

# TAILORED TO FIT

Architect *Clare Cousins* believes every site and client deserves a bespoke approach.

Portrait SEAN FENNESSY Edited KAREN McCARTNEY



Architect Clare Cousins was shot exclusively for Belle.

**SOMETIMES THE SKILL** of an architect is evidenced in the extracting of beauty where the circumstances seem stacked against it. One such project is the Rail House by Clare Cousins Architects in which the awkwardness of the site, the clients' concerns around noise and security, not to mention heritage issues, threw down the collective gauntlet. "It is a polarising project," says Cousins of this exquisitely austere building. "The clients favoured a raw, stripped-back Japanese aesthetic and so we used black-stained cedar and concrete. The council described the building as 'mute' which was a compliment, in that it didn't compete with its surroundings," she adds.

The land, beside a suburban railway track in Melbourne's Northcote, had the inevitable challenges. "We did advise the client to take on an acoustic consultant, who thankfully proved our gut instinct of a sound absorption wall to be right," says Cousins. The security concerns of this robust, urban site were addressed by a covered walkway from the garage. "We also layered the sense of entrance by designing a loggia to provide an acoustic buffer, while using concrete blocks turned on end to create a porous facade which allows screened views in and hints at occupation," she says.

Internal courtyards draw maximum northern light into the living spaces while the bedrooms are darker and restorative in character. This was one instance of navigating client expectations. "We have an acute awareness of how to manage risk, especially in untested situations, by making sure the client is with us every step of the way."

As a practice they are aware of the need to get to know their clients quickly and that some things they are required to understand are emotional and abstract – about how something feels as well as functions. "We give clients a questionnaire to do in their own time, and it is often from the subsequent discussion that a little gem or germ of an idea becomes a springing point. We are exposed to intimate concerns in our clients' lives and our job is to open their eyes to alternatives they had never imagined," Cousins says.

Developed in parallel to the Rail House, the Gable House, in a neighbouring suburb, is a light white solution with its stepped facade encouraging different vistas and ways of connecting to the street. "These two projects, constructed by the same builder, show clearly that we don't have a 'house' style but respond to the clients and the opportunities the site provides," says Cousins.

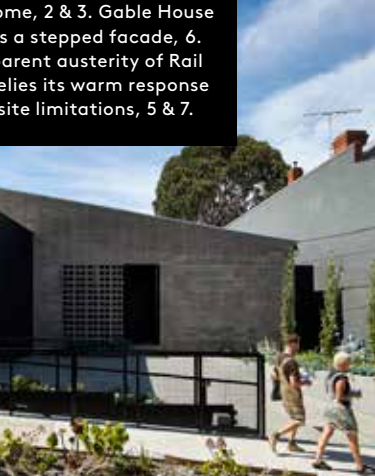
Not all the practice's projects are inner-city blocks. The issue with the Wallington House, set in an established plant nursery and vineyard in the Victorian countryside, was to reduce mass while creating connections to the site through materiality. "We designed two forms, one of which was a guest wing, and the steep slope of the land allowed the three kids' bedrooms to be underground with direct access to the grassy lawn," says Cousins. Sandstone from Western Australia, which aligned with the colour of the local earth, and adopting a rural shed typology helped to integrate the building with its surrounds. "The client and I agreed to eliminate plasterboard internally and the rustic earthy palette, including spotted gum ceilings, creates atmosphere."

Interiors are an arena where the practice shines. Cousins was keenly involved with interiors at Wood Marsh during a period when architects regarded the internals as an afterthought. "I took an interest in interiors early on and have enjoyed the micro details ever since," she says.

While the practice is growing, Cousins sees the value in taking on small, medium and large projects. "Small projects can be a great testing ground and feed into other larger-scale projects such as multi-residential where we can apply concepts in a new context." But ultimately she is cautious about who she partners with. "We have a lot of long-term relationships with repeat clients or clients who are upscaling," she adds. "Trust generates the best work."

For more go to [clarecousins.com.au](http://clarecousins.com.au).

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER BENNETTS (RAIL HOUSE), SHARYN CAIRNS (WALLINGTON HOUSE), SHANNON McGRATH (GABLE HOUSE AND HERTFORD STREET HOUSE)



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Clockwise from top Wallington House, set in a nursery and vineyard in the Victorian countryside, 1 & 4. Hertford Street House is a contemporary family home, 2 & 3. Gable House presents a stepped facade, 6. The apparent austerity of Rail House belies its warm response to the site limitations, 5 & 7.