



# Modern Monument

*Text / Payal Uttam    Images / David Roche*



**W**hen Australian art collector and philanthropist Judith Neilson asked her friend William Smart to design her Sydney home, she gave him an ultimatum: start work right away or she would go to Frank Gehry instead. ‘I knew it was that lucky moment when someone says, “Here’s your chance to build something extraordinary”,’ says the architect, who instantly agreed in spite of his packed schedule.

The project began with an eccentric handwritten brief. Aside from insisting that the home last for 100 years, Neilson wanted a dining table able to seat 60, no curtains, no automation and only manual fixtures. ‘And it must be beautiful, which she underlined four times,’ Smart recalls with a laugh. She decided to name her new home Indigo Slam, the title of a crime novel by American author Robert Crais. ‘That was my first clue that the home would be unconventional,’ he says. ‘It didn’t feel like a name that would be pinned onto an elegant, conservative house.’

Since construction was completed in 2016, the award-winning home has been turning heads in Sydney’s inner-city Chippendale neighbourhood. ‘It has an incredibly sculptural concrete facade that bulges out and pushes back in, so it’s quite arresting to see from the street,’ says Smart. The drama continues inside with walls curving up to reach the tall ceilings in capacious living and entertaining areas. ‘I used a language of peeling and folding to allow sunlight to bounce into the space,’ he explains of the skylights and the strategic shape of the home’s curved facade.

Previous page: Named Indigo Slam, this architecturally driven home in an inner-city Sydney suburb belongs to Australian art collector and philanthropist Judith Neilson

Setting the tone for the 1200-square-metre home is a massive staircase made of waxed, dry-pressed grey bricks. It was sized specifically to accommodate a galloping horse, another of Neilson’s quirky ideas, inspired by Italian and French palazzos. Although surprised by the request, Smart is impressed with the outcome: ‘It’s very gentle to walk up and it feels like marching up to a monument at the top of a hill.’

On the right of the stairs is the formal dining room with timber shutters and blade walls behind a long, narrow table. Moving upward, the visitor transitions into a series of more intimate private spaces through a glass bridge leading to four bedrooms. Then on the top floor is the living room, a cosy space with a mid-century aesthetic. Highlights include a series of wooden chairs by Australian designer Khai Liew that resemble flowers bursting open. ‘Judith commissioned him to make every piece of furniture in the house, so that shut down his ability to make objects for others for three years,’ explains Smart.

Like the rest of the home, the room has a relatively sparse amount of art considering Neilson’s vast collection; happily for Smart, she was so impressed by the architecture that she felt it deserved the limelight. The home essentially became an artwork in itself, and Smart likes to describe it as ‘an art collector living in a piece of sculpture’. Beyond that, he sees it as a space that slowly reveals itself, not unlike a Crais mystery novel: ‘It has a quietness to it but it’s also exciting and intriguing. There’s so much surprise and delight.’

Facing page: Inspired by Italian and French palazzos, a massive staircase made of waxed, dry-pressed grey bricks was sized specifically to accommodate a galloping horse



An upper-level living room features a series of wooden flower chairs by Australian designer Khai Liew

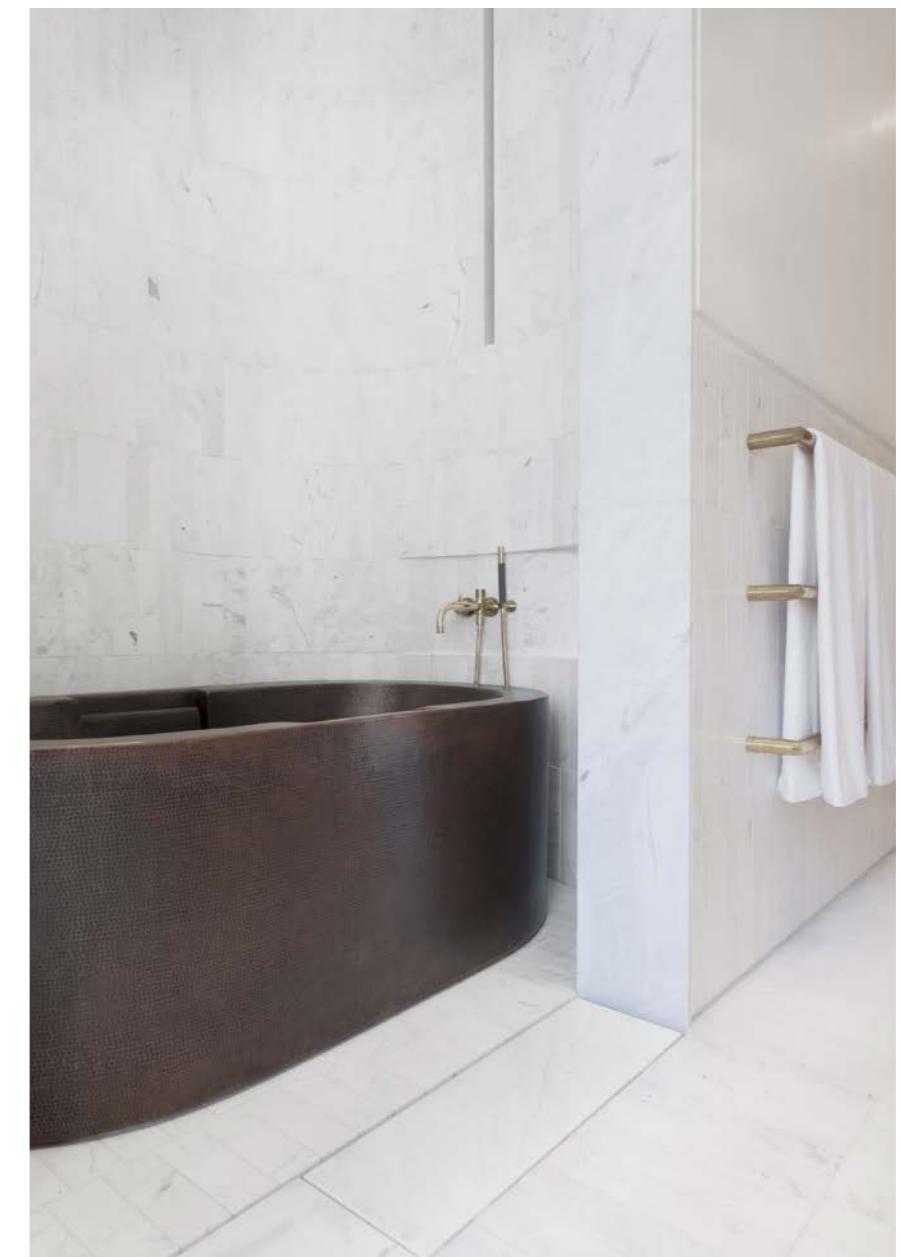


The home features only a sparse amount of art despite its owner's vast collection, instead highlighting the architecture's sculptural qualities





A mid-century aesthetic permeates the living spaces throughout



Clean lines and restrained material choices define the master en-suite