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The rise of
the boutique
developer

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CURATING *communities*



A clutch of developers who cultivate design values and sustainability are seeding enduring boutique multi-family settlements in the inner city.

Words **STEPHEN TODD**

Business of Design **RIGHT NOW**



WHEN MELBURNIAN Michael McCormack couldn't find a house in a neighbourhood he and his wife wanted to live in at a price they could afford, he decided to become a property developer. So Milieu was born in December 2010, when he was just 28.

"I bought a block of land in Fitzroy with a terrace house on it, demolished it and built five townhouses for us and people like us who didn't want to live too far out or in an inner-city tower block," he explains. "We're interested in the idea of community, sustainability and good design. All our projects are kind of pitched to ourselves," 'ourselves' being partners Shannon Peach and Ross Troon and others in his immediate milieu.

McCormack, as the grandson of a carpenter and with a degree in construction management and an understanding of law, may not be typical, but he is emblematic of a new spirit in the development sector. Polyester pants and hard profit are no longer the driving forces for a generation of developers who were born looking down the barrel of a housing crisis. "When we started we had very little cash so we would take all the more challenging sites – the tight, bizarre little blocks of land that nobody else could figure out," says McCormack.

By finding design solutions to spatial problems Milieu quickly made a name for itself as a savvy, solution-oriented development group. It was never about glitz, but the true grit of inner urban living definitely had its appeal. Milieu is active in Melbourne's inner-northern suburbs, McCormack's home turf, always close to amenities such as public transport and schools.

Milieu's latest development in Breese Street, Brunswick, is designed by DKO and Breathe architects to be fossil-fuel-free with a 7.5-star sustainability rating and a maximum of five neighbours per floor. "We've taken the lessons we learned in our townhouses and applied them to apartment living," says McCormack.

The interiors are simple volumes, floors are recycled hardwood; ceilings and walls are concrete – perfect for thermal massing. Oriented for passive cooling, airconditioners are unnecessary and residents can opt for shared rooftop laundry facilities to allow more space in their own homes for storage. And to enjoy the landscaped roof garden with its own Breese Street bees.

In a nation raised on suburban home ownership, creating inner city density is vital if we are to adequately house and service a growing – and ageing – population.

Michael Piccolo at Piccolo developers helps ease downsizing clients into apartments by offering grown-up interiors by the likes of Hecker Guthrie and featuring appliances by Gaggenau, Bang & Olufsen and Venini – and an optional interior design consultant service to assist

This page, from top Breese Street by Milieu in Brunswick is a collection of one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments. A typical bathroom. The communal rooftop garden has its own hives. Kitchens are fitted with induction cooktops and no fossil fuels are created or consumed in the building. Opposite page Transport and shopping are close at hand.





This page, from top right With 49 apartments, 18 townhouses and retail space, 122 Roseneath Street at Clifton Hill is a collaboration of Wulff Projects and Assemble. The spaces offer a community feel with a sense of ownership. The design has a modern, brutalist edge. Piccolo's luxury residential apartments at Elwood House. A kitchen. The lobby.



them in sorting out the clutter. "A lot of our clients are scaling down from a home but don't want to lose quality," he says. "They have to let a lot of things go and we're there to help them navigate the process."

Piccolo took over the family firm 20 years ago and in 2013 decided to focus on the owner-occupier market. "There's been a glut in investment-type apartments for some time and many of them are shoddy," he says. "I decided to focus on the owner-occupier market at the higher end, offering quality design with architectural integrity." Piccolo's latest development, Elwood House overlooking Port Phillip Bay, is shortlisted for the World Architecture Festival Building of the Year award, to be announced in Amsterdam in November.

At Assemble, the close-knit group of young property directors are intent on not just offering exceptional design in key inner-city locations, in July they launched the Assemble Model as a means of assisting clients to finance their home. An adaptation of the build-to-rent system that is gaining popularity in North America, the Assemble Model allows clients to secure a five-year lease off the plan with an option to purchase at a pre-fixed price. The idea is to try-as-you-buy but with the right to opt out at any time. Assemble also offers a not-for-profit financial service scheme.

"Overall, this approach results in true alignment between residents and Assemble as the property developer and long-term manager of each building," says Assemble's strategy director Ben Keck. "This close relationship holds us directly accountable for the success of our projects – ensuring that our communities are great places to live."

The first apartment building to be delivered under the Assemble Model will be 393 Macaulay Road, Kensington, just north of Docklands. Retaining the original art deco facade, the new structure designed by Fieldwork houses 73 apartments over eight levels. At the heart of the design is a landscaped, open-air walkway to allow cross-ventilation and dual-aspect natural light to all homes.

"The entire community will be connected through communal spaces on the upper and ground floors: places for work, eating and leisure together," says Assemble's design director Quino Holland. "The aim is for the building to improve with age through durable materials, flexible spaces, good access to natural light, strong connection between indoor and outdoor spaces, robust energy systems and integrated landscaping. It's about liveability – implementing a clear set of standards that promote a better quality of life."

In an under-supplied market, if you build it they will come. But the real skill is getting them to stay. "We care about the legacy we leave and the community that grows in and around our apartments," says McCormack, echoing the new spirit of 21st-century development. milieuproperty.com.au; assemblecommunities.com; piccolo.net.au