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The pandemic shows why good design matters

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Two very different buildings – an apartment block in Melbourne and a bespoke house in the Blue Mountains – that both offered space and comfort during the pandemic and reinforced the importance of good design took out the country's top awards for residential architecture.

A North Melbourne project designed by Kennedy Nolan Architects with six four-storey townhouses and two two-storey apartments took out the main award for multi-residential housing, while Peter Stutchbury Architects' house in Blackheath for an astronomy-loving client in a wheelchair topped the new house category.



Good medium-density development: The Lothian in North Melbourne has two apartments and six townhouses, all with their own street addresses and entrances. **Derek Swalwell**

Both projects offered solid, comfortable spaces that met occupants' needs and created a refuge for them during the pandemic, showing how big an influence the concepts or lines architects drew on a page have on people's lives, jury chairwoman Alice Hampson said.

"That line you make became, during the pandemic, someone's entire world," Ms Hampson told *The Australian Financial Review*.

"The importance of really strong architecture seems more important than ever before, particularly in housing, because that's where we're all spending lockdown."

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The brick building on Lothian Street that evoked brick buildings of the suburb's industrial heritage had deeply recessed balconies and large internal spaces and gave each of the eight homes its own entrance, making it the opposite of the typical "glass box with glass walls everywhere," Ms Hampson said.



Sky's the limit: The Blackheath house by Peter Stutchbury Architects is designed to be accessible for its wheelchair-user owner. **Michael Nicholson**

It was a "brave" move by the developer Excelon Projects, she said.

"It's unlike what else is on the market," Ms Hampson said. "When you work in a market, it's quite hard to stand out."

Buyers of the “quite large” three- and two-bedroom townhouses and apartments in the building with an end value of \$13 million were young families, Excelon director Kelvin Taing said.

“As a budding inner city suburb, I thought there is a market, a demand from people who want higher-quality, more specifically designed dwellings for themselves,” Mr Taing told the *Financial Review*.

Gazing space: the vaulted arch of the main room includes an elliptical hole to permit observation of the night sky. **Michael Nicholson**

One of the two-bedroom apartments is currently for sale [with a \\$880,000 price tag](#) – more than \$10,000 per square metre with no car park.

The jury lifted up the [Peter Stutchbury house](#), which won a lower-level gong rather than the state's top prize in the NSW awards in June, for the highest national award for new house architecture.

The design, with a vaulted roof with elliptical hole to allow for night sky observation and an accessible, single-level floorplan for the client, a wheelchair user, was unique but showed that architecture could exactly meet people's needs, however, individual, Ms Hampson said.

"It's all thought through precisely for someone in a wheelchair who wanted to make a connection with the universe," she said.

A design by Grimshaw in collaboration with Monash University, which created both small and large light-filled spaces and became the southern hemisphere's largest Passive House-certified project, won Monash Woodside Building for Technology and Design, the country's top awards for public and sustainable architecture.

"At the heart of this building's imperative is demonstrating how architecture can assist clients to achieve net zero, in this instance by 2030," the jury citation says.

The top award for educational architecture went to Neeson Murcutt + Neille-designed Rosewood Centre gym and teaching building at Sydney's Barker College.



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The large building that includes five court spaces, gym and exercise spaces, rooms for dance, general purpose teaching areas, showed how sporting facilities could be more enjoyable to be in, especially for children, Ms Hampson said.

“They’re normally a great big shed and tend not to have the space humanised, which is pretty unpleasant and confronting to a three quarter-sized person, which is what children are,” she said.

Big and small spaces - and highly efficient: The Woodside building is the largest Passive House-certified building in the southern hemisphere. **Peter Bennetts**

“The ceiling space is somewhat divided in geometry. It doesn’t feel like you’re in a huge big tin shed. The light is extraordinary. It’s very cleverly done. The humanising aspect is beautiful for our soon-to-be adult population.”

Large, but small: The building design humanised the big-box gym and created a scale that suited the children using it. **Rory Gardiner**

The space was also much nicer than many school gyms for people going to watch sport, Ms Hampson said.

“There are some terrible ones there,” she said. “You feel as [a] parent, you climb into a corner somewhere to watch the sport. You don’t feel you’re part of their experience.”

The country's top award for heritage architecture went to the Williams Boag Architects-designed Bendigo Former Mining Exchange, for [a \\$3 million renovation](#) that restored the Victorian-era building and brought it up to modern standards.

However, the building with 1415sq m of new commercial space intended for bars and restaurants, was completed in late 2019, just before the pandemic struck and was empty of tenants when it [won Victoria's state award for heritage architecture](#) in June.

Awaiting a pick-up: The Beehive Buildings (Bendigo Former Mining Exchange), restored by Williams Boag Architects, is still vacant, two years after completion. **Fred Kroh**

Only two weeks since Victoria's lockdown restrictions eased, it remained vacant, Colliers leasing agent Andrew Lewis said on Thursday.

"The commercial market is generally strong but hospitality is the donut hole," Mr Lewis said.

"There's no interest in the hospitality sector across Ballarat, Geelong or Bendigo. We're not back into normality yet. Hopefully, after Christmas we might be."

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