



TINY TOWN

A series of spaces sequenced together through clever connections and alignments, this sociable home is its own little village.

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THE PROJECT

MRTN Architects, Brave New Eco, SBLA and Lew Building collaborated on this project in Melbourne's Westgarth for a couple and their three teenage children.



THESE PAGES Private spaces and a variety of different-sized social spaces offer all kinds of opportunities to be together and apart, with friends and without. Between the front and rear two-storey buildings is this courtyard linked to a communal studio where the whole family can work and host meetings. **PAGE 80** Most of the house isn't visible from the street, and likewise from the rear it appears recessive, so the garden is the main event. One of Antony's key design moves was pulling the north-facing wall away from the boundary, "so instead of maximising the width of the house, we've made it more narrow and then created generosity down the side to encourage the garden to come up that north face, so it's not just front garden, house, rear garden — it's that kind of continuous linkage of green space around the house." This approach also gives back to the community, allowing a view from the footpath right through to the Merri Creek parkland on the boundary.

When now Melbourne-based architect Antony Martin was a teen in Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, he was good mates with celebrated architect Marshall Cook's kids, and invited to their home in Parnell's Brighton Road all the time.

"I used to have a second life around there, and it really stuck with me that when you went in through their front door, it was like a piazza, and all these living spaces looked down over it," he says. "When it came to doing this house, it came into my mind how you could plan a house as urban planning rather than a floorplan."

An artist and an economist/environmentalist, the owners are also good friends (and prior clients) of Antony's, and one of their three teenagers is besties with one of his. And so it was, with past and present friendships as guides, that Antony came to design their home not as your usual house, but as a tiny town, the toast of which are the relationships nurtured within it.

It took a village to work on this veritable village in Melbourne's Westgarth, underpinned by Kiwi common ground, with Antony and the owners all from Aotearoa, and the project team including New Zealander Megan Norgate and her colleague Kelsey Dabinett of interior design studio Brave New Eco, and SBLA Landscape Architecture & Urban Design led by Simone Bliss, whose partner happens to be a Kiwi, "so she sneaks in on relationship grounds", says Megan.

"It's a bit of an expatriate club that we've got going on," she continues. "I think there's a down-to-earth utilitarianism Kiwis have that's imbued in New Zealand's local design community and based on a reframing of what lifestyle aspirations we value. This house was about accommodating the preferences of a growing-up family, where it's more like five adults living in the space, who have their own unique needs with regards to sociability, privacy, noise..."

The singular new dwelling meanders down a narrow section from the street to Merri Creek >

and its parkland on the rear border. Although the existing house on this section had been built in the 1960s, this is the site of the first European home in this suburb, so some sensitivity to that 1850s heritage was required. Courtesy of archival photographs used for reference, the new abode looks the part from the footpath, and Antony also honoured the past in a way you might not expect.

The original farmhouse faced north, and also predated the street network. “The interesting thing about that is that these days, it’s a knee-jerk reaction to orientate to the street and the rear garden,” says Antony. “But the long façade here faced north, and we wanted the house to face north. It has a more classic, gabled front-of-house elevation to it, although you can never stand back and look at that façade in its entirety.”

Running along the property’s east to west axis, the collection of connected buildings caters to the sociable family’s various private and public needs, while following the lay of the land. The

streetfront structure houses the garage and a spare room designated for band practice, plus the two daughters’ bedrooms above that. Next, there’s a single-storey section — the ‘city square’ — comprising a communal work studio and an external courtyard. This leads to another two-storey section where the kitchen/dining/living areas sit alongside the son’s bedroom, with the main bedroom above them, then the home steps back down to a single-storey living area linking onto the pool and rear garden. Antony is very much an “anti-box architect”, and these cleverly arranged smaller spaces broken up by level changes and different ceiling and floor finishes each have a wonderful individual character.

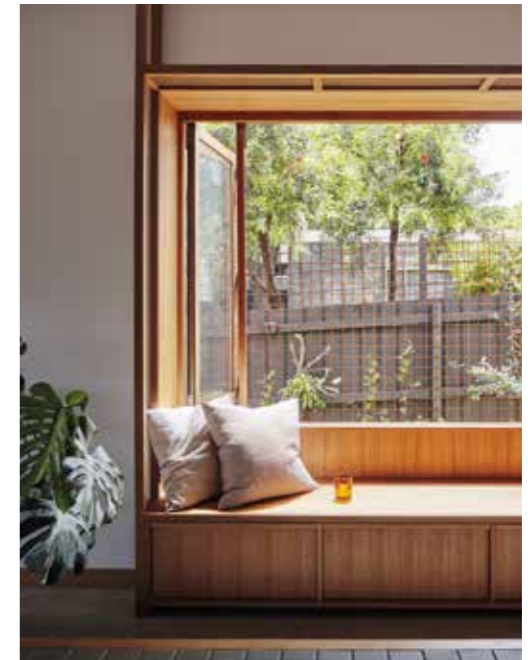
Dovetailing beautifully with the architecture are the interior elements Brave New Eco devised, including expanses of gorgeous timber joinery. “I wanted to use reoccurring materials that were durable, textured and responsive to Ant’s architectural materials,” says Megan. “The clients >



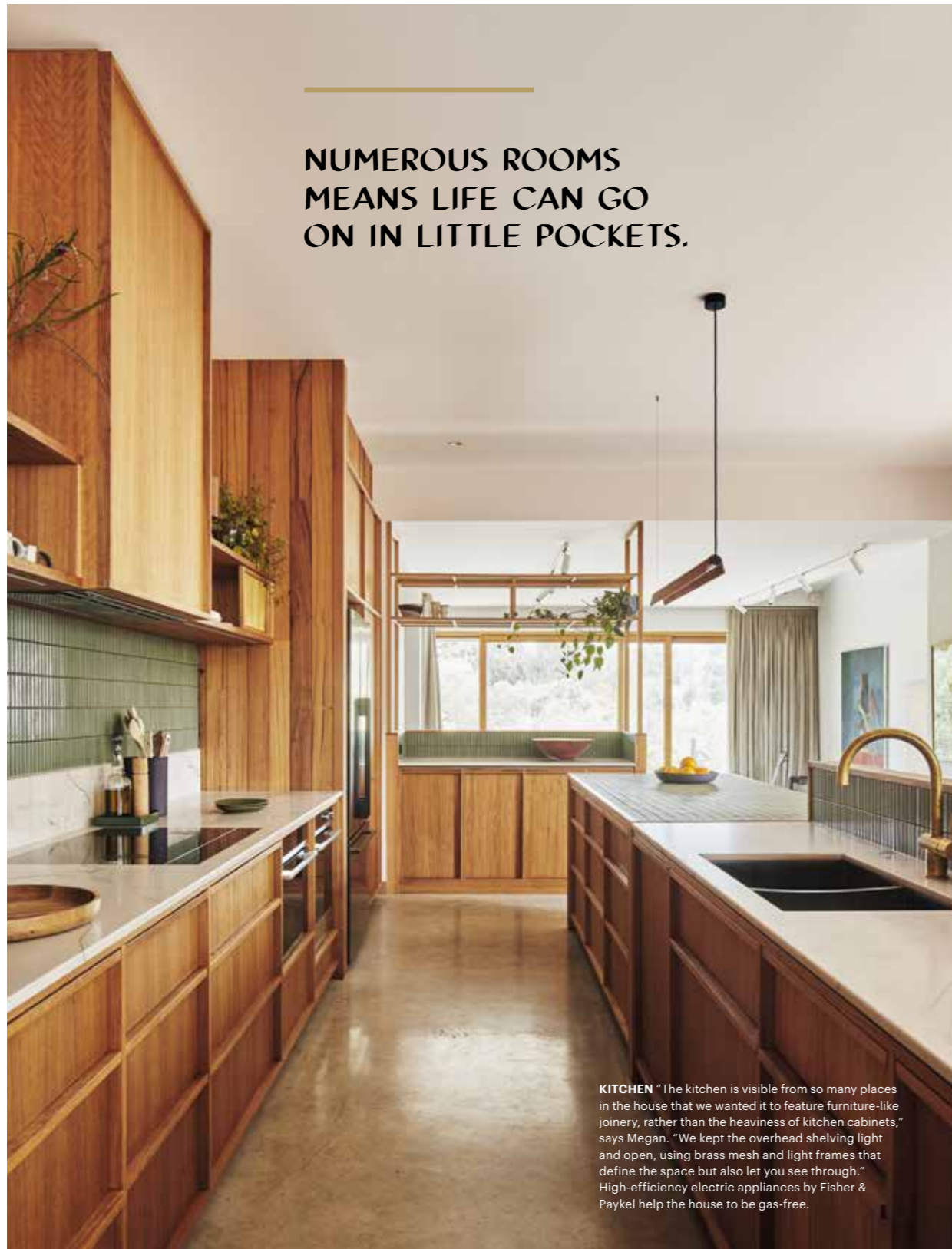
ABOVE The custom joinery in the kitchen, study and laundry (which Megan jokes she “didn’t mean to make so beautiful”) incorporates carbon-negative Marmoleum by Forbo, made from recycled content and 97% natural raw materials, including biodegradable linseed oil, pine rosin and wood flour. **OPPOSITE, LEFT** All sustainable, the materials used relate to the light and acoustic qualities of the spaces. In the more active areas of the home, the materiality is a bit richer and more reverberant, whereas in the quieter zones, it’s lighter and more absorbent. Take the two staircases, for example. “The front staircase is like a public staircase — you walk up it and get a view back through the house and you can be part of several different spaces at the same time, so the materials are robust,” says Antony. “The second staircase into the main bedroom [pictured on page 87] is a quieter, enclosed space with timber and carpet on the floor. In the studio and courtyard, there’s brick flooring that’s an external material brought internally, blurring the threshold, then as you go to the back to the quieter living spaces facing the garden, the finishes there become a bit more refined.”



THIS PAGE Brave New Eco uses permaculture design principles as a system of thinking about the built and existing environment. An example of that here is stacking function, where one solution solves multiple problems, such as the joinery over two levels at the end of the kitchen that creates a battened return to keep the dish zone out of sight, and a record nook below it. **OPPOSITE, TOP** A savvy idea Megan says she and Kelsey borrowed from Antony's own home, below the window seat opposite the kitchen island are 'bedroom repatriation drawers' for each family member, where accumulated stuff can be stored before being taken back to where it belongs.



NUMEROUS ROOMS
MEANS LIFE CAN GO
ON IN LITTLE POCKETS.



KITCHEN "The kitchen is visible from so many places in the house that we wanted it to feature furniture-like joinery, rather than the heaviness of kitchen cabinets," says Megan. "We kept the overhead shelving light and open, using brass mesh and light frames that define the space but also let you see through." High-efficiency electric appliances by Fisher & Paykel help the house to be gas-free.



ABOVE "We layered a single colour on each of the three bathrooms to make them respectively soft and warm or moody and grown-up," says Megan. This bathroom is shared by the couple's two close-in-age daughters and features terracotta porcelain tiles in three shades and a poured-concrete bench in a custom muted plum hue. In keeping with the ethos of everyone on the team, there was no question that sustainable materials would be used on this project. All the bricks are reclaimed, sustainably harvested and milled silvertop ash is used externally, the internal timber and veneer is Forest Stewardship Council-certified, and low-VOC paints and linen curtains feature alongside locally designed and made lighting and tapware.



ABOVE At the back of the house, the living rooms are across two levels, the lower one linking directly to the garden and the upper one (pictured) with a double-sided, sound-deadening cinema curtain that can be drawn across to divide it from the rest. “The TV’s in here, so the kids can go in and pull the curtain across and do their thing,” says Antony. The space includes wool-upholstered, L-shaped seating and plush carpet, so people can comfortably relax on the furniture or the floor. This was Brave New Eco’s third project with these clients, so they knew their inventory of sculptural and art objects well, and considered their colour influences and placement as part of the interior design.

have a big appetite for colour, so we embedded the colour in the materiality, with lots of warmth and earthiness. We worked in detail with the way they like to use the kitchen and the locations they keep things in throughout the house, making sure every item has a specific home — so much so that if I visited now, I could find the dog food, the tongs and a bottle of wine without thinking!

“They also wanted a future-ready home that didn’t use any fossil fuels, so no effort was spared on Ant’s part to use the best electric technologies and a whopping solar system to capture Australia’s plentiful sunshine,” she continues. Sustainability was a must for all materials and passive design principles led the way, so as well as the solar array on the roof, the concrete and brick flooring provides thermal mass, high-performance windows and the northern orientation harness the sun for thermal gain and natural light, and rainwater is collected off the roof for the laundry, toilets and garden.

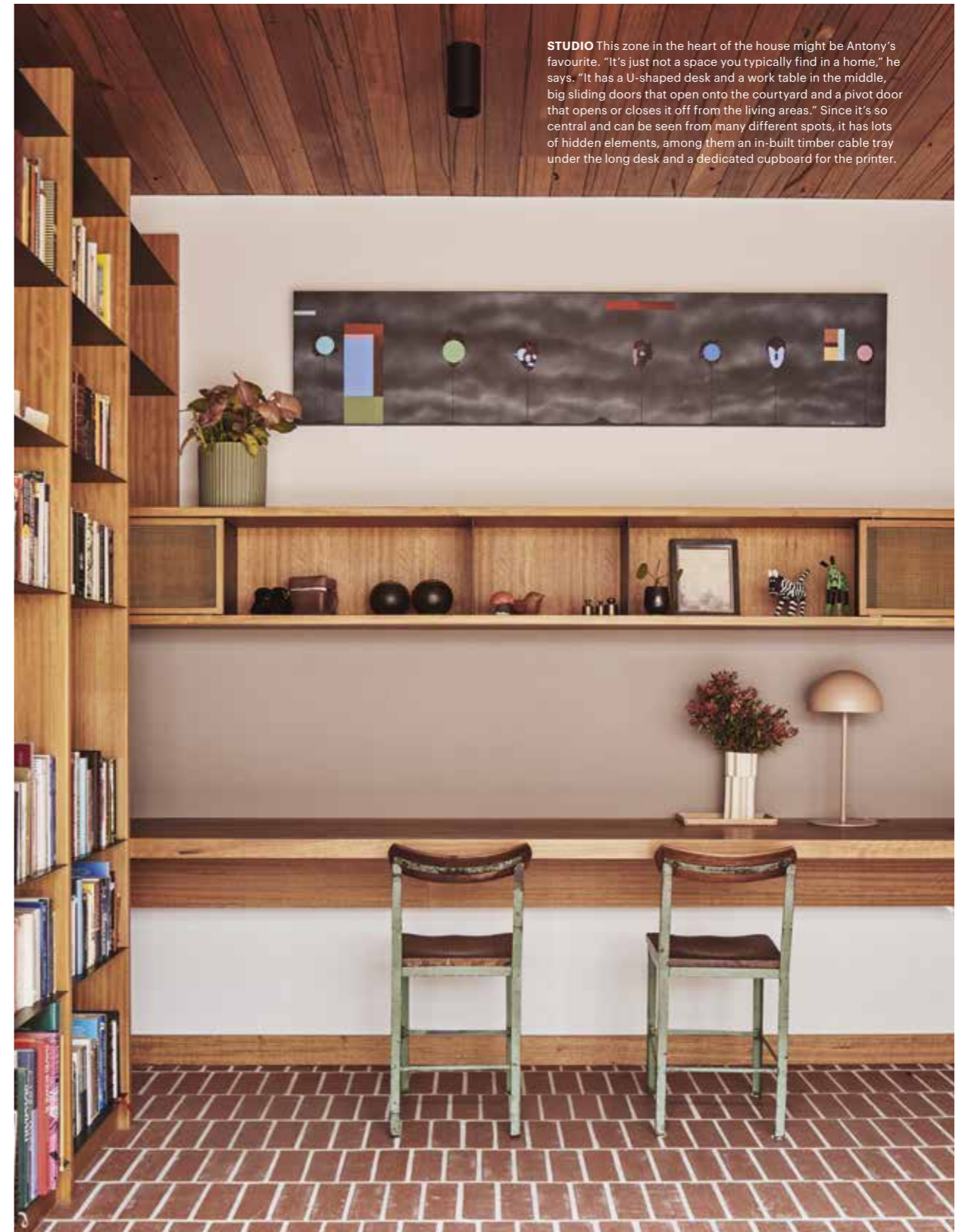
Airy and leafy, yet grounded and cocooning, “this is a real kind of country house, but you can still see

the city,” says Antony. “It’s a fantastic feeling of being surrounded by green and you also have an awareness of that body of water down there.”

Indeed. Despite those Kiwi connections, Antony adds that there’s one regular reminder they’re not in New Zealand now. “There’s a snake alert that goes on among the properties backing onto the creek. If someone notices there’s a snake travelling through, they send a text to let everyone know!”

Apart from reptiles, everyone’s welcome at this address. “They wanted to create a home with an open-door policy, which again was very much how I experienced Marsh Cook’s house as a teenager — everyone used to be there,” says Antony. “Now that’s the experience I have when I go round to this house.”

Antony says his friends are “more themselves” here. “It’s been amazing to see them in this space tailored for them. I think that’s the thing about us. Architecture’s not just styling and aesthetics, but how we design our spaces to suit the people we are. We’re extroverted and introverted at certain times, and this house can accommodate both.” ▲

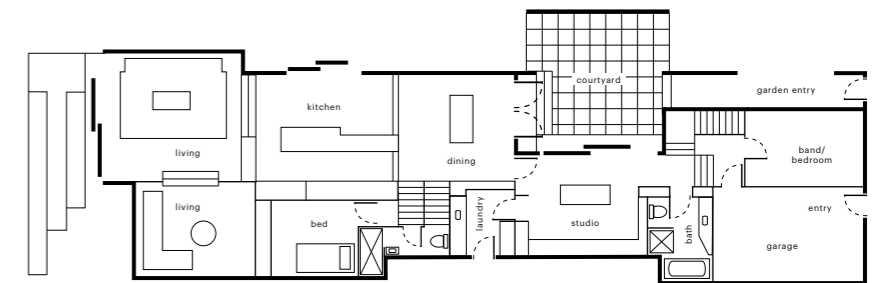


STUDIO This zone in the heart of the house might be Antony’s favourite. “It’s just not a space you typically find in a home,” he says. “It has a U-shaped desk and a work table in the middle, big sliding doors that open onto the courtyard and a pivot door that opens or closes it off from the living areas.” Since it’s so central and can be seen from many different spots, it has lots of hidden elements, among them an in-built timber cable tray under the long desk and a dedicated cupboard for the printer.

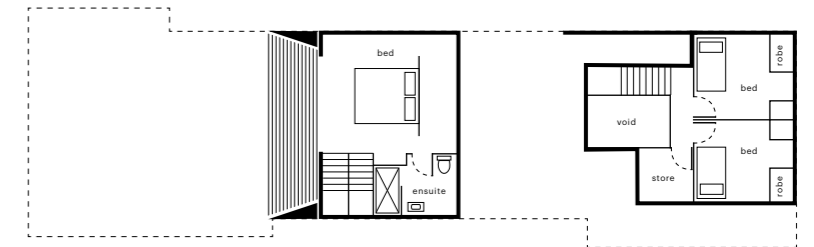


TOP & OPPOSITE The watery blue ensuite features the same custom-made, Australian-manufactured tapware by Sussex that appears throughout the home, finished in brass to avoid the use of chrome. Also seen elsewhere in the house, the pure brass mesh screens that shield the shelving will darken with age alongside the tapware. **ABOVE** With a floating wall dividing the bed from the walk-in wardrobe, the main bedroom catches glimpses of the city. Even though this is a very inviting home, there's a strong sense of privacy in the spaces that require it. This bedroom, the son's bedroom and the daughters' bedrooms are all located in different parts of the house. "These are quite formal, and people can go up to their rooms and feel like they're getting away," says Antony.

THIS PAGE It's rare to have a garden this size in a central location like this, and the owners were keen to make it one in which they can really get their hands dirty, so SBLA created a variety of green spaces, including a terraced garden with a pool at the back of the house. **OPPOSITE** Teens can be tricky at the best of times — how do you design a house to suit? "Future-proofing is always a key concern for us," says Antony. "Teenagers become young adults, and here it's less about how the spaces might be when the kids move away, and more about how they can coexist in the house together as young adults and feel welcome, and continue living there beyond being children."



GROUND FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR

