

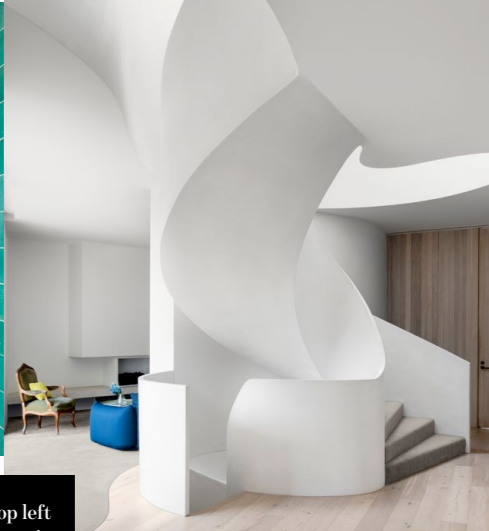
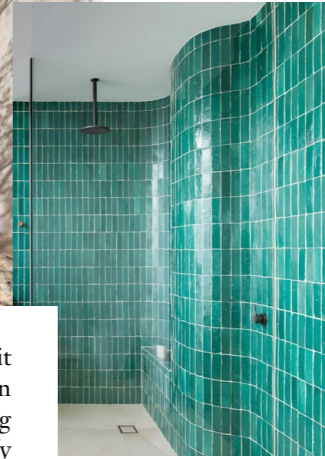


Architect and interior designer Susi Leeton was photographed at a project in Hawthorn, Victoria.

SEEKING SUSI

An early sojourn working in Rome set this architect and designer on the road to an holistic, all-encompassing approach to her practice.

Portrait **PAUL BARBERA** Edited by **KAREN McCARTNEY**



This page, clockwise from top left The curves of Oak Tree House sit in its natural surroundings. The facade of Birch Tree House with its play of light and shadow. An undulating tiled bathroom wall (above) and an expressive staircase (top right) also feature in the Birch Tree House. A coastal project – the F-linders House – makes the most of its site.



PHOTOGRAPHY PETER BENNETTS (OAK TREE HOUSE), SHARYN CAIRNS (FLINDERS HOUSE EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL), FELIX MOONEERAM (EXTERIOR BIRCH TREE HOUSE), NICOLE ENGLAND (INTERIORS BIRCH TREE HOUSE)

“THE SUN NEVER KNEW how great it was until it hit the side of a building,” said Louis Kahn, the great American architect. His comment is what comes to my mind when looking at the exterior of Susi Leeton’s Birch Tree House in a leafy Melbourne suburb. Indeed, it is this combination of light, nature and sculptural architectural form that sums up the best of her work. “The desire to create evocative work that is both romantic and poetic is very intentional, and the vibration of light and shadow on external surfaces communicates the connection to the natural context,” Leeton says.

She started her career studying fine art, but was drawn to the collaborative potential of architecture and the ability to create 3D volumes. She describes it as “like painting projected to become spatial and structural”. The creative freedom of her architecture degree at University of Melbourne included exercises such as building a full-scale pleasure dome and this left-of-centre conceptual thinking served her well when she ended up in Rome working for architect and artist Luigi Serafini. Her approach to securing a position in his office was as naive as it was gutsy. “I bought a copy of *Abitare* – one of Italy’s best-known design magazines at the time – and read about an architect who designed avant-garde furniture for Tonelli Design, Memphis Milano and Edra. A multidisciplinary in the true sense, he was working on theatre projects creating scenery, lighting and costumes. He was kind enough to invent a position for me,” Leeton says.

Clearly, living in Rome was a magical two-year period and her appreciation of the ancient architecture – particularly the Pantheon, which she walked past daily, with its purity of execution and ingenious engineering – made a lasting impression along with the food, the light, the people and the stimulating working environment, which she describes as “completely out of the box”. In the Italian system, architecture is all-encompassing – it is not just the envelope of the building but the design eye is applied to everything including the doorhandles – and so when Leeton returned to Melbourne and set up her practice in 1997 she adopted this approach and her view of a project is holistic including interior space, furnishings and art.

At that time there was a distinct hierarchy, with architects referring to interior designers rather disparagingly as ‘rug chuckers’. Undeterred, Leeton’s practice grew organically with a number of clients now on their second commission as new properties come on board or the timely revamping of existing ones comes around. “It’s a joy to do both the architecture and the interiors. I like spaces that whisper not shout, and create a beautiful backdrop to family life,” she says.

With a tightly knit palette of favoured materials such as off-form concrete, polished plaster and a soft greyed-off oak, Leeton is determinedly sensitive to the site in general and the vegetation in particular. Leaving mature trees in situ, caring about the canopy and the root structures, she positions her buildings to benefit from the ever-changing effects of light and shadow which in turn imbues them with a sense of

permanence. While most architects talk about northern light she is equally seduced by underrated southern light, cutting organic voids in ceilings to allow it to be pulled in the building in unexpected moments.

Of particular note is Leeton’s ability to design sculptural staircases that are almost baroque in terms of the theatrical flourish they deliver. “I’ve been developing this particular design language for a long time now and circular staircases make so much sense because they become a pivot in the floor plan of the house and a beautiful ribbon-like connection that ties the ground floor with the upper floors,” she says.

As you would expect, art plays a central role in the curation of Leeton’s interior spaces (Jonny Niesche and Sally Gabori are favourites) and she draws an analogy between the process of creation. “Working on an architectural design is very much like working on a painting – reflect on the composition, the colour and textures, the light, the atmosphere and the construction technique,” she says.

Much of Leeton’s communication with her clients is through tactility and the three-dimensional. To help them visualise the sculptural nature of their project she often fashions an abstract maquette in clay. It taps into her love of the work of sculptor Constantin Brâncuși. “His work is such an ongoing inspiration. That’s what I aspire to every day – capturing the elegance and gracefulness of Brâncuși.”

susileeton.com.au