

REVISITED

Crigan
HOUSE
by Allan Powell
Architects

• MELBOURNE, VIC •

Completed in 1988–1989 and recently refurbished, this distinctive St Kilda home by Allan Powell expresses a “painterly vision of architecture” and continues to be a delightful setting for celebratory events.

Words by Leon van Schaik
Photography by Shannon McGrath

01 When viewed from the street, the large, red front door is framed by an aedicular portal in the faux ruined garden wall.



In the early evening a jogger runs down a street in St Kilda towards the bay. From the corner of his eye he sees something unusual in the trees – it is a cocktail party in full swing. He pauses, turns and jogs backwards as he takes in the scene: above the street boundary wall, revellers are tied into the tree canopies. Curiosity quenched, he runs on; parties happen often in this bayside suburb. The revellers are here to celebrate the renovation of the house, originally built in 1989 for the Crigans, a couple retiring to the seaside, and now restored for its current owner Ross Mollison, an impresario, who was raised in Melbourne but is a resident of New York. While Ross doesn't live here, the house is his sentimental stake in his home city – a party house, a locus for occasional, celebratory events.

In this, the house reveals a Palladian

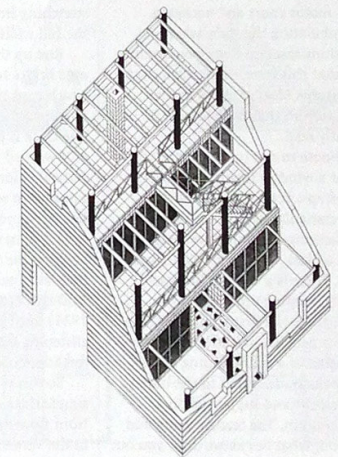
strand in its lineage, joining the party pavilions of Chiswick House (Lord Burlington, 1729) and the Casino at Marino (Sir William Chambers, 1775), structures designed to host parties and conceal all signs of ordinary life. Attuned to fantasies of retirement and suited to prodigal returns, this is a perfectly conscious lineage, given that the architect is the hyper-self-aware Allan Powell. Like these precedents and Powell's fascination with what he describes as a "simple-minded provincial civic-ness," the Crigan House appears far larger and more accommodating than it is.

On the ground floor, partly protected from the street by a cutaway garden wall, are the spaces that serve ordinary living: a main bedroom suite, a spare room, a study, a bathroom and a utilities room. These spaces, modest in size and tightly and functionally

planned, form the substantial base to the terraces above. A plane of dark glass runs the full width of the facade, obscuring the individual rooms behind it. As in the Veneto, the engine of their seeming mass is an overwhelming symmetry asserted by the powerful thrust of a staircase to the upper floor, set centrally in a wide lobby that stretches from the front to the back of the house. When viewed from the street, the large, red front door is framed (a faint hint of postmodernism) by an aedicular portal in the faux ruined garden wall. The door sits, glass panels to either side, in a black tiled portal, its startling redness unsettling the location of the entrance and rendering its size indeterminable.

If you constrain your desire to rise up in the building and instead walk around the base of the stair, you will find, beyond

- 02 The house reveals a Palladian strand in its lineage, joining pavilions designed to host parties and conceal all signs of ordinary life
- 03 An overwhelming symmetry is asserted by the powerful thrust of a staircase to the upper floor, set centrally in a wide lobby.
- 04 The fireplace is housed in a white stepped form flanking the stair.



Isometric drawing (1989)



another red door set between glazed sidelights, a motor court and backyard. In circumambulating the stair, which floats on a shiny terrazzo floor, you become very aware that this is an element plucked from the Platonic ideal of stairs and set here in isolation so that its "facture" is independently read.

If you choose to rise up that stair, you will arrive at a window looking out over St Kilda rooftops. Your arrival is held by two large rectangular objects – a stepped white one flanking the stair immediately to the left and a black, oblong kitchen island to the right. There is a bias to the right caused by the opening up of the space. As you turn, there is a first glimpse of the bay through a pergola, partially obscured by the elevation of a stair running along the terrace balustrade lateral to the initial axis of movement and supported on a pale yellow column. The teasing views and curiosity about what lies above draw you out onto a wide external terrace. Glancing back through glazed doors you realize that you

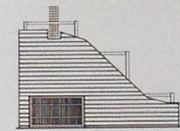
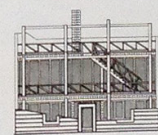
have risen into a single rectangular room stretching from party wall to laneway wall – the full width of the house.

Rise up the lateral stairs and you arrive on a bridge to a pergola-framed roof terrace, which runs the full size of the room below. This space is slightly surreal. A black-tiled flue stack is placed seemingly autonomously, as if wrested from a "ship's graveyard." This vertical oblong counters and confounds association with the fireplace it serves, housed, as you discover when you return to face it, in the white stepped form flanking the stair. This dissociation makes the walled terrace reminiscent of the Beistegui Apartment in Paris (Le Corbusier, 1931) until the view over the trees to the glistening slivers of the bay wrests you back to Melbourne.

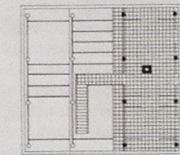
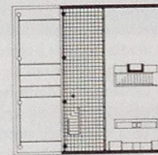
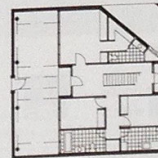
So this is a one-room-deep house, a simple thick wall of space separating formal front from utile back as Palladian mansions in the Veneto do: they assemble, as Guilford Bell might have said, "cowsheds" to create theatrically the impression of mass.

05 Teasing views and curiosity about what lies above draw you out onto a wide external terrace that runs the full width of the house.

06 After climbing the first flight of stairs and turning right towards the kitchen, a glimpse of the bay is offered through the pergola, partially obscured by the elevation of the external stair.



Elevations (1989) 1:400



Ground floor (1989) 1:400

First floor (1989) 1:400

Roof terrace (1989) 1:400

07

07 The stair element is plucked from the Platonic ideal of stairs, set in isolation so that its facture is independently read.



08

08 The pergola-framed roof terrace is accessed via a bridge at the top of the external stairs.




This makes arrival or the prospect of arriving tantalizing, makes being there an event and departure a ceremony.

Original models and isometric drawings reveal that this building articulated a cusp in Melbourne's architectural history at the moment that postwar modernism gave way, as did the city's dining and drinking mores, to a more nuanced engagement with cultural possibilities. The more casual working drawings reveal the poetics of this shift, using faded tones, foliage and Powell's signature palms; while the presentation drawings, emphasizing a grid of red columns, show a knowingness about Italian theory, at a time when Aldo Rossi could still be seen to be exploring types inherent in Palladian thinking.

In the Crigan House, the muscular postwar thinking embedded in the designs for the Case Study Houses and adopted by Boyd and Grounds and their followers gives way for the first time to a painterly vision of architecture, in which real space is confounded by the mind's assembling and reassembling of bland geometric elements in black, white, red and yellow within a

meccano of columns and beams. These elements, if seen as static, are rather like a Fernand Léger painting depicting factory work, but they are not arranged in a fixed narrative composition. They swirl and settle, swirl again and resettle around the rituals of daily occupation while the sun marks time sweeping through the spaces as the earth rotates. Even in the main ensuite, the chamfer of the wall cut to accommodate a car entrance to the yard from the lane – shades of the Villa Savoye (Le Corbusier, 1931) is used to make the space seem endless, undefinable in extent.

A house like this is not for any age; it is for all ages. Its elements are "sketched in just enough," the "hand of the designer is held back ..." The materials too are "arte povera" – humble, they recede and cannot readily become a topic of conversation.

The jogger ran on in youthful exuberance. Maybe he will own the house one day, and hold a party here, and watch for a former self running past as his memories fill the spaces between the red, the black, the white and yellow solids that fluidly define the spatiality of the house. 

Architect

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Practice profile

Powell and Glenn, originally established by Allan Powell under his own name in 1980, is one of Melbourne's leading design-oriented architecture practices.

Builder

Bob Crigan of Claudius (original work)
Jeff Lowther (refurbishment)

Consultants

Engineer: Tribe Consulting Engineers (original work)
Landscape design: Kate Seddon Landscape Design (refurbishment)
Interior designer: Edwina Glenn (refurbishment)
Furniture: Courtesy of Space

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