

A ROOM AND A BATH

Architect Ha Architecture
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Through subtle changes to the familiar layout of the Australian suburban home, Ha Architecture's repurposed dwellings for retiring sisters of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul present a liberating option for the ubiquitous domestic space.



Now almost one hundred years since the foundation of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM), the tendency to favour the new and revolutionary in the discussion of housing persists. This usually takes the form of a search for new typologies with new names, presented as unprecedented answers to unprecedented problems.¹ What results is a kind of consumerism of ideas where newness is favoured over the familiar, and innovation is valued over things simply being good.²

Meanwhile, the most enduring developments in domestic planning have become quietly naturalised. Inventions such as the corridor, or the amalgamation of the living, dining and cooking spaces into one room, were not the subject of manifestos or research projects. Rather, they emerged through single buildings as minor alterations to existing housing types.

Located in Marsfield, Sydney, Ha Architecture's Living Quarters is comprised of two good houses. Each house is resolutely suburban in plan, with a footprint of 12 by 28 metres. Such proportions are perfectly suited to the typical suburban plot, long and narrow with its short length to the street and from which one enters the house. So too, the plan's internal arrangement follows the suburban formula, with entry via a long central corridor flanked by

closed private rooms and ending in the largest room of the house, an open-plan living-dining-kitchen.³ The corridor also directs access to a laundry, office and bathroom, as well as a closed secondary living space separated from the open plan. The architects had the replicability of this model in mind, and familiar arrangements such as these are a strength in this regard.

There are, however, three important differences in plan when compared with the typical suburban house: each bedroom is the same size, has equal access to bathrooms and is of an equivalent location in the house.

Within a domestic plan, the status of inhabitants is determined through the size of their bedroom, the rooms access to bathrooms and its position in the dwelling. It is these three variables that create hierarchy within the house between otherwise equal inhabitants. Such ordering was first optimised by Henry Roberts in his *Model Houses for Families* (1851), in through which the compartmentalisation of the nuclear family was set through the differentiation of one bedroom as the largest (still referred to as the 'master'), with direct access to services and separated from the other closed rooms of the house. Today, this hierarchy persists as a normalised practice of domestic planning, even in small apartments.⁴

Below: living quarters, passageway
Opposite, above and below: courtyard; exterior views
Page 104-105: living quarters, prayer room
Page 108-109: living room







Ground floor plan 1:250

- KEY**
- 1. Entry
 - 2. Bedroom
 - 3. Ensuite
 - 4. Courtyard
 - 5. Prayer Room
 - 6. WC
 - 7. Laundry
 - 8. Study
 - 9. Kitchen
 - 10. Dining
 - 11. Living
 - 12. Shared outdoor dining
 - 13. Carport
 - 14. Visitor parking

“Within each house, each bedroom is the same size, has an equivalent location and equal access to bathrooms. This subtle shift eliminates the implicit hierarchies of domestic planning.”



West elevation 1:200

In response to the specific housing brief for retiring sisters of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, Ha Architecture have avoided this differentiation. Within each house, each bedroom is the same size, has an equivalent location and equal access to bathrooms. This subtle shift eliminates the implicit hierarchies of domestic planning. In this way, these two houses are not only good houses in response to a specific brief, but they also demonstrate a quietly liberating idea for the dwelling in general.

In a similar way, the building’s expression includes familiar elements that would benefit wider use, such as the return of eaves to the Australian house, a pitched roof and an open-air carport to the street. Each house also adheres to accessible design standards without the alienating visual cues normally associated with such compliance. However, the building’s expression, a refined vernacular, is not present in Ha’s earlier residential work, which mostly tends toward the neo-modern. A possible explanation lies not in the project cost, as one might normally expect, but instead in a particular moment in history for the Catholic Church.

The project’s commission coincided with an accumulating crisis of public regard for the Catholic Church in

Australia. Perhaps in response, the Daughters of Charity’s brief included an interest in modesty. Importantly, this interest extended only to the *appearance* of modesty, rather than any material or pricing modesty. During the Counter-Reformation, the Catholic Church tried to regain influence through excessively indulgent architecture, commissioning architects such as Michelangelo and Borromini. Today, in a state of damage control, the Church is trying to obscure its excesses, commissioning houses of refined brick-veneer by Ha Architecture.

However, to focus on the subject of Living Quarters would be to overlook the quietly revolutionary moves it demonstrates for the dwelling more broadly. Through subtle shifts to an existing housing model, the project repurposes the typical single-family detached house in ways that could easily be overlooked. While for CIAM the answer to the housing problem would be sought in a conscious break from all that came before them, Living Quarters demonstrates an alternate approach, one in which examining and understanding what exists can lead to a repurposing of the house for a contemporary way of life. [U](#)

1. While for CIAM the pursuit of newness was in the name of social and political change, its contemporary manifestation is economic. Today, the use of a new name more commonly presents an existing type as a ‘new’ marketable product. Nightingale’s ‘Teilhaus’ apartments are one such example, a plan that presents no significant changes from what is more commonly known as a studio apartment.
2. For a discussion on the legacy of ‘good enough’ architecture in Australia see Guillermo Fernández-Abascal and Urtzi Grau, *Regional Bureaucracy* (Melbourne: Perimeter Books, 2022), 9–13.
3. Kim Dovey comments on this pattern of entry sequence: “This is a domestic parallel of the diplomatic promenade or the corporate foyer – highly ritualised and awe-inspiring with high symbolic value and low use value.” *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form* (Routledge, 2008), 304. However, the original use value of the corridor is outlined by Robin Evans in his 1978 essay “Figures, Doors and Passages.”
4. The Victorian Government’s *Apartment Design Guidelines for Victoria* (2021) reinforces this logic through minimum bedroom size requirements, stipulating the dimension of a ‘main bedroom’ as at least 3.4 x 3 m and ‘all other bedrooms’ of 3 x 3 m.