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A Home That Looks Like the Sounds of the '60s

The exterior of David and Karla O'Donnell's home in Melbourne, Australia, is wrapped in a material called EcoFrac, a water-resistant foam that looks like a vintage stereo speaker cabinet.

By NATE MOSES
Published September 14, 2011

MELBOURNE, Australia

WHEN David O'Donnell and his wife, Karla, decided to build a house on an empty lot on the outskirts of this city two years ago, they didn't know exactly what they wanted it to look like. They weren't planning to live there — it was an investment property they intended to sell as soon as it was built — so they gave the designers free rein.

What they got in return was a modern home that bears more than a passing resemblance to a 1960s hi-fi stereo, complete with a front facade made of ash and tinted glass, and a slatted-wood base that recalls a vintage stereo speaker cabinet. The design was so striking that once they saw it, they abandoned their idea of selling, and, last June, after construction was completed, left the house they were renting nearby and moved in.

"I love standing back and looking up at it," said Mrs. O'Donnell, 35, a sales consultant for a real estate company in Melbourne. "It's just so different."

She and Mr. O'Donnell, 38, a co-founder of an information-technology company, had intended to go into speculative real estate after he sold his company in 2006. In 2008, they bought a small lot in this upscale neighborhood for 1.1 million Australian dollars (about the same in American dollars). Construction, which took about a year, cost \$2 million.

In a happy coincidence, they sought out Michael O'Sullivan, the architect who owns Vibe Design Group in Melbourne, at a time when he was beginning to do more experimental work. Mr. O'Sullivan, who also designs furniture, was working on a new piece inspired by vintage stereo equipment when it occurred to him that it would be interesting to see if a house could evoke the nostalgic feeling of a classic hi-fi stereo as well.

The result of that experiment is the O'Donnell house, a 3,475-square-foot three-bedroom home that harks back to an era when stereos were art pieces.

Off the entrance foyer, a wall of wood paneling conceals the door to a bathroom, held in place by the kind of push-release magnet one might find on an old stereo cabinet. Beyond is the kitchen, where the refrigerator and freezer are similarly concealed behind honey-colored wood paneling (along with the coffee machine, the dishwasher, an induction cook top and the wall oven). A walk-in pantry behind the paneling next to the refrigerator is stocked with wine for their frequent dinners.

"We wanted to have a lot of concealed areas, so that the house sort of unfolds," Mr. O'Donnell explained.

The house, with glass walls throughout, was positioned on a hill to make the most of the natural light, particularly in the master bedroom, which is reached by a narrow hallway off the kitchen.

Up a flight of stairs from the master bedroom is a pair of smaller carpeted bedrooms with a shared bathroom and a study nook, for future additions to the family. Two flights down, in the basement, is an exercise room, with a pair of stationary bicycles that look out onto a patio with Australian spotted gum hardwood flooring.

But the best part of the house may be the view from the backyard, particularly at night, when the inside is illuminated.

How does it feel to live in a vintage stereo? "It's obviously amazing," Mr. O'Donnell said. "Living in what can be considered a piece of art."

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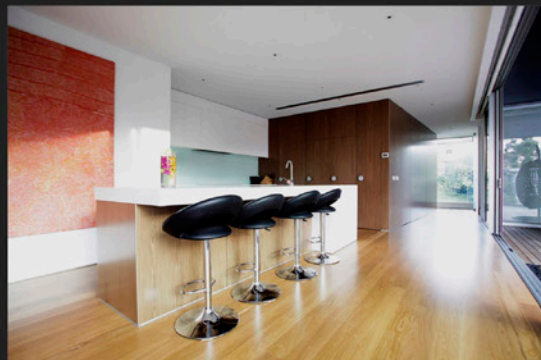
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A 18-ft House in Melbourne



A CaesarStone island with four stools bought on eBay, for about \$50 each anchors the kitchen. Walnut veneer cabinets hide the refrigerator, dishwasher and a walk-in pantry; the knobs are by Designer Decors, an Australian company.

Photo Courtesy for The New York Times


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A 18-ft House in Melbourne



The house was built as an investment, but the O'Donnells reconsidered. In June they moved in. The land cost \$1.1 million, construction, \$2 million. Behind them is the kitchen's glass wall and below, the spotted gum deck.

Photo Courtesy for The New York Times

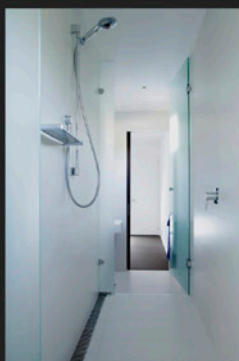
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The white conceals the bathroom off the master bedroom. The shower and shower fixtures from Kohler, a German company. "One of the things we just love about it," Mr. O'Donnell said, "is that it's got that sense of mystery."

Photo Courtesy for The New York Times

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