

NEW PERSPECTIVES DIMITY REED

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# Quartet born from a duo's best intentions

Sustainable design lies at the core of this spirited project.

**E**LWOOD is the sleepy seaside sister of sexy all-night St Kilda and in one of its wide tree-lined streets sit four new townhouses. They are the first completed project by Karen Alcock and Clare McAllister, who, in their previous lives as founder and directors of Neometro, reinvented the laneways and backyards of Richmond and went on to design and build some of the most interesting multi-unit housing projects seen across inner Melbourne.

As the scope of Neometro's projects grew, the firm split recently into a development company, Neometro, and the architectural practice, McAllister Alcock Architects (MAA), with both arms working together and independently.

The brief for this project was to develop two house sites with four townhouses while minimising impact on the environment.

The buildings fit in with their neighbours at first glance and then surprise with the more refined elements of the building form.

The front elevation captures the seaside spirit of Elwood and reflects the marine-inspired apartments that dot the nearby beachfront.

The windows, boxed delicately in thin strips of black steel, and varying in shape along the four facades, cut into the brick front wall, which has been treated to a natural sand render. The winter-bare street trees of July reveal the simple, robust form of the building, while in summer these trees will almost completely obstruct views of the building from the street.

The plans are typical of the type, with living areas at the lower level and three bedrooms and a study above. The two end houses have



A bright spiral staircase (left) leads to the rooftop deck (below), while the exterior offers an interesting street presence (below left).

PICTURES: TREVOR MEIN



side courtyards cut in while the middle townhouses have been designed around spacious central internal courtyards to allow light and cross-ventilation to every room. Within the courtyards, gorgeous orange spiral stairs penetrate the buildings to access the roof decks.

The internal detailing is considered and simple; these are

houses intended to be lived in. On the lower level, the polished concrete floor provides good thermal mass to the living areas at the back, and openings in all facades maximise cross-ventilation.

The rear elevation is folded to capture the north sun and clad in slatted timber in varying patterns. This change in material creates a more tactile and intimate edge to

the private gardens while control and definition of sunlight is provided by the double-height, wisteria-clad pergolas. In addition to sun screening, louvres attached to the pergolas prevent overlooking of the private open space of adjoining properties, eliminating the need for window screens.

The client was a local who had lived in one of the existing houses

and wanted to make a contribution to the suburb.

Both client and architects were keen to investigate sustainability at every level, so they selected builders, contractors and landscape architects who worked and lived locally; they wanted people who understood and cared about the area in which they were building. This approach must have helped integrate the proposal with its context immediately.

This Spray Street project demonstrates that good sustainable design is more than a shopping basket of environmentally sustainable design systems but must start at the core of the project, the DNA of the building, with passive design principles such as cross-ventilation, natural light and the use of thermal mass.

These are not new ideas but, in the rush to integrate new systems into building design, they are often lost.

The landscaping has been designed and planted by Defriest Sapontsis to reflect the indigenous planting of the sand belt and provide a drought-tolerant garden that presents a lush contrast to the simplicity of the building form. Hard landscaping has been minimised to increase site permeability. In addition to passive solar and ventilation initiatives, the project also incorporates rainwater harvesting and solar hot water to the four townhouses.

These townhouses show how architecture can capture the spirit of a place by recognising its built and social character and its sense of itself.