

ANCIENT AND MODERN

Evoking old Roman villas with its courtyard and pool, one of Auckland's most urbane houses, now 15 years old, is still resolutely contemporary.

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Designed by Patterson Architects in 1993, the Summer Street house features an inviting courtyard behind a formidable front fence.

The gang headquarters-chic of this house in Auckland's Ponsonby has never quite caught on. But the brusque appearance of its formidable exterior wall masks what is one of the city's most urbane houses. Don't be put off by the provocative gesture of the cold, hard street frontage, because it conceals what is a very good model for inner-city homes.

This house, designed by Patterson Architects and built in the early 1990s, has recently undergone a minor renovation (also conducted by Pattersons) for a new owner. It wouldn't be right to call it a facelift, however. That stern facade the house presents to the street remains unchanged, something I'm sure gives city planners conniptions. This is a street of pretty villas and although this home's aggressive appearance from the street would

INSIDE



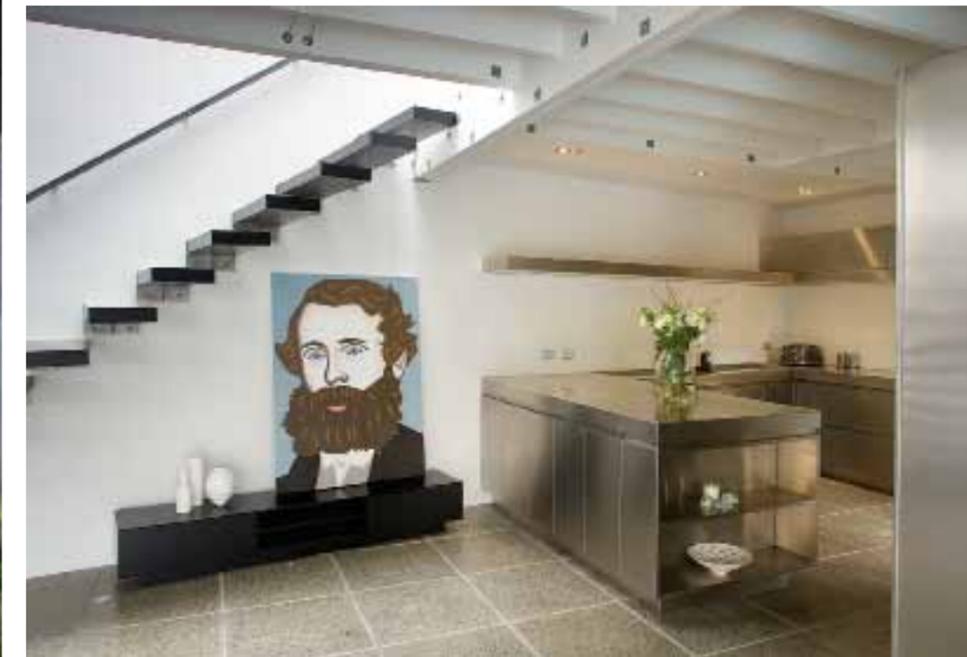
The home's main living areas are contained in a double-storeyed volume at the rear of the courtyard, where a new screen now filters light to the upper level. The outdoor lounge is from Matisse. The home's forbidding front fence tilts open (opposite page, above left). Inside, light enters the living spaces from a skylight above the stairs (above far right). The artwork is by Gavin Hurley, the bench is by Simon James and the ceramics are from Matisse. The living room features new cabinetry and a sofa by Patricia Urquiola from Matisse (right). A detail of the exterior screen (far right).

seem out of place, it is important to remember that it is just one site back from Ponsonby Road, in the vomit zone of that sybaritic mile of late-night bars and restaurants. In the early hours these side-streets echo to the cries and car alarms of departing revelers. And in the cold light of day, it is right next-door to the busy service areas and carparks of the neighbouring shops and cafés. Amid all this very urban hubbub, this house doesn't look out of place at all. In all likelihood, most Aucklanders find the 24-hour towaway sign more fearsome than the façade.

Beyond the front wall (a section of which is tilted open dramatically to allow visitors to enter) is a lovely courtyard, centred on a pool, with living spaces arranged around it. When first built, there was much talk of the house as "urban bach", perhaps because of its simplicity, its openness to the outdoors or its extensive use of tin. I never quite bought into that. After all, the atrium house is an ancient form of city living that goes back millennia to Roman times. Atrium houses rub shoulders and share exterior

walls with neighbours, but turn in on themselves and are very introspective and private on the inside. The New Zealand obsession with the suburb and the view has seen us create little boxes in the landscape, surrounded by land, but a lot of it is useless: too exposed, too shady, too small to be useful. In the courtyard house, the beloved backyard is at the centre of things – and there's no need for a lawnmower here.

Around this courtyard are arranged a garage, a pool room (that can also serve as an office or guest room), shaded loggias and at the rear, the two-storey structure that could be called the house proper, including two bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs, and living, kitchen and dining downstairs. The beauty of the atrium house is you can spread things around a bit and get away from each other. There is even a little terraced lookout above the office up on the street-front battlement. Despite the pool in the middle, which is more swimming hole than luxurious lagoon, there is



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a pleasing air of order, modesty and simplicity about the place.

Inside the main structure, set at the back of the site, is the smallish kitchen, living and dining area downstairs. This place is smaller than you imagine, but on the other hand, it makes full and efficient use of its site. All the indoor-outdoor space is well-suited to Auckland's balmy climate, with lots of shady retreats providing refuge from the sun. The way the entry to the living area is slightly recessed also means it is possible to keep the doors open when it rains. The house is open to the sun and air but protected from the elements. Light pervades the entire space, including the courtyard, which through the day works a little like a sundial, with shadows lengthening in the weakening autumnal light, but as the sun rides lower in the sky it reaches deeper into the rooms.

Inside the main building, a skylight over cantilevered stairs means light from above pours down the back boundary wall, drawing you up to the bedroom level. In the bathroom too, with the fronds of a palm waving just outside the window, the soft light filtering in from above has a calming and relaxing effect like being in a grove. The living room ceiling maintains this aura of simplicity with exposed joists rather than the usual slick plasterboard plane.

This is a crisp, industrial-quality house, not afraid to expose its nuts, bolts and steel plates, which imparts a sense of strength and honesty, the steel-age equivalent of rustic charm. The recent alterations have finessed its appearance, with new cabinetry and a slightly projecting balcony, and a new screen in front of the upstairs bedroom



The main bedroom looks over the courtyard (left). The bathroom (above) is at the end of the upstairs corridor, with an overhead skylight bringing light into the upper level (right).



windows. This screen, with its vertical louvres, not only allows finer tuning for solar protection, but is a slightly more artful device than the old one, which was reminiscent of a garage door. The new screen's 'V' shape and fins evoke a sense of expanding ripples beyond those found in the pool below. This is a beautiful diamond-like effect, a tin jewel that adds sparkle to the muted, monochromatic palette of colours and materials.

Back outside, the home's rude tin facade may mark the building as a little fortress, eminently defensible come the breakdown of civilisation, but this masks a civilised style of atrium house that has served metropolitan mankind well for millennia. The problem now is that you couldn't build another house like this in this location, as the planners have changed its zoning designation from business to residential. That's a real shame, because the city could do with more of this sort of house – simple and economical, sensible and charming; a rare place of tranquility in the inner city. •