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Sam Newman House 270 Canterbury Road, St Kilda West



Sam Newman House, 2002

Bob Hart broke the news in the *Herald - Sun* on 7 June 2000, that 'Footy funster' Sam Newman was building a house with a facade entirely of a '9m by 8m' mural of patterned glass designed by architect Cassandra Fahey, which may, or may not, feature an image of *Baywatch* siren Pamela Anderson... 'The Pamela Anderson thing has been blown out of all proportion', Newman said, 'For which I blame her plastic surgeon, but never mind'.

The black plastic sheets were removed 17 days later. Builder, Wes Alfreson said, '(the)... sneak preview was a mistake... It shouldn't have been uncovered'. Mr Newman also made the mistake of building opposite former Royal Australian Planning Institute chair, Bernadette George. Port Phillip Council was alerted that the planning permit was incorrect. Journalist, Alan Attwood quipped: 'Mother Teresa would have struggled to get a planning permit. To imagine otherwise shows more front than Ms. Anderson'.

However, Newman duly complied with the Council's request and lodged a corrected permit application. But a next door neighbour appealed to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal against its issue. Meanwhile the press revelled in a deluge of *double* and even triple Sam/Pam *entendres*. The *Herald Sun* noted that Anderson's lips appear to part to allow a car to enter the garage.

Dr Gerald Vaughan, director of the National Gallery of Victoria was reminded by the design of Italian Renaissance and Baroque palaces; Juliana Engberg, curator of the Melbourne Festival's Visual Arts Program felt it fitted within Australia's fixation on 'the gigantic', as in big pineapple, big banana and now, 'big Pammy'. Norman Day (48), Adjunct Professor of Architecture at RMIT University, saw it as pop art (and doubtless reminiscent of his own design for Geelong footballer Doug Wade's Parkville house in the early eighties, which caused an even greater controversy and about which a book: *The Wade House Case*, was written); Professor of Urban Design at RMIT, Dimity Reed felt it was public art in exactly the same way as at Republic Tower (11); Visible Art Foundation manager, Bruce Filley who manages the giant art installations on the face of Republic Tower agreed and so did over 50% of the *Herald-Sun's* readers, via its vote line on 8 July 2000.

By 15 July 2002, Newman had sold the house. "When Sammy left Pammy" was *The Age's* headline. The new owners are said to not be proposing any changes.

In fact there is tradition of faces as ironic, yet strong design elements on the façades of buildings: such as in the Sacro Bosco garden of the Orsini family at Bomarzo, Italy (1552) and the Palazzo that Federico Zuccari built for himself in Via Gregoriana, Rome (1593). But surely Cassandra Fahey's design for the Newman house refers to Luna Park, an even more famous facade face? (4). It is in the spirit of what Robert Venturi calls 'the decorated shed' in his influential book *Learning from Las Vegas*.

The narrow strip of land between Canterbury Road and the former railway, formerly leased by the Victorian Railways for various industrial uses, was subdivided and sold as housing allotments in 1993-94. The City of St Kilda set guidelines and the development has been in both urban design and real estate terms, most successful.

If developers complied with the guidelines, then no further planning permit was necessary. The first section to be developed was 229A Canterbury Road, lots 1-53, from St Kilda Station to Cowderoy Street, in March 1994. Statutory and Design Guidelines were prepared for the City of St Kilda by SJB Planning. The area was both an urban

conservation area and a development control area and development complied with *VicCode 2*. Planning objectives were: compatibility to existing character, amenity, to minimise the visual impact of car parking, height control (7-10 metres), noise isolation, building rhythm, massing and proportions, to prevent reflectant surfaces, setback, shared driveways and landscaping.

Residents have included Andrew Parr, director of interior design at SJB Architects who have designed building complexes in Acland Street and Fitzroy Street and Ian Hewitson of Tolarno (17), as well as Newman.

Cassandra Fahey of Cassandra Complex Pty Ltd is a young recent Architecture and Interior Design graduate from RMIT University who has won over ten awards. She interviewed and produced a documentary on architects the Lord Foster of Thames Bank, Jean Nouvel, and Peter Eisenman and designed and produced with Mark Chapman, 'art disguised as furniture'. In 2002, she has designed an international museum and a five-storied commercial building for Magnet, on a site at Southbank, again with graphically rich facades.

The Newman house is actually a most subtle and sophisticated design for a first work, in which Post-modernism co-habits seamlessly with Minimalism. Cassandra uses Robert Venturi's term 'billboard façade', for her art-work actually named 'White Noise'. She experimented with over 20 patterns to obtain such subtlety, printing full-sized versions of the pixelations. The façade is manufactured from laminated glass, digital film and an aluminium flat plate grid frame. Varying light, reflections, shadows, direction and distance, all contribute to the depth and density of the image, sometimes disappearing into non-figurative patterns. She began by looking at the work of Australian artist Geoffrey Smart, known for his highly coloured images of figures placed in bleak urban settings.

The tiny site measures just 20 x 9metres, half now occupied by the house, on a difficult south-west, north-east orientation: the south-west faces busy Canterbury Road and north-east fronting Albert Park across the railway line: noise and danger intrude on both fronts. Cassandra was given an entirely open brief: a rare luxury, particularly for a first commission. Only a sense of the exotic, light and privacy were mentioned as requirements.

Her client was such a popular figure; she determined to cast her design net over popular culture. She values action into the public space, by speaking in popular language, superimposing a flat image over the architecture, a gesture at once beautiful, subversive and confrontational. It became a design objective to get (her) architecture on the front page of the *Herald Sun*, and that she did, twice. That does not commonly happen these days. Architecture no longer determines the parameters of public life. It is commonly too cerebral for that.

Of the three levels of the Newman house, ground seems to be taken by parking and utility, expressed as a solid plinth. The two upper levels float above, set well back from boundaries in a fresh interpretation of the typical sensible Melbourne suburban siting, to let

cross-ventilation allow the building to breathe. The entire north-western elevation opens, as vast glass screens glide away. An open-plan dining/living space opens onto an entertainment platform and lap pool. Yet there is a reassuring feeling of safety from an intrusive world beyond.

The corrugated, studded, fibreglass walls on the park facade are lined with pink bats, which in the morning sun, glow with a pink fleshy tone (suggested to the press as reminiscent of Anderson's blouse). The stair glows through orange perspex. It is formed with continuously folded perforated steel, leading to the mezzanine bedroom above. Box forms encase both the ensuite and robe within opaque walls, and also kitchen storage.

The colours are almost edible, reminiscent of jelly beans. Pinks, aquas, oranges, purples and yellows appeal to Cassandra. 'We're drawn to things we enjoyed as children, the plastic and glossy things that we put in our mouths'. In the Newman house, these contrast with hard, modernist materials like concrete, corrugated steel cladding, steel frames and louvres.

Such refinement of detail, considered spatial resolution, manipulation of light and ventilation, with such strong image-making is remarkable in a young designer.

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