellis wires and vines. The geometric structure of the wires contrasts with the softness of the leaves. Fabric shades can be drawn down on particularly hot days. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Existing load-bearing concrete beams along the ceiling gave the architects the creative freedom to subdivide the interior with little regard for supporting walls or columns.

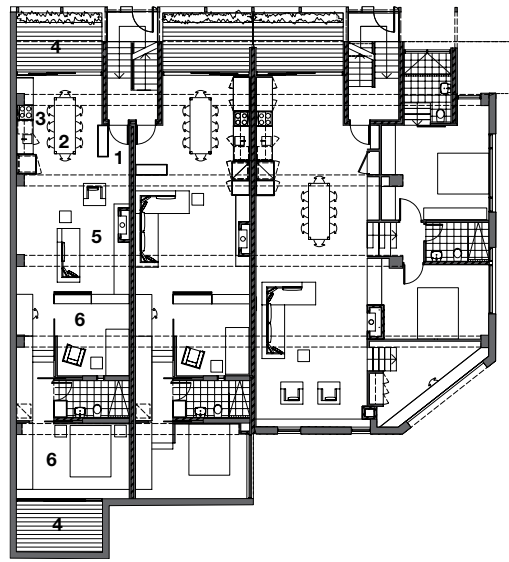


**APARTMENTS** IN FOCUS

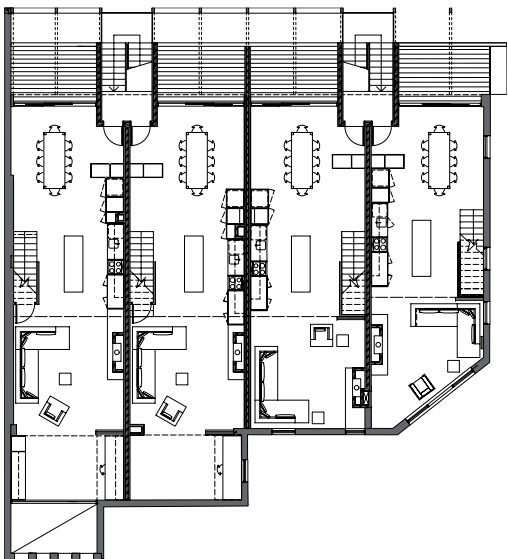




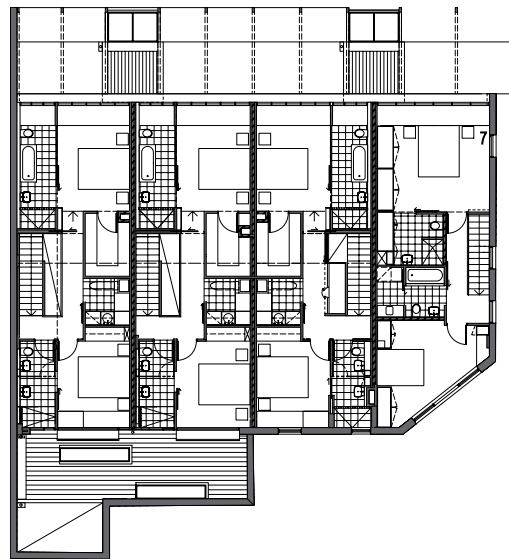
Basement



Ground floor

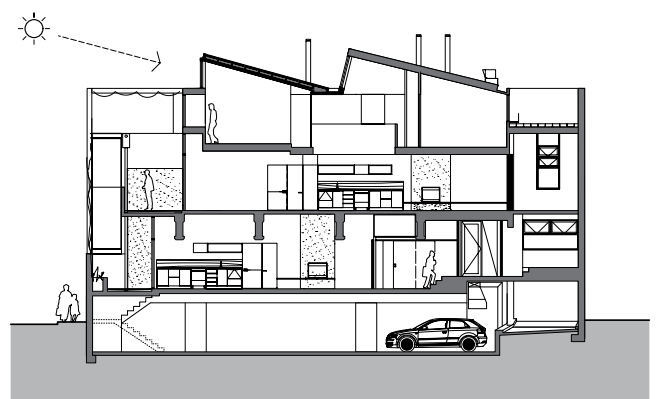
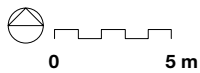


First floor



Second floor

- 1 Entry
- 2 Dining
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Terrace
- 5 Living
- 6 Bedroom



Section

OPPOSITE: This ground-floor apartment includes a second outdoor terrace at the rear of the site. Because the apartments run north-south, to give each access to northern light, and the existing beams run east-west, the architects have used the beam structure as a visual device for breaking up the skinny floor plans.

## APARTMENTS IN FOCUS

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**PRACTICE PROFILE**  
Medium-sized design-focused practice specializing in single- and multi-residential projects.

**PROJECT TEAM**  
Claire McAllister, Karen Alcock, Jeff Provan, Maria Danos, Aaron Jones

**BUILDER**  
Neocon

**CONSULTANTS**  
**Engineer**  
Maurice Farrugia & Associates

**PRODUCTS**  
**Roofing** Colorbond steel **External walls** Existing brickwork **Internal walls** Light bagged finish to existing brickwork; Dulux 'Ghosting' quarter-strength to brickwork and plasterboard; timber lining boards with limed finish **Doors** Capral aluminium frames **Flooring** Ground floor: concrete slab; Units 1–2: Floorspace 'Gunsmoke' sisal carpet; Units 3–7: Godfrey Hirst 'Mink' Condo Plush carpet **Kitchen** Fisher & Paykel DishDrawers; Kleenmaid and Smeg rangehoods; Kleenmaid freestanding ovens; stainless steel benches with integrated sinks; Scala tapware; Carrara marble splashbacks; white gloss laminate cupboards **Bathroom** Classic Ceramics 'Black Pearl' flamed granite; matt grey and white gloss mosaic tiles; Scala tapware; Porcher Coronis wall-hung toilet; Engelfield Flaminia and Hokusai basins; custom stainless steel towel rails **Climate control** Hydronic heating; Fujitsu ducted cooling to upper-level units; deciduous vines and operable awnings to north-facing windows **External elements** Timber decking; stainless steel wires for vine

**TIME SCHEDULE**  
**Design, documentation**  
6 months  
**Construction** 12 months

**FLOOR AREA**  
400 m<sup>2</sup> per floor  
(including balconies)

**PROJECT COST**  
\$3 million

**PHOTOGRAPHY**  
Trevor Mein

**THIS PAGE: Concrete, steel and brick hint at the building's history, but the leafy facade is distinctly residential. The changing density and colour of the vines will mark the passing seasons.**