



M+C RESIDENCE by Philippa Mowbray Architects. Image: Joel Barbita

m+c residence

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Strong versus discreet.

Driving around Devil's Elbow early this morning, high above the river, I was captivated by the beauty of the glimmering water in the morning sun, the remnants of Point Walter like an island breaking the smooth surface. I looked towards the sheer cliffs that form a cove for some of our city's most exclusive abodes, all vying for access to the best views of the Swan. This is one of Perth's most spectacular settings. It is a unique neighbourhood, a special pocket of homes, and the M&C residence by Philippa Mowbray Architects is a standout.

In this context, often the sheer scale of the houses is enough to intimidate visitors and passers-by. It is the skilful duality of this building that is the key to its success. Philippa Mowbray and her team have navigated a 13 metre fall across the site with a calmness and connectivity to the ground that is striking. When many of the neighbours appear perched skyward ready to take flight, this building is settled into its landscaped nest comfortably and securely. The clients requested an "earth connected" house rather than a "sky" house and that goal was achieved with finesse.

On a battleaxe block, the main visitor and pedestrian entrance is to the west of the house via the narrow leg of the block and the vehicular and family entry to the east. You would expect the most magical moment when visiting

this house to involve the spectacular views. But for me, one of the major triumphs of the design is the entry transition sequence that transports you from the street, via a beautifully landscaped walkway, through a gated entry court, guided by the sound of trickling water to the front door. The journey is quiet, calm and discreet and belies the scale and breathtaking views that await beyond. From the moment you begin the journey towards the house from the street, the skilful integration of the architectural language and the landscaping is evident.

Clever planning enables the house to be grounded at each level in spite of the 13 metre cliff-like slope across the site. The main bedroom and living areas are all on one level at the top, with the guest domain on the mid level. A monolithic concrete base at the bottom of the cliff accommodates the garage. All living and bedroom spaces have direct access to external courtyards and terraces. Abundant natural light is drawn into the house from these external spaces which have been carefully landscaped to prevent overlooking from neighbours.

Needless to say, the river views are to die for! Almost every space in the house has access to these views. Carefully crafted screening devices effectively modulate sun, wind and rain. The large living area on the top level opens up to both north and east, turning the house into a balcony seemingly hovering above the

water yet still connected to the ground. The architect's project mantra for this building "Strong versus Discreet" is played out on many levels. The strength of the cliff location is emulated in the solidity of the articulated concrete base, offering security and a sense of discretion for the inhabitants. This is contrasted by the lightness of the glazed top level that is set back and floats high above Saunders Street but offers a unique sense of privacy despite its spectacular transparency. Within the house, each space is strongly and beautifully grounded to its own outdoor earth, while also opening out to the river and the sky in an almost fragile and private way... like nobody else is looking.

The detailing and material selection is meticulous and sophisticated. The palette is simple, but strong. The detailing is crafted and finely finished, yet has a robustness that will stand the test of time. It is understated, not ostentatious, like the house itself. The landscaping thoughtfully integrates the house back into the cliff and blurs the delineation between shelter, earth, river and sky.

This project has been skilfully designed. It has overcome the challenges of a difficult site, an expansive client brief and an imposing neighbourhood. It is subtle in its strength. It is delightful in its discretion. We could all aspire to that. ■