

BLACK BEAUTY

A young practice designs a home that's soulful despite its monochrome palette, simple lines and project-house budget.

PHOTOGRAPHER: SHANNON MCGRATH PRODUCER/TEXT: ANNEMARIE KEELY

Responding to a steep slope and a client desire to be grounded in the landscape, Studiofour positioned a public living box at the lowest level of the golf-estate site and fanned off a series of portal-framed decks. Porter's Paints' 'Palm Beach' black stain was applied to the mahogany cladding of the structure to make it disappear into the encircling scrub. Details, last pages.

Deferring to nature for colour and sculptural interest, the designers made a living-room feature of one windswept tea-tree with a dramatic double-height window powder-coated in black. The low-key aesthetic of a pair of Hans Wegner 'Plank' chairs is matched by a coffee table and cushions custom-designed by Studiofour.





IF YOU WANT to get architects going, just prompt discussion of project housing. Odds on they'll start posturing about their profession's ability to deliver superior service in a superior structure that is nuanced to place, personality, and patterns of behaviour... all for the same price as a 'production-line project' that approximates every man and every situation. It is a moot point, really, until they present with a piece of architecture that makes concrete this claim.

Meet Annabelle Berryman and Sarah Henry, the co-directors of Studiofour – an emerging design practice so named after its service scope of art, architecture, interior and landscape design. They got the gig to design a primary place of residence on a sloping site in a coveted golf-course estate on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula because they were prepared to match a housing company's package price. And that wasn't by undercutting their professional fees or stripping structure back to a barely functioning shell; it was by doing the very thing they say they were educated to do – respond to the brief with an intelligent resourcefulness.

"Our clients had approached many project housing companies with the request to build something close to the ground," recalls Berryman of a sea-change couple wanting a new house positioned at the low level of a block that falls sharply from the street. "They didn't want to float podium-style above the tree tops like all their topography-cancelling neighbours; they expressed the need for varying levels of interaction and connection with the landscape and for separation between public and private zones."

But this was going to incur a hefty excavation cost. "So they turned to us and asked, 'What can you do for the same amount?'" Factoring in the requisite site dig, the Studiofour team costed for a multi-level scheme ideally spilling down the slope (introspective private space at the top, public nestled in the lower link's scrub). And they matched the square-metre rate of a project house presumed built on the flat surface. "We were very happy with

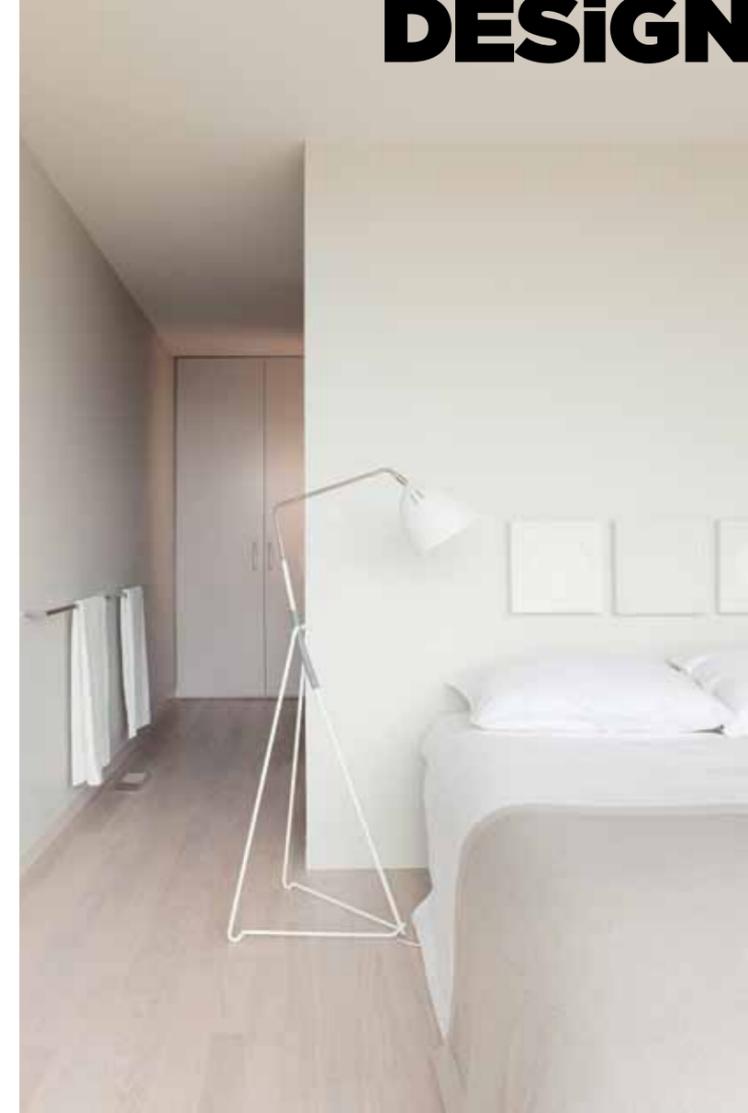


that," says Berryman. "Sure, the end house may not have all the bells and whistles – the integrated stereo system in every room – but we budgeted for things with bigger long-term benefits, such as double glazing, big sliding doors and a double-height steel window to frame that one beautiful windswept tea-tree" – a form that perhaps would have been cropped or completely obscured by the predetermined modules of a project house. They invested in the intangibles – light, largesse and the secret little space – that while not instantly apparent, add soulful dimension and story to inert structure. Yes, they were forced to slash spending in typically 'exxy' service areas to afford the site excavation, but they distracted from this frugality with a drama of colour and an ambiguity of space. Low-cost hardware was selected over designer fixture, limed tallowwood flooring over oak, an Ikea-faced kitchen (brilliantly blacked out with paint) over stone and veneered surface, and private and public blocks interlocking via a view-channelling stairwell. "That stair was important both in terms of directing visitors to lower-level living and making big mystery of the small house," says Berryman, a former design director at Metier3 and former director at Carr Design.

Explaining that their every project begins with an extended workshop in which the computers are turned off, Henry describes a studio design process that is first informed by pencil play. "Our collective of artists and designers use different media to explore the client's brief and site particulars over a number of days," she says. "What emanates from these sessions may be a charcoal line drawing that captures the essence of vision for the project."

In this case, their conceptual splodges and lines translated into multi-level, mahogany-clad blocks stained the same light-soaking black as their charcoal sketches. "Porter's Paints do the best pitch black," Henry says, adding that this no-colour carries through to the kitchen to distract from its low-cost materials and to kill the effect of bodies floating in an all-white living space (as viewed from outside).

Some might tag their monochrome holism minimalist, but that wouldn't account for the palpable emotion that resonates in every room of this seemingly simple house, designed around sacred geometries and simple shadows that serve to put you at peace. "We are simply not the same people in whatever room we are in," chips in Berryman, paraphrasing philosopher Alain de Botton's view on the benefits of good architecture. "If a better house can fit the budget, why not be in it?" We clearly see her point. ANNEMARIE KIELY
For Studiofour enquiries, visit studiofournews.com.



A monochromatic Danish luxe pervades the lower-level kitchen, **opposite, top**, set with an oak Mads Johansen dining table and N.O. Møller chairs, and living room (**below**), furnished with Jardan's 'Bosko' sofa and a Nanna Ditzel side table. The artwork, *Perspex 01*, is by Studiofour, a thank-you gift inspired by the project. Featuring a Jenny Bäck-designed 'Lean Light', the master bedroom, **above**, is located in the street-facing private box, **below**. Details, last pages.



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