

Big Steps



Co-directors (L-R) Ben Keck, Giuseppe Demaio and Joachim Holland with Assemble Pages' editor Eugenia Lim and Chips

Frustrated by the paucity of genuinely liveable, small footprint housing in Melbourne, a group of young creatives is applying design thinking to change the rules of the inner city development game.

Step into Assemble's studio and the first thing you notice is the ceiling. It's mostly raw concrete, but in the corner of the room, pressing upwards, hovers a structure you might describe as cloud-like but for its hard, angular geometry. It looks improbable, the stuff of science fiction, the anti-gravitational landscape of an upside-down world.

"We were really keen for this space to be representative of some of the ideas that we're talking about, ideas of flexibility and sustainability," says Joachim Holland, co-director of Assemble. "We wanted it to be exciting in terms of form, but it also had to be rational."

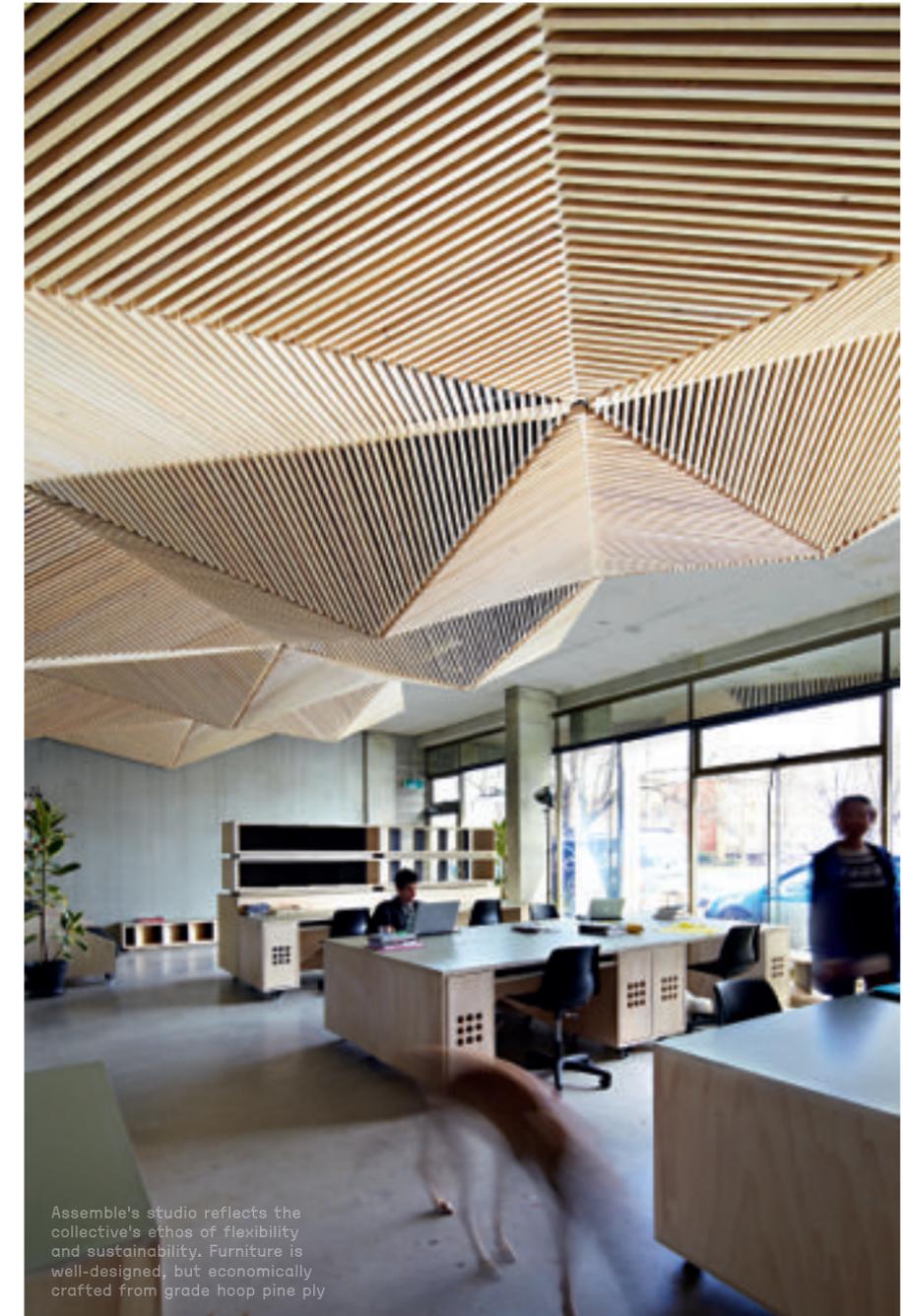
The otherworldly ceiling sculpture? Basically a bulkhead made from Bunnings two-by-four pine battens, used to conceal services and provide acoustic baffling.

"From the material point of view, the two-by-four pine battens are pretty much the most unglamorous, cheapest material you can buy," Holland continues. "But they also happen to be sustainable, because they're made from fast growing plantation pine."

The studio makes the most of its concrete skeleton's innate qualities with minimal intervention. Additions are built with sustainability in mind, and the entire fit-out is easily demountable, with much of it resting on castors, allowing the space to hold events and, eventually, workshops.

The workshops are an important part of the program, because much like their studio, Assemble is not your typical design practice – in fact, it's not really a design practice at all. While it counts among its staff an architect (Joachim Holland), a designer (Giuseppe Demaio) and an artist (Eugenia Lim), its primary purpose doesn't relate solely to any of these disciplines. Assemble is a development company, and its studio space serves as both a workplace and a 'demonstration suite' – albeit for its ethos, rather than its projects.

I first got wind of Assemble through its affiliated publication, *Assemble Papers*, an online magazine dedicated to propounding the benefits of small footprint, sustainable living. It boasts interviews with renowned thinkers and doers such as Alain de Botton and Marcus Westbury as well as more |...



Assemble's studio reflects the collective's ethos of flexibility and sustainability. Furniture is well-designed, but economically crafted from grade hoop pine ply



Skillfully constructed by LocalSpaces, Assemble's studio promotes a community-like atmosphere in keeping with the vision of the co-directors

...| conventional profiles of people and their homes. While its features were aspirational ('Living not decorating', 'This vertical life'), they clearly celebrated a very different set of values and ambitions to those of most lifestyle-oriented 'shelter' media.

"Assemble Papers is intended to demonstrate that there is a clear distinction between how Assemble works and how a traditional property development company works," says Eugenia Lim, the title's editor. "We're not really interested in creating a display suite or traditional billboard marketing, or things that talk in a hollow way about lifestyle."

The ambition of the company, in this respect, is to establish a dialogue in the first instance with a community of like-minded people frustrated with the paucity of genuinely affordable, liveable housing stock in inner-city Melbourne.

"About five years ago a lot of our friends and colleagues got priced out of the inner city housing market. I think it was probably when the single fronted, terrace house in Collingwood went past the \$500,000 mark," says Holland. "We found there were a lot of people looking to buy in those areas, and there was no credible alternative to the single fronted terrace house. So we decided to get

together to try and produce the sort of buildings we ourselves would want to buy in."

According to Ben Keck (one of the company's three co-directors), there is a very simple reason for the dire lack of liveable inner-city housing stock: liveability is not a significant consideration for most inner city developments.

"Over the last 20 years of off-the-plan development in Melbourne, around about 70% comes from investors, and most of that is overseas investors, so they're designing the product with them in mind, not really owner-occupiers," he points out. "They're not physical assets, they're just financial products, so the cheaper that you can build them for, and still sell them and get a good yield, that's all the investors care about."

Assemble is not interested in building financial products, or apartments in the abstract, but rather real housing for real people, which is where the workshops come in. As opposed to finding a site, and then simply shoehorning as many units as possible to extract maximum value from it, they want to engage people in a conversation about what they'd like from the design before ground is even broken.

By keeping the process open and transparent, they're hopeful that they'll not only

be able to deliver on a more tailored solution for their home owners, but also disseminate a deeper understanding and appreciation for what really makes high density living work – namely, good design and a strong sense of community. The ambition is to shift the conversation towards features that offer genuine amenity – like generous communal gardens, good orientation and robust, family-friendly finishes.

"I'd love to get people to the point where they're debating about their future townhouse or apartment, the way that people do when they're buying a car," says Holland. "People spend so much time researching vehicles from the point of view of on-going maintenance, on-going costs, the design features, but they don't do that when they're buying a home."

With the successful launch of *Papers* earlier this year at its studio, which drew a large crowd of young inner-city types and coverage on the popular sub-cultural website *The Thousands*, Assemble has already demonstrated that there is hunger out there for small footprint living. Its next challenge? As co-director Giuseppe Demaio puts it, "Finding an awesome site!"

assemblepapers.com.au
assembleprojects.com.au