

Hedge and Arbour House

Emergent Studios' design for the garden of a dwelling in Melbourne's north east connects deeply with the site's bushland context and fosters an ongoing dialogue between its different inhabitants.

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Text Virginia Overell
Photography Rory Gardiner



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01 — The design for Hedge and Arbour House was driven by a desire to regenerate the site's ecology and surrounding bushland. Photo: Rory Gardiner.

02 — A recessed courtyard uses mounding to create the conditions for growth, and Austral indigo, lemon beauty heads, and she-oak are thriving. Photo: Rory Gardiner.



02

Hedge and Arbour House

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Built on the land of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people
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Emergent Studios

A hedge evokes images of English manor houses, where the opaque form marks an impenetrable line between what is public and what is private. This opacity leaves passers-by to imagine what lies beyond – typically a formal, structured garden that sits under a certain definition of “well maintained.” But behind an established Monterey cypress hedge in a leafy Melbourne suburb lies a new paradigm for what a suburban garden might be. The entry to the garden – an arch shaped by the gnarled form of the 90-year-old hedge – frames a long view, not to the house, but to the bushland reserve that sits beyond the creek along the rear of the site boundary. This first glimpse reveals the fundamental objective driving this project: ecological regeneration.

Designed by Emergent Studios, the Hedge and Arbour House garden creates a transition between Studio Bright's rigorous and rectilinear house and the fluid, unstructured bushland beyond. The existing hedge is at risk from Cypress canker (a major fungal disease affecting exotic conifers in Victoria, causing rapid die-off of branches and eventually the death of the whole plant), so the design had to imagine a new interface with the street – one in which the hedge is no longer there.

The site unfolds as a series of thresholds, with architecture and landscape in dialogue. The first is the arrival garden, then a blockwork “arbour” that works as a portal to the courtyard and the house. Here,

the living and dining area spills out to a porch and a flexible lawn with a productive garden tucked down the side, and a gravel path through a rockery leading to the bush amphitheatre. The final threshold is experienced via a goat track that leads through revegetation sloping beyond the site boundary to the creek.

The arrival garden, currently shaded by the formidable hedge, will eventually become sun-drenched grassland, where a foundation of endemic plants is complemented by sympathetically selected natives and exotic grasses and herbs. Rather than recalling a European meadow, it evokes an undeniably Australian scene. Permeable pavers laid in a staggered orthogonal pattern create niches, with plants slowly spreading, blurring the linear edges in search of their ideal growing conditions.

The pavers lead to the blockwork arbour and the steps to the recessed courtyard, transitioning to a domestic scale as you approach the front entrance. This protected space offers respite in summer – away from the west-facing back garden – and supports bi-directional living. Cut into pure clay, this space uses mounding to create the conditions for growth, and *Indigofera australis* (Austral indigo), *Calocephalus citreus* (lemon beauty heads) and *Casuarina glauca prostrate* (she-oak) are thriving. Now three years into the project, landscape architect Sarah Hicks, director of Emergent Studios, notes that though the garden is “still young ... the soil condition has come a long way.”

Project



03 — The arrival garden at Hedge and Arbour House will eventually become a sun-drenched grassland, with endemic plants, natives, and exotic grasses and herbs. Photo: Rory Gardiner.

04 — The motivation for the project was born from the client's voluntary work in bushland regeneration at a nearby reserve. Photo: Rory Gardiner.

05 — The garden of Hedge and Arbour House feels lived in and shared, and not just by its human inhabitants. Photo: Rory Gardiner.

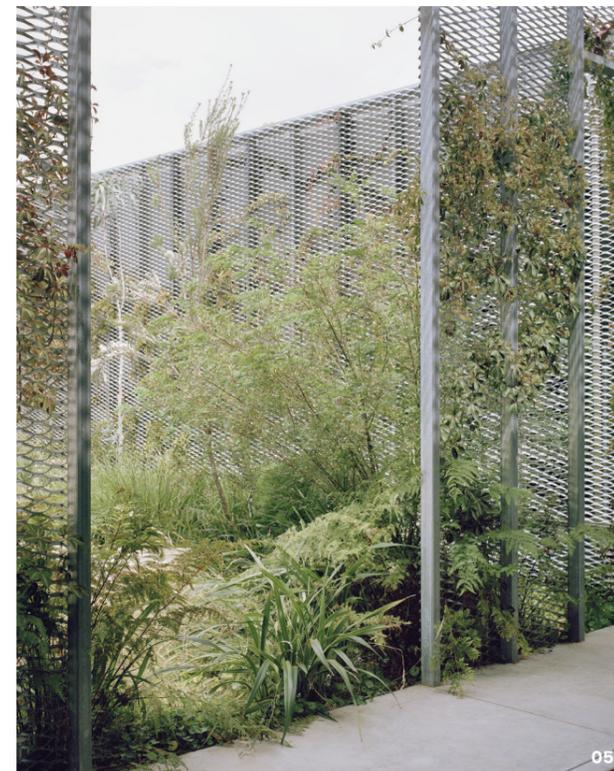
Stepping out from the central living area, an open lawn is punctuated by three embedded rocks –anchoring your vision before it drifts into the expanse beyond. Emergent Studios employed a ha-ha: a seamless, hidden retaining wall that preserves the uninterrupted view. Like an infinity pool, the vanishing edge allows the view line to flow without catching. Unlike the boundary of the hedge, the ha-ha does not enclose; rather, it marks an edge that points elsewhere, an opening-up beyond the typical home garden.

The motivation for the project was born from the client's voluntary work in bushland regeneration at a nearby reserve. As they learned about the impact (both positive and negative) that residential gardens can have on broader ecosystems, the vision for Hedge and Arbour House began. The rear of the 90-metre site slopes steeply to the creek, and this slightly treacherous terrain was overrun by weeds like morning glory and trad, which had spread downstream via the creek corridor. By weeding and planting endemic trees and shrubs, the owners are beginning to see the balance weighted towards indigenous species.

This project was slow, deliberate and collaborative. Hicks and the client began by taking a habitat

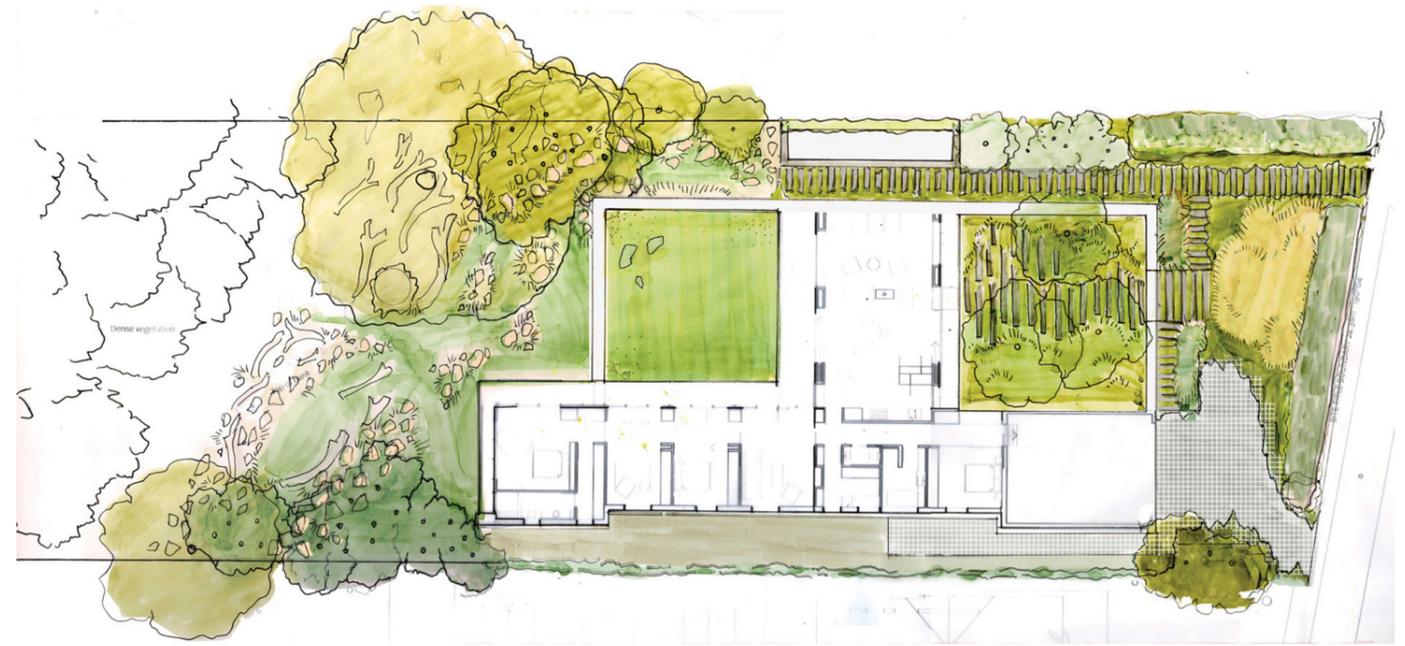
conservation and management course together; they went on field tours with practitioners and learnt from fungi and invertebrate specialists and ecologists, which helped them understand the role this garden plays as part of a greater ecological network. The collaboration is ongoing: Hicks and the owners continue to swap and source plants together, test out different species in the evolving laboratory of the garden, observe and learn. This dialogic “experiment” acknowledges that our understanding of ecologies can never be complete, as the materials within the “lab” are always shifting. As plants self-seed, they exceed human intervention and gather agency. Hicks and the owner do tinker, however, when the dynamic equilibrium of the garden is threatened, like when the *Myoporum parvifolium* (creeping boobialla) was so successful it had started to dominate everything. Otherwise, they observe the gradual changes, letting the plants ebb and flow or “walk,” as Hicks calls it, as the plants build their own communities and move towards a kind of balance.

The garden feels lived-in and shared, and not just by its human inhabitants. Birds have moved closer to the house and the variety of species that visit is increasing. I heard a rich morning chorus of magpies, currawong,



eastern whipbird and pardalotes, to name a few. To protect visiting native fauna, the owners chose not to have pets. They planted several *Eucalyptus melliodora* (yellow box), a key endemic species and an important food source for flying foxes. As flying fox droppings can damage furniture, the owners decided the outdoor fittings would be mobile, so they could be brought outside only when needed. When I visited, we were nearing the end of their yearly revegetation period; as the weather warms, the snakes become more active and the owners recede to other parts of the garden to enjoy the summer, coexisting with the broadening array of native species their garden now supports. In this thoughtful garden, the daily rhythms of the human owners work in concert with that of their plant and animal companions.

A hedge is an enclosure: it marks a boundary and defines ownership. The Hedge and Arbour House garden, however, breaks down these boundaries. It is deeply connected to its context within a broader ecological network and takes this responsibility seriously. It is a catalyst for expanding the suburban ideal of being neighbourly beyond a purely human frame.



Site plan



Project
Hedge and Arbour House

Design practice
Emergent Studios

Project team
Sarah Hicks, Matthew Hamilton

Architecture
Studio Bright

Landscape contractor
Lucida Landscapes

Time schedule
Design and documentation: 2018
Construction: 2023

Plant list
Evergreen trees: *Acacia implexa* (lightwood), *Acacia melanoxylon* (blackwood), *Allocasuarina littoralis* (black she-oak), *Bursaria spinosa* (sweet bursaria), *Callitris columnellaris* (white cypress-pine)

Shrubs: *Acotriche serrulata* (honey pots), *Banksia marginata* (silver banksia), *Cassinia aculeata* (dolly bush), *Cassinia longifolia* (shiny cassinia), *Correa reflexa* (common correa), *Dodonaea viscosa* (sticky hop bush), *Enchylaena tomentosa* (ruby saltbush), *Hymenanthera dentata* (tree violet), *Indigofera australis* (Austral indigo), *Pteris tremula* (tender brake fern), *Rhagodia parabolica* 'Grey Edge' (Rhagodia Grey Edge), *Spyridium parvifolium* (dusty miller)

Climbers: *Parthenocissus henryana* (Chinese virginia)

Herbaceous and flowering plants: *Arthropodium milleforium* (vanilla lily), *Arthropodium stritum* (chocolate lily), *Brachyscome multifida* 'Pacific Cloud' (native daisy), *Brachyscome multifida* (cut leaf daisy), *Bruonia australis* (native

cornflower), *Chrysocephalum apiculatum* (common everlasting), *Chrysocephalum semipapposum* (clustered everlasting), *Hovea linearis* (common hovea), *Linum marginale* (native flax), *Maireana enchylaenoides* (windless bluebush), *Wahlenbergia communis* (tufted bluebell), *Wahlenbergia gracilis* (sprawling bluebell), *Wahlenbergia stricta* (tall bluebell), *Xerochrysum viscosum* (shiny everlasting)

Grasses: *Austrotipa elegantissima* (feather spear-grass), *Calamagrostis acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' (Calamgrstis Karl Foerster), *Deschampsia cespitosa* (tufted hair grass), *Dianella longifolia* 'Summer Haze' (Dianella Summer Haze), *Dianella revoluta* 'Little Rev' (dianella Little Rev), *Dichelachne chinita* (longhair plume grass), *Lomandra longifolia* (lomandra),

Panicum virgatum 'Autum Glory' (Autumn Glory switch grass), *Poa sieberiana* (grey tussock grass), *Rytidosperma racemosum var. racemosum* (clustered wallaby-grass)

Groundcovers: *Dichondra argentea* 'Silver Falls' (dichondra silver falls), *Dichondra repens* (kidney weed), *Einadia nutans* (nodding salt bush), *Myoporum parvifolium* 'Flat Out' (creeping boobialla) *Pratia* sp. (star creeper) *Viola hederacea* (native violet), *Xerochrysum* sp. (golden everlasting daisy)