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# Creative Archaeology

Photography Matthew Stanton

Review Paul Carter

Project Clifton Hill House

Architect Sharif Abraham Architects







## | 01 &amp; 02

Two views of the remarkable ebony veneer applied to the living space. Left: perspective from the living room. Right: north from the dining room.



Clifton Hill, Melbourne



02

Drawing on the 'creative archaeology' of the client's migrant family history, the **Clifton Hill House** is both radically nostalgic and also future-forward. It is erotic, art deco, filmic, transcendental and 'surgical' all at once – a nexus of interlocking dreams and desires.

S harif Abraham's Clifton Hill House bears the trace of earlier aspirations to innovate. The client invited the architect to engage with the legacy of what remained of the previous house, on a site with a mildly irregular trapezoid aspect, an ample but narrowly elongated suburban block fixed like a strut between two converging roads. The ruins of the dwelling boasted brushstroked wall figures, suggesting floor plans. More tangibly, the client's immigrant forebear had constructed a mezzanine and intended to add a roof terrace. Taking possession of this new 'acre of air' would have afforded him personal views of the adjacent parkland.

Migrant turret building abounds in inner-suburban Melbourne, often accompanied by elaborate staircases, balconies and corridors, suggesting isolationist and utopian sensibilities, as if construction of a view can overcome certain emotional blockages at ground level. The challenge was partly to interpret the ruin of an unfulfilled future, and to realise what had been left undone involved a creative archaeology, made all the more intriguing because preliminary renovation of the older building had reduced it to a shapeless carcass. Whatever lay dormant in the spirit of place would have to be reawakened by a design both radically nostalgic, and historically and psychologically transcendent.

Abraham was asked to develop a design that would have art deco features, an allusion to the original occupant's tastes that was bound to be deeply ambiguous, as it invoked no house that had ever been but rather a dream of ornamented dwelling projected onto the screen of the future. Nostalgia, a longing for home, is in the migrant dispensation an arrow fired at a future place. Similarly, the new house would not only have to accommodate the functions of a contemporary family, it would need to create room for unfinished identifications – dreamed dwellings, as well as spaces, choreographed for everyday comfort. In contrast to the typical expectation that an architect produce a design capturing a client's identity, Abraham negotiated the craft space in which latent visions of belonging could continue to be incubated. Instead of cocooning fixed identities, the Clifton Hill House's deft and generous assemblage of corridors, stairs and sharply contrasting, mysterious inner rooms amplifies something about the nature of 'a house' that is not reducible to living arrangements.

Philosopher Hannah Arendt once wrote: 'The word "house" is something like a frozen thought that thinking must unfreeze whenever it wants to find out the original meaning.' There are subliminal agreements articulated in Abraham's remarkable design: between unfinished



migrant designs and the continuing necessity of visions of belonging, and between the 'visible' house (the client's 'dream') and the invisible house (what Arendt calls 'the unseen measure' holding 'the limits of all things').

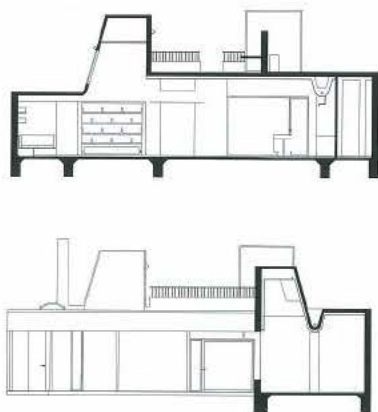
Abraham has created a warm synthesis of feeling and intellect, an erotic mind/body fusion that makes sense in tactile and kinaesthetic ways. Identification is empathetic and aggressive – a desire to become someone (or somewhere) else. It implies vulnerability – a sense of mortality – and a determination to 'breakthrough', not only architecturally but socially and psychologically. In an extraordinarily orchestrated and narrated arrangement of interior spaces, it exploits the ambiguity of appearances and relationships. The black-tiled bathroom reflects the intimate nakedness of bathing bodies but only in the key of darkness. The magnificent corridor is lofty and clinical, like a Tarkovsky set, leading with surgical precision to an exit that, to invoke Abraham's own distinction, has utility but no overbearing function.

Surgical metaphors appeal to Abraham. His creative archaeology involves the replacement of organs, the cosmetic refurbishment of dishevelled space, by its expressive resurfacing and lighting. However his empathetic artistry transcends controlled detachment, as in the cheeky surrealism of the kitchen joinery handles, or the astonishing ebony veneer applied to the walls and ceiling of the main living space, sourced from a drowned tree. Regarding the 'waste' spaces of the house, Abraham speaks of that which comes out at night, the supplement of hopes and fears that houses contain. In the Clifton Hill House, such expression is apparent in the sub-ceiling void or the 'borrowed space' of the second storey setback, which not only dovetails inner and outer spaces but suggests a shadow volume.

This house is further evidence of a highly expressive and exciting talent. Like earlier commissions, notably the Red Hill House (2001) and the Flinders House (2007), it integrates cultural and physical readings of site character with a brilliant capacity to reinterpret native and international architectural vernaculars. The result is a creative assemblage, a new house. Typologies (family histories, architectural anatomies, palimpsestic future visions of recurrent dreams) are crafted into drawings, or into arrangements of walls, where windows, as Abraham remarks, recover their association with privilege, emancipation and epiphany. Volumes transform what was ruined into the precious scaffolding of unfolding futures.

The Clifton Hill House is a revelation because it insists on the role that enigma plays in feeling at home: there is always something beyond and it is in the house, or

Section Plan



03

**Project Details** Architect: Sharif Abraham — Project team: Sharif Abraham, Kristin Green — Builder: Rossi Constructions Aus. Pty Ltd — Town Planning: Streetwise — Structural Engineer: Kennedy Cox & Associates Pty Ltd — Building Surveyor: Fisher Dowell Pty Ltd — Land surveyor: Nisha Moore Land Surveyors Pty Ltd — Project size: 250 sqm — Completion: Two years — Council: City of Yarra

## | 03

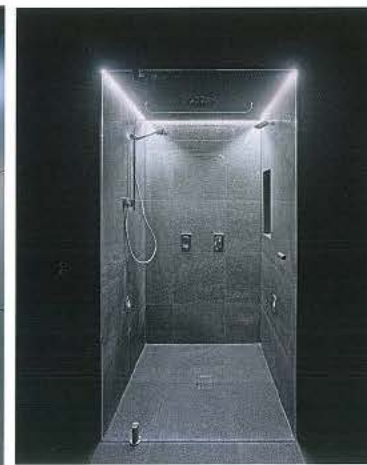
The outdoor area at night: a carefully orchestrated, narrated space.

## | 04 &amp; 05

Like something from a Tarkovsky film: cupboard space (left) and shower recess (right).



04



05



Ground Plan



## Ground Plan

- |            |             |                  |
|------------|-------------|------------------|
| 01 Entry   | 06 Bathroom | 11 Cupboards     |
| 02 Living  | 07 En suite | 12 Utility/store |
| 03 Kitchen | 08 Laundry  | 13 Study         |
| 04 Dining  | 09 Hall     | 14 Garage        |
| 05 Bedroom | 10 Deck     |                  |