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Leafy gem

identity speaks to Neil Cownie about the award-winning Roscommon House, a family home that's in dynamic and meaningful conversation with its unique location.

TEXT: JENNIFER COPLEY

“I strive to achieve built form that reflects its location, so that the building and its interior feel like they ‘belong,’” explains award-winning Australian architect Neil Cownie. Nestled in Perth’s leafy garden suburb of Floreat is Roscommon House, a mid-century modern-inspired gem that epitomises Cownie’s objective. In the architect’s words, “Holistic design through architecture, interior design, product design and landscaping has been equally applied at all levels.” Indeed, the history and heritage of the surrounding area infuses every element of the project’s design; from the smallest interior details to the aesthetics and functionality of the building as a whole.

Floreat, meaning ‘flourish’ in Latin, has a fascinating architectural legacy: “The suburb itself was designed with the ‘garden suburb’ ethos, where natural bush and public open spaces were integrated within the suburban streets,” explains Cownie. When Perth hosted the Empire Games in 1962, Floreat housed a new sports stadium as well as 150 homes built for athletes. These modernist residences inspired the construction of further buildings designed along mid-century modern principles. Later, in the 1970s, the shoreline of City Beach and Floreat saw the creation of brutalist concrete ‘kiosk’ structures built among the sand dunes. Cownie estimates that there are over 70 modernist and brutalist buildings still in existence in the area; all were documented as part of the practice’s design process and evidence a form of regionally distinct modernist architecture. For Cownie, the ‘kiosk’ buildings became “the single most important reference point” in his design. He elaborates: “The use of concrete, the ribbed vertical profile and the organic shapes of the kiosk plan and roof formed a narrative that became that of the design of Roscommon House.”







Roscommon House has modernist principles at its heart: designed to serve the needs of a family, it is a building with functionality at its core. The layout of the building provides natural ventilation and conceals 50 solar panels, resulting in energy self-sufficiency. The open structure also recalls classic mid-century modern homes, creating a seamless flow between living spaces, both external and internal. Nature is present everywhere, whether in the form of landscaping that recalls the garden suburb's leafy surrounds, or in the organic forms, colour palette and natural materials used in the building's construction. Large windows showcase garden spaces that traverse the building's structure, connecting, for example, the ground floor with the roof garden. "Pocket" courtyards have been 'carved out' of the building mass to connect the building with its landscape and to allow the winter sun to penetrate the courtyards and the building," explains Cownie. "The external courtyards that lead from internal living spaces become rooms in themselves as they transition between indoor and outdoor." The building's sculptural structure is comprised of fluid forms that pay homage to international modernists such as Oscar Niemeyer. These organic forms also reference the surrounding natural landscape, while the curvilinear profile of the building's roof structure softens the space by casting rounded shadows.

Roscommon House demonstrates the architect's keen sensitivity to the poetic and functional potential of materials. Cownie explains: "In seeking sustainable and maintenance-free finishes throughout the building, materials were chosen for their modesty and their ability to age gracefully as the house endures, with all finishes to the house reflecting the ethos of seeking beauty from imperfection." Concrete, timber and glass coalesce to filter light, demarcate space and create rich and varied textures. The client requested a predominance of concrete in the building's design; "For me, the challenge was then to find the right balance of other materials to bring warmth and add life to the grey concrete surfaces," states Cownie. This has been achieved through the architect's breath-taking attention to detail; from the ribbed profile of the timber wall panelling and the unique colour variations in the hand-pressed wall tiles, to the coloured glass panels and brass accents throughout. Concrete itself is also used in exciting and innovative ways, maximising the potential of its liquid form. Cownie applied poured concrete to moulds created using sandblasted timber, resulting in concrete that has a textured grained surface. Concrete was also used to create the fluid formed recesses in the ceiling over the main stair; these organic pools serve as focal points for bespoke circular pendant lighting.



Neil Cownie



Like many of the mid-century modern architects who preceded him, Cownie takes a holistic approach to the space he is creating; hand-designing furniture, commissioning artwork and selecting textiles. Furniture and fabrics have been chosen for their relationship to the ethos of Roscommon House. For example, the colourful floral Missoni Home fabric in the living room, "reinforced a connection with the telling of the 'garden suburb' story," explains Cownie, while the rounded forms of Kettal's outdoor *Mesh* and *Boma* furniture pieces correspond to the structure of the building itself.

There is a mirroring and an echoing taking place throughout Roscommon House, wherein design elements work together to amplify the building's central ethos; a family home that is itself at home within the landscape and with the heritage of its surroundings. Cownie states: "The house was designed to not reflect the here and now, but rather to reflect the past while looking to the future; a house that would remain relevant over time." 

