

FEATURE

ANN PILMER

Bringing the outside in

When you're feeling ordinary, communing with nature can lift your spirits. But if you live in a city apartment, greenery is harder to come by. It could be a fair hike just to get to the park, unless you're lucky enough to have a penthouse with a roof garden.

Smaller places might have a tiny balcony that throws shadows inside a leafy tree outside the window.

But resourceful designers are coming to the rescue and adding touches of nature to the fabric of new apartment buildings. By adding features such as an external screen or window with a leafy pattern that throws shadows inside a space like a real tree, or reminders of nature in the building's facade, a water feature, wall or internal joinery, they are referencing nature everywhere.

When the designers at Hassell worked on the 88-apartment George building in Flemington Road, North Melbourne, they wanted it to echo the 100-year-old plane trees in the street.

"We wanted to create a building that sat comfortably with those trees," says architect Ingrid Bakker. "Plane trees are so graphic. They're dark and spooky in winter, fresh with new life in spring, bright green in summer, with beautiful colours in autumn."

The designers used a leaf image in fixed metal screens on the car park and balconies. The screens provide shade to complement the double-glazed windows.

And like the trees outside, they play with light to reflect leafy silhouettes in the apartment interiors. "Trees change between dark and light, so we made the internal corridors dark and the apartments light for contrast," says Ms Bakker.

"Mirrored splash-backs and floor-to-ceiling glazing add to the feeling of light."

Sam McInnes, of developer Evoive Development, says residents like the shadows created by the screens on internal walls and the fact double glazing blocks traffic noise but not the sound of birds. Ms Bakker believes the trend

DESIGNERS ARE FINDING CREATIVE WAYS TO LET THE NATURAL WORLD INFLUENCE URBAN PROJECTS.



INSPIRATION: THE GEORGE ECHOES PLANE TREES. PICTURE: SHANNON MCGRATH

towards incorporating nature in design will continue as inner-city living gets denser. "There will be more opportunity to bring nature in with graphics, views, courtyards or green roofs," she says.

The sea was the inspiration for Aqueous, a 42-apartment development on the drawing board at Rothelowman. The Nott Street, Port Melbourne, site is about 50 metres from the beach and the proximity, coupled with the "dynamism, movement and effervescence of water," was the inspiration for the design.

The facade appears to be covered in giant, oval, bubble-like shapes. "When we design, we look at the context of the site," says architect Shane Rothe. "This is close to water so we investigated how water would affect the architecture. It's an

opportunity to create a dynamic piece of architecture."

The facade is designed in white, natural concrete precast panels. It frames views, allows light and ventilation, protects from the weather and reveals internal spaces and surfaces, yet gives privacy and some connection to what's happening in the street. The design theme continues inside with curved components in the joinery and foyer.

There's a definite nature theme in another Rothelowman project under construction, the Albert Tower, near the junctions of Albert and St Kilda roads.

It takes its design cue from the nearby Royal Botanic Gardens and Albert Park Lake area, exploring the idea of regeneration and the cellular structure of plants.

The 27-storey residential tower has a prefabricated concrete skin to represent the concept of biodiversity, with curved, light and dark two-storey modules, like cells in plants.

There will be real plants on the rooftop garden, which will look over the botanic gardens and Albert Park Lake.

The trend towards organic design is also spreading to the workplace.

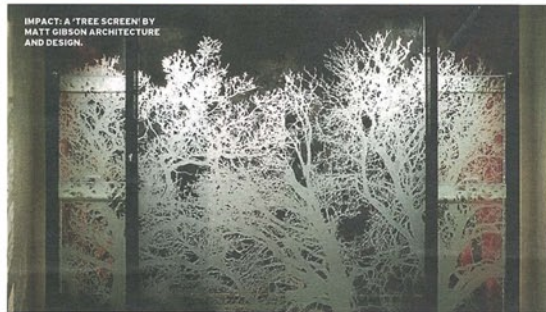
Views over leafy Fawkner Park were the inspiration for an office makeover by Rothelowman on one floor of a St Kilda Road building. The revised floor plan, shortlisted for several design awards, was designed to maximise natural light and promote communication among the 355 staff members.

It emphasised sight-lines to the park and look advantage of a central atrium.

The idea of tree canopies and dappled light is reflected in timber feature ceilings and vertical screens. Organic-patterned carpet in traffic areas looks like painted images of bare tree branches. "We're finding our clients are drawn to more environmental buildings," says Mr Rothe. Weisan Lim, of Matt Gibson Architecture and Design, says when the practice was commissioned for the renovation of a house in Middle Park, it found it was impractical to keep an old tree in the back garden. So the designers did the next best



THE ALBERT TOWER TAKES ITS CUE FROM THE ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS.



IMPACT: A 'TREE SCREEN' BY MATT GIBSON ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN.

thing and commissioned sculptor Damian Vick to design a two-metre-high screen reflecting the foliage of the tree canopy for the second-storey balcony. A white stick-on decal was applied inside the window that sits 300 millimetres from the dark screen, to give a three-dimensional effect. The screen's best advantage is it gives privacy at night — although the owners also have block-out blinds — and lets in wonderful bursts of

light during the day. Mr Lim says where site constraints restrict landscaping, the firm also uses vertical gardens with manicured greenery on metal frames.

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Screens do double duty as art works

ALUDEAN

Sculptors Lu Skacej and Dean Collis, of Aludean, specialise in metal screens that soften a surface with pattern and form and play with light to give it a more natural, ephemeral quality. One of their recent projects, a five-storey apartment development, in Inkerman Street, St Kilda, features patterned screens on the facade and balconies so they can be enclosed for an outdoor room or open to the street's eye.

"The metal screens add a textural layer to the facade and create soft patterned shadows that move across the internal spaces like the dappled shadows of sunlight through tree tops," Ms Skacej says.



ENTANGLEMENTS

Helen Neyland, of Entanglements metal art studio, says most of their work features organic horticultural designs. She and husband Ian make wall, light and water features, sculptures, pergolas and screens for outdoor areas, and internal balustrades.

"I have a theory that organic shapes appeal to everyone," Ms Neyland says. "A lot of architects are moving away from hard squares to curves for balustrading. Interiors are neutral, so they want to soften the edges."

People with small courtyards use vertical space and big pieces of art or high planters to bring greenery to sitting eye level, says Ms Neyland, a former visual merchandiser. She says timber-burning fire pits, like large works, are a big trend. Wall art for pools is also popular where a deep, patterned, metal screen is backlit with LED lights to make colourful reflections.



DIGIGLASS

The owners of this 20th-floor apartment are transported to Italy every time they look outside, where there is an image of a Tuscan walk on their balcony walls. Digiglass Australasia printed the image on vinyl between two sheets of glass on the 2400-millimetre-tall balcony sides.

"It's a vast terrace and it's given it depth," says John Witney of Digiglass. "You can have any image in any colour."



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