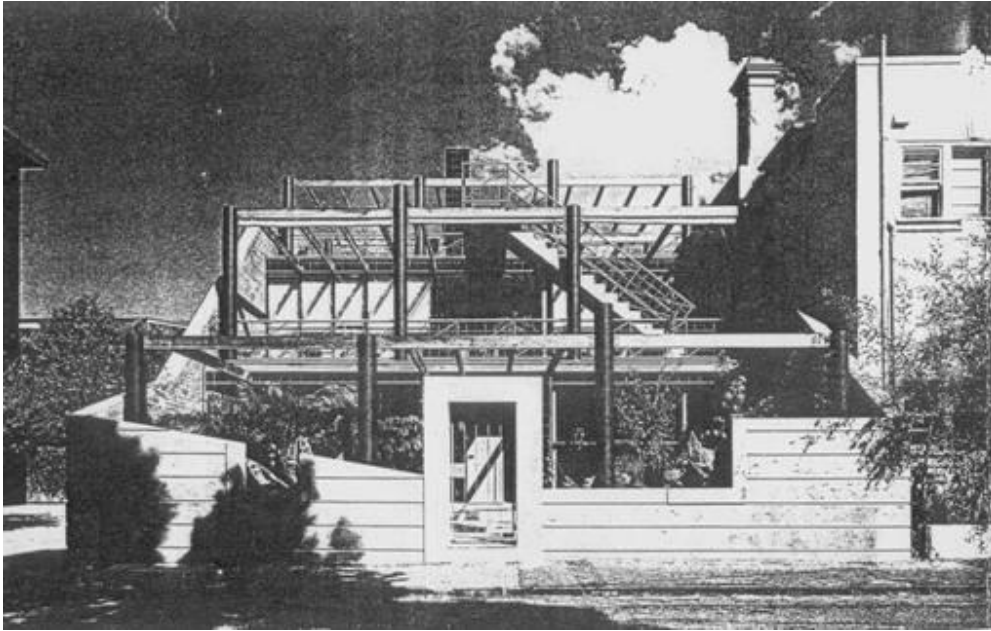


13

Crigan House

21 Victoria Street, St Kilda

The City of St Kilda's *Twentieth Century Architectural Study* claims this house, built in 1988-89 and known locally after its architect as 'the Allan Powell House', to be 'arguably the most distinctive and creative piece of domestic architecture to have been built in St Kilda in the 1980s'. I won't disagree with that, but it doesn't have much competition. No other 1980s 'domestic building' is mentioned in the *Study*. It was then not yet quite fashionable for relatively affluent, educated middle-class families to establish in St Kilda and the brave pioneers who did, snapped up, relatively cheaply, pleasant old houses with potential, and renovated them.



Crigan House, 1989

Allan Powell graduated in architecture at the University of Melbourne and in 1992 obtained a Masters degree and is undertaking a doctorate from RMIT University. He first worked in the Office of Guildford Bell, that most refined, severely neo-Classical Modernist, from 1971 until 1976, when he established the practice of Allan Powell Architect. He participated in the *Architecture as Idea* exhibition in 1984 and contributed a thoughtful paper *The Literature City* to the Royal Australian Institute of for Architects Polemic Series in 1991.

Since at least 1988, Allan Powell's design interventions in St Kilda have re-defined settings, within urban contexts, for various aspects of St Kilda life. Powell's evolving concern is for design within the wide proscenium of context, and for the theatre of gesture and effect, as they are contrived on the journey towards, into and through a space. As he manipulates states of mind, sensibility and mood during that experience, Powell is one of the most sensitive and perceptive architects of his generation. Whether at Caffé Maximus (7), in the same year as 21 Victoria Street and Café di Stasio, 31A Fitzroy Street at a 'beachside house' (1992) and the Prince of Wales redevelopment (16), these general observations apply.

It is interesting to speculate and compare not dissimilar concerns of much younger architect, Cassandra Fahey, at the Sam Newman house (22). Both combine Modernism within a Post-modernist shell. The different degrees of privacy and containment and of signification are perhaps more a product of their different times and Powell himself has since moved right along.

Allan Powell's later major works outside St Kilda include: RMIT University Building 94 at 23-27 Cardigan Street, Carlton (1995-96), the Performing Arts Precinct and Information Services, Monash University, Clayton (1996) and the Albert Park Hotel, 83 Dundas Place (2001).

The owners of 21 Victoria Street, Mr and Mrs Robert Crigan had previously enjoyed living with street-life and roof gardens in Eastern countries. Like the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, where a modernist garden environment (1951) emerges out of the long unfinished Palazzo Venier dei Leoni (1749-), and which extends to embrace its entire site, Powell's design of tiered garden terraces emerges from its husk.



Crigan House, 2004

Allan Powell's plan is actually quite rational, formal and indeed, symmetrical. He explains his intentions to 'confuse the intellect and to force a reliance on the senses'. Like a deliberately designed 'ruin' in an eighteenth century picturesque English Landscape Garden, a rigorous three bays wide by four bays deep grid of structure (columns and pergola beams), with undifferentiated Miesian glazing, rises up out of the designed ruin of the external walls. It is like an open casket, 'an arbitrary box', surrounded by the urbanity of densely developed 1920s to 30s flats.

Whilst the vehicular entrance is ingeniously angled to achieve easy access to the garage which is tucked in, as if under a staircase, or grandstand, the three habitable levels step up overhead, allowing each a terrace. The entire first floor is a living space, opening over the terrace, for entertainment, with glimpses of the bay. Its north - west orientation catches the full afternoon sun, throwing deep shadows, with an exposed New York (or Middle Eastern) stair.

Powell says that fine craftsmanship and detailing were not relevant, historicist references are very abstracted and the building is not intended to be visually resolved as a three dimensional composition. It's uneasy and provocative, in confusing and shattering its container.

Powell is near to my age, we were a generation of designers trained in the pure Bauhaus Modernism of the University of Melbourne. Then we were hit with the 'graceless and inarticulate whole' force of Robert Venturi's revelatory book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, as we graduated (I bought my copy in 1971). Venuri called for design to be based on 'the richness and ambiguity of modern experience... rather than arbitrary (rules)...' This is the raw material St Kilda street life readily offers and the reason Albert Tucker returned to live here ten years earlier (9).

Later, when it became available, Powell himself acquired the adjoining late Victorian house at 19 Victoria Street, which had undergone the St Kilda ritual of conversion in the 1930s into flats with an addition in its front garden. It gave him the opportunity reimpose his 'through a glass darkly' interpretation (not a pastiche) of a Victorian façade: a foil against which his design at number 21 could comment, as prequel.

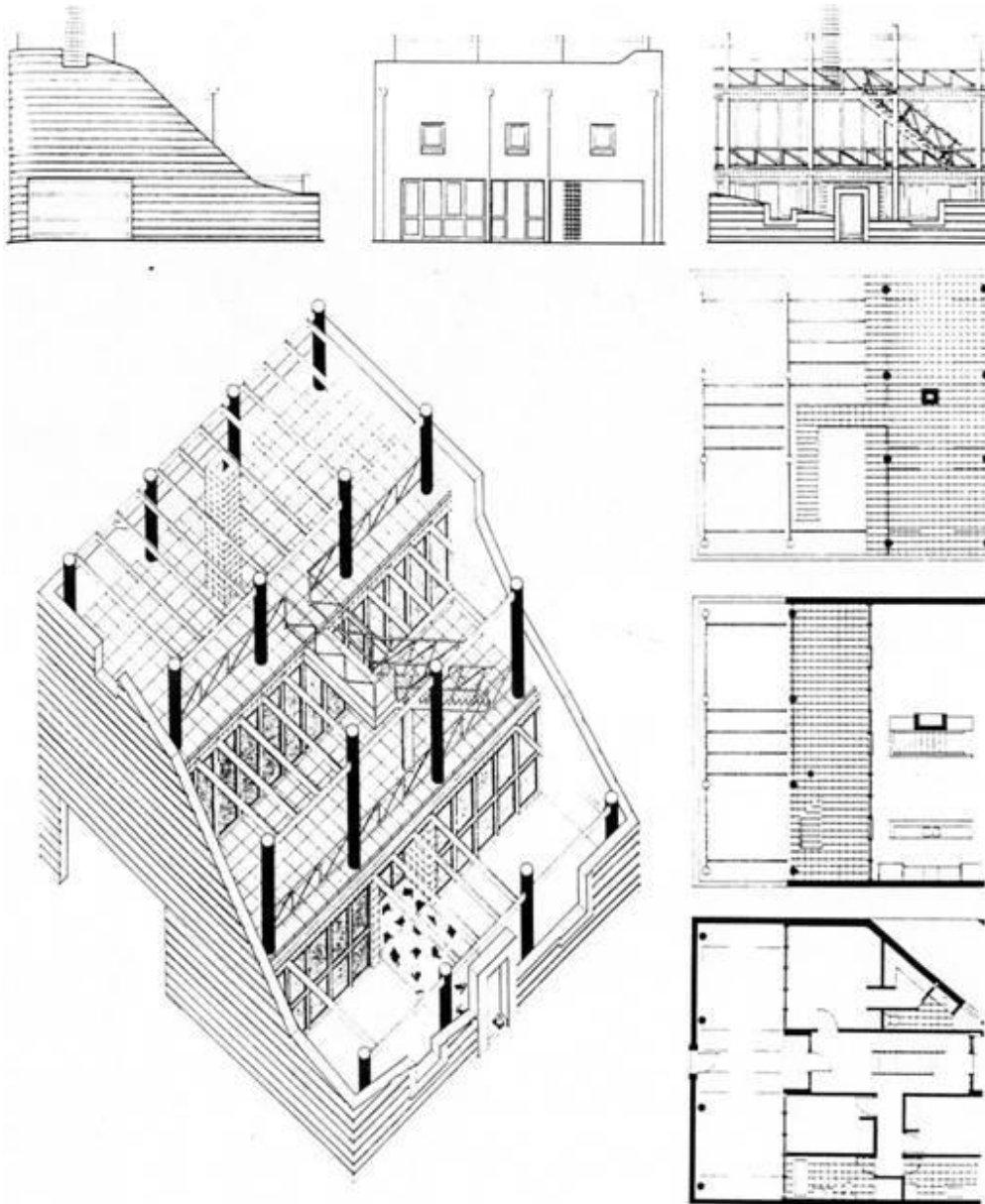
The authors of St Kilda's *Twentieth Century Architectural Study* conclude that the design response at 21 Victoria Street remains 'an exemplary model to be studied (not copied) for future... (St Kilda)... infill development'. It also has resonances in the work of Cassandra Fahey, if not in Katsalidis at St Leonards Avenue (11).

Powell's later buildings, such as The Prince (16), are more refined and sophisticated in colour, surface and subtlety of sensation, but the design principles are never as complex in gesture and experience as here. Nor do they experience quite the same rich understanding of the particularity (indeed the phenomenology) of living in St Kilda.

Richard Peterson: A Place of Sensuous Resort: Buildings of St Kilda and Their People

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Isometric view and plan of Crigan House, 1989

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