

# Controlled Moments

Photography Richard Glover

Review Craig Johnson

Project Kharkov, Sydney, Australia

Architect Collins and Turner



In **Bellevue Hill**, in Sydney's eastern suburbs, Collins and Turner have repurposed a crumbling home into a castle-like lair, slicing into an imposing, 17-metre cliff face. Craig Johnson unpacks the intricacies of this intriguing project

**Y**ou're at street level, about to enter a modest, glazed doorway hidden away inside a wall of sandstone slabs. Inside there's a high-ceilinged tunnel, and much cooler air than outside. To your left is a large, exposed rock wall, hand detailed and subtly lit – effectively a dramatic work of art, damp and dripping into a discrete catch below. As you make your way along a catwalk-style path, elevated from the ground by a few centimetres, you come to another entrance and a glass passenger lift.

The lift has a kind of reverse MONA effect, the ascent offering a myopic view of the raw sandstone shaft lit by skylight. Soon enough, after the equivalent of three floors, your airtight world is replaced as in a revelation. The lift arrives inside an entirely frameless, cantilevered glass box and you're bathed in bright, iris-shrinking natural light, deposited atop a cliff with big skies above and expansive views all round. Welcome to Kharkov, a dramatic, reconditioned 1914 house in Sydney's eastern suburbs.

Kharkov celebrates conspicuous consumption in a single-family private dwelling, and is likely to provoke and irritate as much as it excites and inspires. For here we have nothing less than the transformation of a veritable 'Fraggle Rock', a fragile, inaccessible cliff extending 17 metres below the house into an excavated, secure expansion, with mixed-use landings on the way down and a garage at street level.

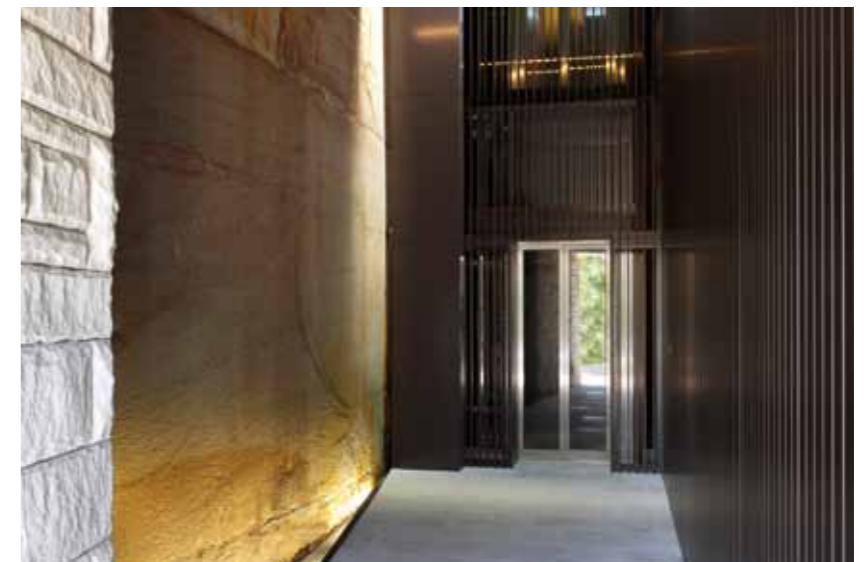
The client wanted 'landscape' and 'accessibility' as much as 'architecture', so a number of different functions were scripted together over the once-precarious cliff face. A major component was the replacement of a mechanical inclinator that had serviced the house since 1960 – it was old and slow, unprotected from the elements and could be trusted only to break down, especially in a downpour. Replacing it with a lift would make the walk-up issue disappear and celebrate the site's vertically dramatic possibilities. This alone (the lift is a German machine-room-less prefab, assembled →

## | 01

In such a dramatic setting, the turret effect is unavoidable

## | 02

Approaching the lift, and the reverse MONA effect



| 03

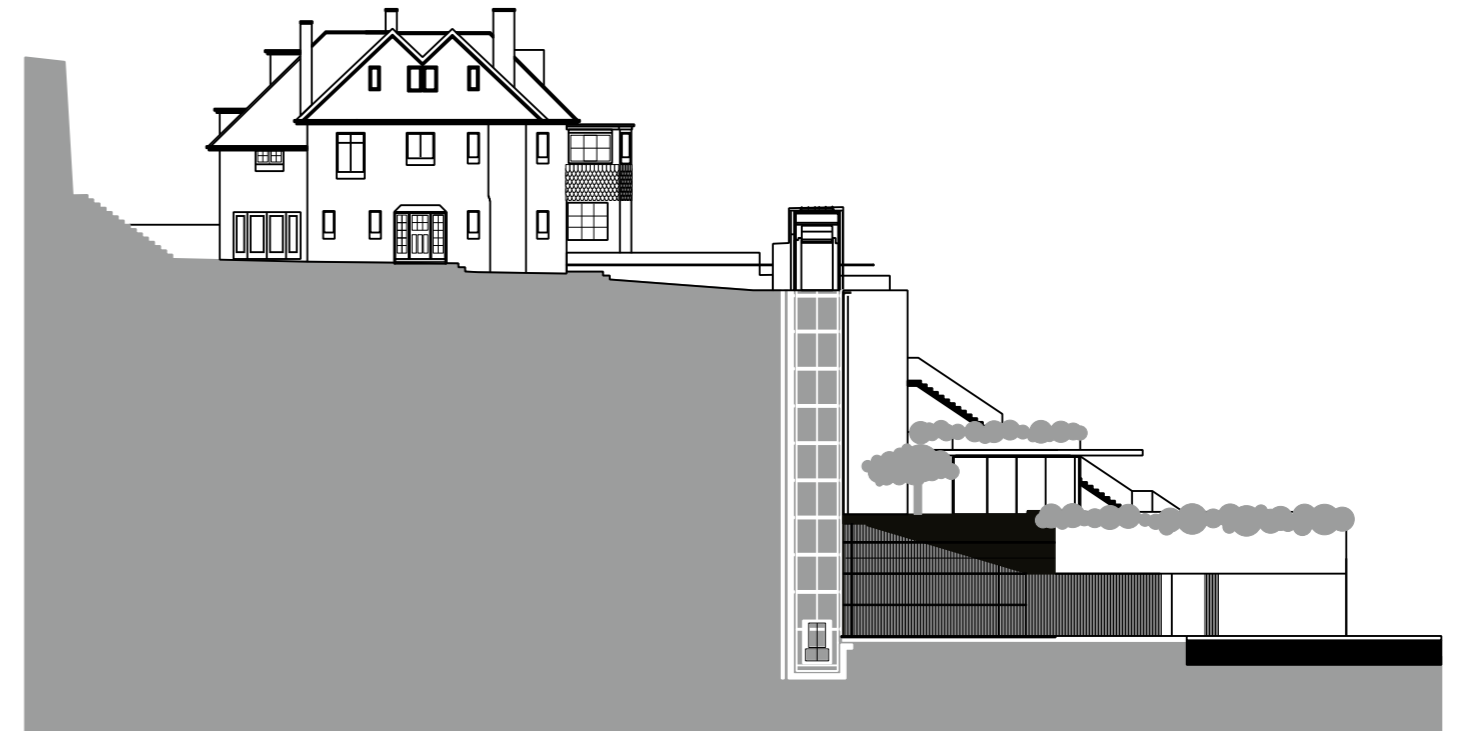
The 18-metre pool slices through the site



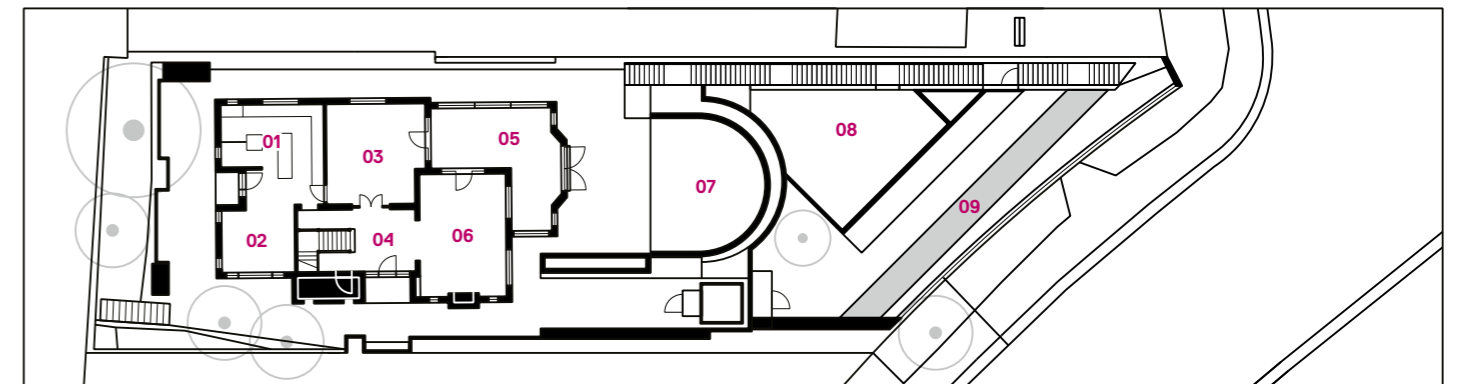
→ in Marrickville) is a major statement in residential living, although the client wanted other conspicuous lifestyle trappings including a cabana, a special landing complete with its own lift stop and an 18-metre lap pool covering the width of the landing.

The elements don't quite gel as a whole but that's what makes the project interesting, with juxtapositions of light and dark, old and new, rustic and slick, wet and dry, high and low. Most obviously, the main house points to old-world conservatism whereas the new, quasi-modernistic, lightly constructed and angular cabana, cut into rock, screams 'new world'. When the sandstone was found to be strong and aesthetically interesting, stones from the site were used in the property's retaining walls and artfully exposed in the street entry and inside the cabana, where a glass wall slides directly into the stone. Also inside the cabana is a shower 'pod' with mirrored 'periscope' skylight, creating zigzag lighting effects and signalling Collins and Turner's commitment to controlled moments of chance and detail. →

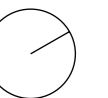
South Elevation



Site Plan



- 01 Kitchen
- 02 Study
- 03 Dining
- 04 Entry
- 05 Living/dining
- 06 Living
- 07 Terrace
- 08 Voids
- 09 Pool



Project Details

Project team Penny Collins, Huw Turner, Sara Gardhouse, Markus Bruenjes, Sonny Lee /  
Interior design & restoration of 1914 dwelling Donald Campbell Design (Donald Campbell & Bernard Vella) /  
Landscape Aspect Studios / Builder Mardini Constructions /  
Project size 952.25sqm (internal and external trafficable)



## | 04

Controlled moments of chance and detail spill from the inside to the outside

## | 05

A jumble of signifiers: high and low, light and dark, old and new

→ The main house is two storeys high, with an interior tastefully restored by designer Donald Campbell, who adhered to minimal reconstruction and maximisation of natural light and views onto the bay. A third floor was added and an attic void converted to accommodate the client's familial and professional needs, which included an additional bedroom, bathroom, study and windows. Through the windows a 20-panel photovoltaic power installation is visible, part of a project-wide plan for energy conservation.

The main house was a cut-and-dried restoration and attic extension and keeping it rather than bulldozing it was an honourable move, given its traumatic state when the client purchased it last decade. The result is light and fresh but directly in touch with its evident character. From the street, the overall appearance is not overtly modern or contemporary, being a product of both the client's conservative taste and a reverence for the suburban setting, with 'respect for context' equating to similarity.

Opposite the lift, down the entire property, is a new stone staircase where the inclinator once operated. It provides walkable accessibility to all levels and an alternative to using the lift should you stop and smell the roses – or if the lift should break down.

The stone staircase is how you reach the top of the cabana, with its own small triangular landing, where a delightful surprise awaits – a vegetable garden. That area has a rustic feel and a different tactility from the rest of the landscape, as you hop on stepping stones set into a bed of straw, amid an inspiring variety of produce including numerous herbs, tomatoes, lettuce and small fruit trees.

Elsewhere, a gigantic, semi-circular retaining wall sits in the middle of the project, rendered from sandstone excavated from the site. This has a grass lawn on top and, concealed below, a 10,000-litre capacity water tank to supply the house, pool and vegetable garden. This semi-circular wall is more formal than the rest of the site, defined by the after-image of an old kidney-shaped pool. The architects didn't want the wall to appear castle-like, but that's the effect, a turret, yet another element in the unusual mix.

Over time, however, the turret effect will be reduced by growth from planters carefully positioned around the property. Then when the vines have dropped, the new stones have darkened and the planted succulents have softened the hard stone edges, the property will have been fully absorbed into the aesthetic of its bourgeois suburban context. **ar**

