

Sanctuary

MODERN GREEN HOMES

ISSUE
74

Smart backyard builds for more flexible housing; monitoring your indoor air quality; sitting pretty with window seats; gardening for wildlife habitat and more

BACKYARD
STUDIO
STYLE

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Come on in!

SUSTAINABLE HOUSE DAY
SUNDAY 17 MAY, 2026

Take a sneak peek inside
10 participating homes and studios



Participating in Sustainable House Day 2026. Search for 'Echidna Studio' at sustainablehouseday.com.

AT A GLANCE

- *New garden studio on the footprint of a dilapidated garage*
- *Flexible space for work, guests and quiet retreat*
- *Shading, ventilation and privacy carefully considered*

Space talk

In Melbourne's inner suburbs, fitting an extra room on a tight block prompted some innovative solutions.

When Karen and her husband downsized to a small two-bedroom home on a 187-square-metre block in Melbourne's Middle Park, there was no space to extend. On the corner of the site sat a dilapidated 1960s garage "that probably wouldn't have fit my Mini," says Karen. The couple briefly considered demolishing it for more garden, but realised the space could be put to better use. "We needed the house to do a lot more for us," Karen says, explaining that they wanted a flexible area for work, guests and quiet retreat.

That old garage has been rebuilt as a compact, light-filled home office, complete with guest accommodation and bathroom. With concept design by MUSK Studio and refinement and delivery by Session Architecture, the project transforms

an area of just 16 square metres into a multi-purpose addition, with an updated landscape design that strengthens the connection between house and garden.

While the original brick walls and slab were too degraded to reuse, architects Nick Johnston and Chris Le Page retained the small garage footprint to preserve precious outdoor space. "The aim was to bring new life to a redundant corner of the site without consuming more open space," Nick explains. Strict planning limits meant any increase in height or volume had to be carefully managed, leading to a stepped layout: a sunken bathroom below, workspace at ground level and lofted sleeping nook above. "It's essentially three levels within the volume of one," says Nick.

"The original concept came from the



Above Although it sits right on the footpath in the space formerly occupied by a small garage, the studio's openings have been carefully considered for daylight and screening. "I really value the privacy," says Karen. "You feel like people can't see you, but it is still very light." **Left and facing page** Plywood joinery inside the bright, white studio houses a bathroom and incorporates the stairs to a loft sleeping space. Perforated metal screens on the north-eastern facade can be adjusted for shade and privacy.

recognition that many of Melbourne's historic laneways now operate as secondary streets," adds Chris. "We reimagined the old garage as a compact split-level studio that contributes positively to the laneway's character. It's a small footprint made generous through a clear idea, thoughtful detailing and a shared commitment to doing more with less."

The studio stays comfortable year-round through good design rather than mechanical systems. "Because it's such a small space, we had to be really careful about ventilation and exposure," Nick says. "We didn't want it to overheat, especially with the western and north-western sun." Large perforated screens along the north-eastern facade bring in light while adapting to the seasons. "In summer you can close them for shade and privacy, but in winter you can open them right up and let the sun penetrate

deep into the space." Operable windows capture breezes, while a skylight at the loft's highest point releases warm air at the end of the day.

At night, the light glows through the perforations if the studio is occupied, inspiring its nickname: the lighthouse. Inside, pale plywood joinery wraps the compact interior, concealing storage and services while creating a calm feel. The steep ceiling and skylight enhance the sense of space, and the loft provides a cosy perch for reading or rest. "It's like a little treehouse," Karen says. "Even though it's tiny, it doesn't feel small; it feels light and spacious."

When not used as a home office, the "pod", as the family affectionately calls it, accommodates guests or adult children returning home. "If anyone wants quiet time, they just say they're heading out to the pod," Karen laughs. "It has its own personality now."

The project also prompted a complete reworking of the garden by landscape architecture practice Acre, replacing hard paving with stepping stones, permeable paths and lush greenery for natural cooling. "The perforated steel fencing opens the garden to light without losing all our privacy," says Karen. "It feels like one home, even though there are two buildings. They're linked through the colours, the perforated screens and the garden. From nearly every room in the house, I can see the studio. It has a beautiful aesthetic and it blends with the landscape."

"We're thrilled to see a once-overlooked garage transformed into a flexible and tranquil retreat for Karen and her family," Chris says. **S**





LEGEND

- ① Entry
- ② Loft lounging and sleeping space
- ③ Study space
- ④ Bathroom
- ⑤ Stairs
- ⑥ Services/storage
- ⑦ Void
- ⑧ Garden with permeable paving
- ⑨ Main house

SPECIFICATIONS

DESIGNER

MUSK Architecture Studio &
Session Architecture

BUILDER

Nevcon

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

Acre

PROJECT TYPE

New build

LOCATION

Middle Park, VIC
(Bunurong Country)

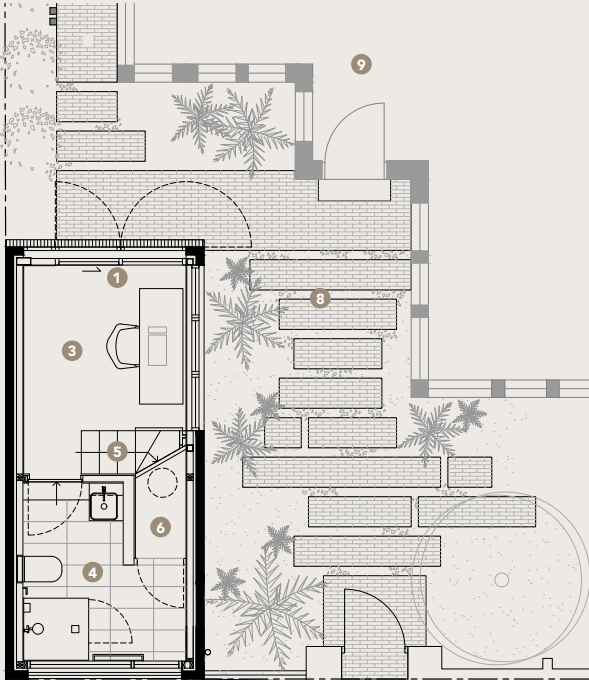
COST

\$260,000
Completed 2023

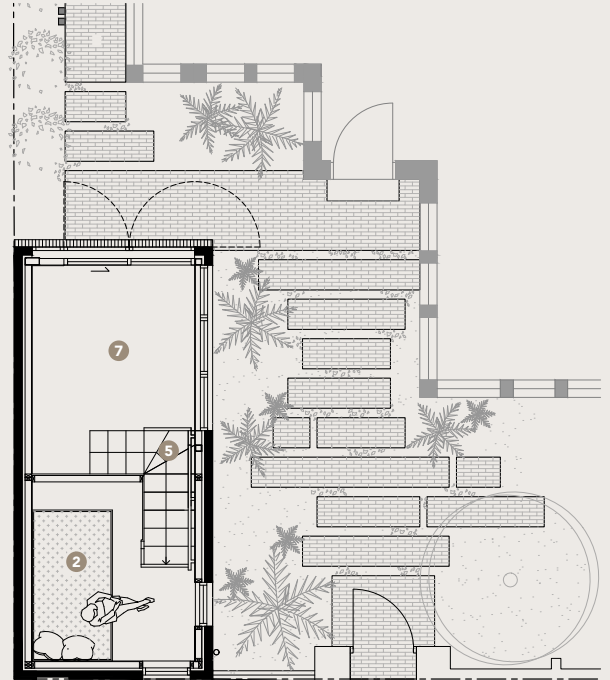
SIZE

Studio 18m²
Land 187m² (shared
with main house)

GROUND FLOOR PLAN



LOFT PLAN



HOT WATER

- Thermann 50L electric hot water unit

PASSIVE DESIGN, HEATING & COOLING

- Compact, well-insulated building envelope
- North-east facade clad with adjustable perforated panels for winter sun and summer shade
- Openings on three sides carefully placed to capture prevailing breezes (no openings on north-west side)
- Openable skylight above lofted area to purge heat in summer

ACTIVE HEATING, COOLING & VENTILATION

- Mitsubishi reverse-cycle air conditioner (seldom required)

BUILDING MATERIALS

- Bagged brick veneer walls
- Corrugated Zincalume roof
- Concrete slab floor to ground level
- Birch plywood and plasterboard interior linings
- Insulation: Kingspan Kooltherm K10 70mm (R3.5) and Kingspan Air-Cell reflective sarking (R1.4) to ceiling, Bradford Gold batts (R2.2) and Bradford Thermoseal wrap (R1.2) to walls
- Perforated steel sliding panels
- Designer Ply plywood joinery from Forest One (FSC-certified)
- Garonne Natural Stone Baton pavers from Eco Outdoor

WINDOWS & GLAZING

- Double-glazed windows and doors with timber frames
- Velux Solar Skylight (operable)

LIGHTING

- Adjustable LED downlights with airtight covers

PAINTS, FINISHES & FLOOR COVERINGS

- Dulux Wash&Wear paints (low-VOC)
- Water-based, low-VOC sealant to plywood
- Godfrey Hirst Carramar wool carpet

OTHER ESD FEATURES

- Small-scale building on footprint of existing garage
- Concrete and hard surfaces removed and replaced with garden and permeable paving