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BUILDING *optimism*

Melissa Bright of Studio Bright has forged a robust foundation on which to express her architectural values.

Edited by **KAREN McCARTNEY** Portrait **TIM O'CONNOR**

Studio Bright's Melissa Bright was photographed exclusively for *Belle* on the 8 Yard House site in North Fitzroy, Melbourne.

PHOTOGRAPHY SEAN FENNESSY (GARDEN WALL HOUSE, 8 YARD HOUSE), RORY GARDINER (RUCKERS HILL HOUSE).



This page, clockwise from top left Award-winning Garden Wall House. Render of Coptic Orthodox Church of St Mary in development. Ruckers Hill House exterior. The nearly completed Loftus Street apartment project in Sydney's CBD. Interior of Ruckers Hill House with its stepped platform. Facade of 8 Yard House in Melbourne.



HEADING TO INTERVIEW Melissa Bright, the director of Melbourne architecture practice Studio Bright, I experience a sense of déjà vu. The office location is on a floodplain next to the Yarra River in Kew where I had met architect Peter McIntyre 14 years before to visit his groundbreaking Butterfly House (1955) for my book on iconic Australian houses. “Our team has created a much-loved home in a barn conversion that embeds our daily work in nature,” says Melissa of this extraordinary, bucolic site. Contrarily, much of the work of the practice is determinedly urban. “Give me a tight, tricky inner-city site any time. We frame it as optimistic problem-solving – a nice way to think of the puzzle,” she adds.

The studio has recently re-branded from Make Architecture to Studio Bright, and that process called for a degree of soul searching. “It was a chance to reflect on what we do and what we believe in. You have to drill down into values, really examine who you are and ask where does it go from here?” Even the tone of the words on the website got an overhaul, with Melissa determined it would be direct and open with an absence of ‘archi-speak’ to better communicate their drive for good places and responsible cities.

I suspect much of the studio’s success comes from this directness, intelligence and the value she places on the team around her, from her husband Rob McIntyre, director of design realisation, whose immense experience and love of detailing supports the younger staff, to the studio’s horticulturalist who shares Melissa’s passion for landscaping. In the life of a practice there is often a period of pivot and 2020 is such a time for Studio Bright, which has a number of projects completing that build on previous successes (Local House won a slew of awards in 2015, for example, including a National Institute of Architects Award for Alterations and Additions) that Melissa attributes to drawing the right clients. “People could see what we had done with Perimeter House and Garden Wall House. So, when they found a site they would call knowing it was something we could get our teeth into,” she says. Garden Wall House is a good example of project as puzzle. “We fought hard for every millimetre and are proud of the rigour and meticulous detailing. But when you occupy the space it has a sense of ease and generosity,” she adds.

The recently completed Ruckers Hill House employs similar gymnastics, fitting in different qualities of space with smaller areas

working hard, and landscaping programmed to include three courtyards and a rooftop garden. “We design the whole site, working within the boundary and often looking at how spaces can double up. We push every project to the max of its potential,” says Melissa.

The practice will now only take jobs where they have full oversight of the interior, so integrated are their concepts of space, storage, joinery and aesthetics. “We weave in things particular to the client. For example, in the Ruckers Hill House living room is a music performance space recessed from the daily path, where a heavy curtain is drawn across to present the childrens’ impromptu theatre, with steps forming the edge of the stage,” says Melissa.

Residential projects are important to the mental agility of the practice. Melissa sees them as a testing ground for larger scale projects. One such is a mixed-use building in Loftus Street in the Sydney CBD, part of an ambitious AMP Capital redevelopment of Circular Quay that involves Danish practice 3XN Architects and a number of local firms, including SJB, Carter Williamson and Silvester Fuller, to bring a diversity of design to the precinct. “It has been a lengthy project that started [for us] in 2014 so the friendships that have developed across the group of architects have been long lasting,” says Melissa of the project, which is due for completion in 2022.

Studio Bright’s apartments, devised as a significant part of the precinct, will be the first to be completed and will feature a facade of grey bricks, specially commissioned through Brickworks, as a contrast to the distinctive Sydney sandstone. The addition of a rooftop garden allowed for the overrun to be hidden in an amazing garden, showing that good design can also be a commercial win when the right thinking is applied. The interiors by Studio Bright were originally to be outsourced until Melissa pointed out that the client was happy to trust her with an entire facade in an iconic part of the city but not an island bench! studiobright.com.au