

In this speculative multiresidential development, David Saunders of S2 Design set out to explore the domestic and commercial potential of a 1940s substation, and ended up investing it with a liberal dose of his own idiosyncratic sense of humour.

# HIGH VOLTAGE









## AMAZING ADAPTATIONS IN FOCUS

**IN A SPECULATIVE COMMERCIAL** development, there is no client and no occupant to help shape the built structure. These traditional ingredients of a domestic design brief are missing. There are also tight cost constraints. Developers need to maximize profit, so the cost of every design decision has to be weighed against the amount it will add to the final selling price. With this multi-unit development in Balaclava, east of Melbourne, David Saunders of S2 Design has responded to these conditions by investing his own personality in the design.

While not officially engaged by the developer beyond town planning stage, David attended the construction site regularly, establishing a relationship with the builders, answering their queries and further developing his design ideas. This hands-on approach was fundamental to the success of the project, which forms its distinctive character from the adaptive reuse of an existing 1940s substation, and the inclusion of an assortment of objects found on the site.

David Saunders is a young architect with a dry sense of humour, and he has brought this sensibility to bear when combining “electrical substation” with “home”. The redundant pieces of substation that could have been discarded have instead been relocated, reused or re-erected. One power pole was re-erected in its exact location after construction; it stands at the back of the site like an abstract totem pole. An antique sign which has been attached to it reads “Warning High Voltage”, which at first glance seems plausible, except that no wires are attached. The facade was designed without visually acknowledging the pole; the two elements – building and pole – simply coexist.

Every found object has been incorporated, and sometimes even supplemented, with items from David’s personal collection. He has added ceramic electrical insulators where they were missing from the old power poles, and off-cuts from other power poles form irregular corner-posts for the fence in front of the garage. He also found an identity tag on the site for a cat with the same name as his grandmother, so he nailed it to a pole near the entry at his grandmother’s eye-height. If she visits her grandson’s project, she will read her own name there.

David’s capacity as project architect was limited – for example, he had no role in selecting interior finishes – but landscaping was one of the design elements within his control. St Kilda Indigenous Nursery Co-operative advised him on what plants would thrive un-watered in the local ecosystem, so tufts of native grass decorate the courtyard gardens on the ground level and a native creeper, which will eventually create an arbour over the entry gate, climbs up the sawn-off power poles and grows over a heavy, rusting steel frame (another found object presumably dating from the substation’s original construction).

David’s design approach results in a complex layering of materials, a collage of genres and scales. The parapet of the substation becomes the balustrade of an apartment balcony. A privacy wall between two balconies is constructed in brick, mimicking the parapet, pretending to be another remnant from the original structure. External walls on the ground floor are made from blue-grey concrete blocks, like a giant-scaled version of the bluestone foundations common to nineteenth-century homes in the area. The middle floor is clad in stained corrugated

sheeting, reminiscent of aged copper, and the set-back upper storey shines metallic during the day, almost disappearing into the sky.

Where the building adjoins a car park, the boundary of the property is marked by a tilt-slab wall. Not content to leave the concrete bare, Saunders invited artist Damon Kowarsky to help transform the wall into an urban art piece. Working on site with the concrete subcontractors, David, Damon and a few friends arranged laser-cut insertions into the formwork for each panel. The result is a wall of inscribed hieroglyphics. Damon had been employed as an artist on an archaeological dig in Egypt in 2002. Bringing this experience to bear on this project, he created abstract writing that could reference ancient civilizations, cave painting or graffiti. During the pour for one panel, a piece of block-out formwork for a window opening slipped out of alignment and, rather than fixing it, Saunders let it become another quirk. From inside one bathroom, the angled window takes a diagonal chop out of the shower tiling.

This project has many faces. S2 Design has worked around the edges of a necessarily tough commercial formula to make the most of limited possibilities. The view from the back, taking in the art wall, is strikingly different to the view from the front. Incongruity is evident even within the art wall itself – the curve rendered in exposed railway ballast conflicts with the rigidity of the rectangular panels, graphically depicting the struggle between utilitarian practicality and poetic aspiration. The collaged nature of the front facade, setting electrical substation against human inhabitation, offers the most cohesive view of the design. In the evening, occupants can be observed through a perforated metal screen inserted above the substation doors, blurring the boundary between the site’s industrial and domestic functions.

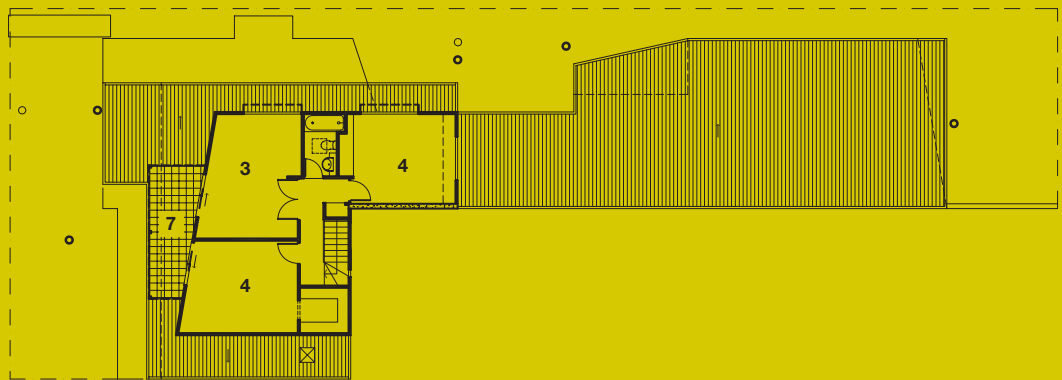
S2 Design has carefully considered the environmental sustainability of the project – living spaces receive northern sunshine, while glass blocks in the thermally massive southern wall light bathrooms and laundry benches, preventing the need for artificial lighting during the day. A water tank forms part of the dividing fence between two apartment courtyards, and is shared for watering the garden (not that the indigenous planting requires much). Fence battens are made from a recycled timber composite product that doesn’t require maintenance.

The project deals with the visual matter of our domestic environment, and forms unexpected relationships. Architecture, as opposed to painting and photography, has the potential to fuse real elements – brickwork, power poles, the tilt-slab – and to transform our real-life experience of suburbia into a poetic one. Generic, mundane objects, like electricity poles, can disappear from our mental picture, but here they form part of an architectural composition, emerging from banality, transformed into suburban collage, into sculpture.

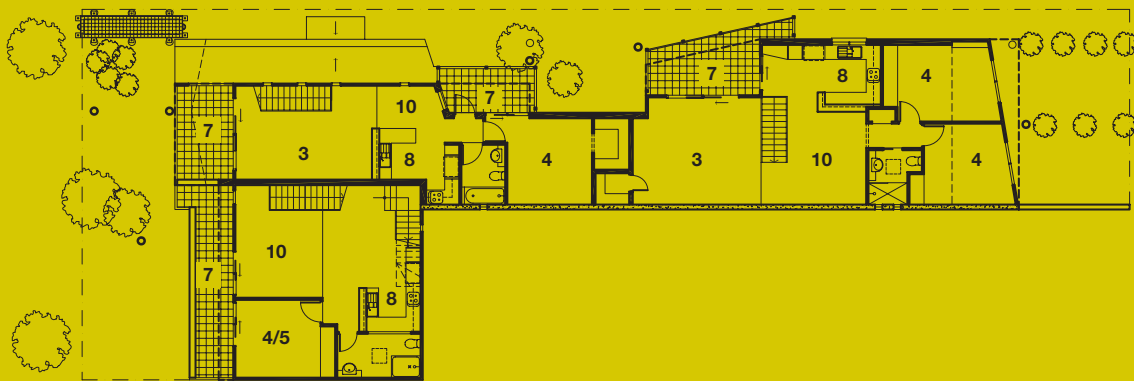
David has personalized this project, adding character and depth to an otherwise anonymous speculative development. Whether observers understand the idiosyncrasies or not, the design invites questions, and the quirks add detail and richness, layers of story and interpretation. This project proves that adaptive reuse is not only an environmentally responsive approach, but a visually rich one. **TOBY HORROCKS**

**PREVIOUS PAGES, LEFT:**  
A 1940s substation was the starting point for the design. **RIGHT:** New and pre-existing elements combine to create a collage effect. **OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP:** Stained, corrugated cladding mimics the verdigris of aging copper. **BOTTOM:** Artist Damon Kowarsky transformed a potentially banal perimeter wall into an urban art piece.

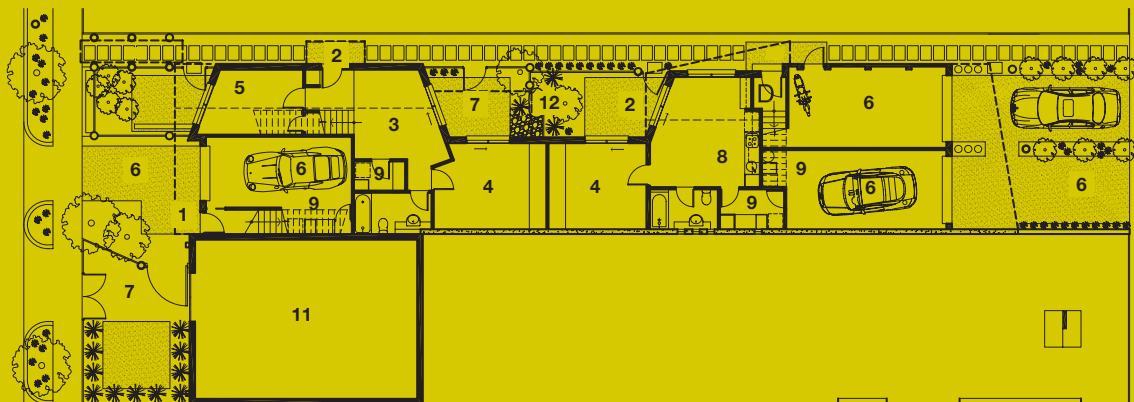




Second floor



First floor



Ground floor

0 2 5 10 m

OPPOSITE PAGE:  
A picture window frame  
provides a view of the  
rooftops of Balaclava.

- 1 Entry canopy
- 2 Entry
- 3 Living
- 4 Bedroom
- 5 Study
- 6 Garage
- 7 Courtyard/balcony
- 8 Kitchen
- 9 Laundry
- 10 Dining
- 11 Electrical substation
- 12 Water tank





## ARCHITECT

### S2 Design

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St Kilda Vic 3182

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## PRACTICE PROFILE

Environmentally conscious architectural and interior design practice undertaking commercial, residential, urban, installation art, landscape, furniture and hospitality projects.

## PROJECT TEAM

David M. Saunders,

John A. Saunders

## BUILDER/DEVELOPER

Gradam Enterprises,

Sajadac Nominees

## CONSULTANTS

**Interiors** Gradam Enterprises,

S2 Design

**Fine artist** Damon Kowarsky

**Joinery** Lifestyle Designs

**Land surveyor** Calvin F. Raven

**Building surveyor**

Nicholson Wright

**Lighting** S2 Design,

Gradam Enterprises

**Landscaping** S2 Design, SKINC

## PRODUCTS

**Roofing** Lysaght Zincalume

Klip-Lok; R2.5 ceiling insulation

**External walls** NuBrick split-face

concrete blockwork,

bluestone/black colour; Lysaght

Mini Orb 'African Copper';

recycled pressed red brick to

match existing; Vitrabond 'Silver

701'; tilt-slab concrete panels

with bluestone railway ballast

**Internal walls** Plasterboard,

painted or tiled; exposed

concrete blocks **Windows**

Geelong Windows; Southern Star

Windows; Glass Brick Company

'Fantasy' and 'Mist' **Doors**

Gainsborough 9900 series

Curvelle levers **Flooring** Fowles

Timber & Carpet 'Tibet Mocha'

carpet; Mingarelli Tiles 'Crema

Light Polished' **Lighting** Home

of Lights **Kitchen** Zucchetti Zara

mixer tap; Bourne Sagi sink;

Ariston appliances; SmartStone

benchtop **Bathroom** Kohler

Calypso and Roca Streamline

Giralda toilet suites; semi-

recessed Fowles 'Tasman' vanity

basin **Heating** DL split system

aircon; IXL electric panel heaters

**External elements** Komplete

Brick & Pavers paving

## TIME SCHEDULE

**Design, documentation**

31 months

**Construction** 29 months

## PHOTOGRAPHY

Michael Downes