



In Adrian Amore's Loft Apartment plasterboard dominates. It's very white; surfaces and shapes have been used to give the apartment its beauty, calmness and simplicity.



■ Photographs by Fraser Marsden

LOFTY HEIGHTS

The little-known architect who beat a raft of big names to top this year's Australian Interior Design Awards is determinedly old school. As **Michael Bleby** writes, Adrian Amore is one to watch.

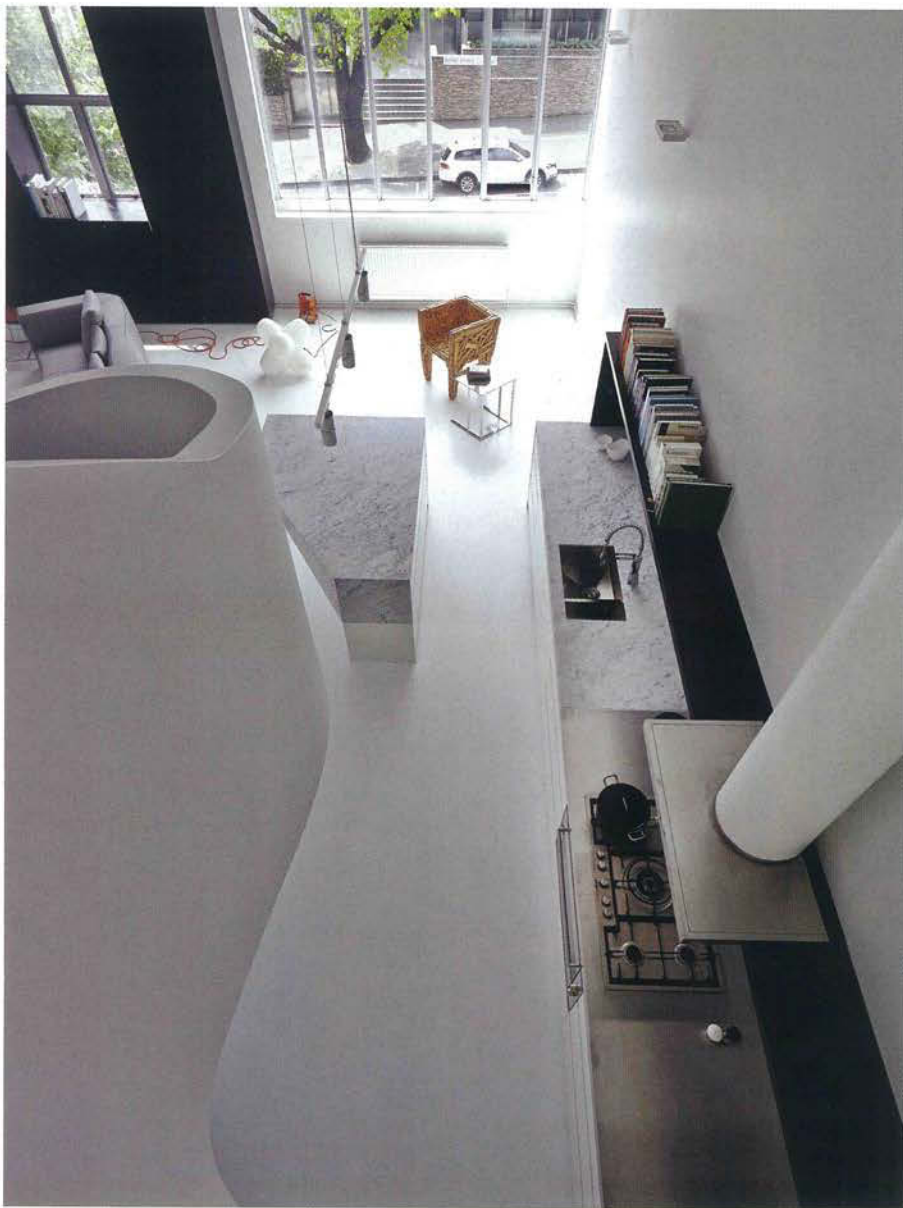
In the dining room of a double-fronted house in Melbourne's Fitzroy, Adrian Amore is making models. Unlike most architects these days, however, these aren't virtual, brightly coloured three-dimensional ones on a screen. They're cardboard scale models that Amore lovingly pulls from a shelf with two hands, blows the dust from and vigorously waves a forefinger over, as he describes the thinking behind them.

In a profession being as disrupted by technology as any other, Amore is slightly apologetic in explaining why he sticks with a process used by a dwindling number of practitioners. "I'm totally old school," he shrugs. "I don't do 3D models. I'm hopeless when it comes to computers."

Amore crafts his models on an old dining table in the red brick Federation home that doubles as his office. The 40-year-old waves towards the table, where seven small models of an office proposal he is working on lie near a glue bottle and a roll of masking tape. "I'll probably build another five models of that, making small changes," he says.

It's not that Amore is clueless about technology. After graduating from Melbourne University in 2000 he spent time working as a "CAD monkey" in London, drafting design plans on screen at well-known firms MJP Architects and The Manser Practice. He does give 3D models to his clients – but contracts someone else to make them. "I'm not good at them," says the designer, whose A1-sized plan printer sits on an antique wooden plan chest that was a family birthday present.

His way of working may be increasingly anachronistic, but this back-to-basics attitude helped the little-known Amore trump more established designers at this year's Australian Interior Design Awards. His warehouse renovation in West Melbourne not only won the Victorian state prize and the residential category prize, but took out the top overall gong, the Premier Award for Interior Design Excellence and Innovation. In so doing, Amore beat well-established names such as Hassell, Fender Katsalidis Mirams, Woods Bagot and Pascale Gomes-McNabb.



IT WAS ABOUT
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This page: The judges described Amore's three-bedroom Loft Apartment in a former Melbourne butter factory as a "refreshing take on what a warehouse apartment could be" before unanimously awarding it top prize at this year's Australian Interior Design Awards.

What was more remarkable was that the award went to an architect with only a dozen or so projects under his belt – a couple of stores for a clothing retailer, some small residential extensions, a factory revamp and an apartment fit-out – who many in the industry had not heard of before the win.

The jury was unanimous in awarding Amore's Loft Apartment the top gong, says Ryan Russell, jury member and director of the Russell & George architecture and design practice. "It was completely unlike anything else in the scope of the awards program," he says. "In terms of what the space did, it was a refreshing take on what a warehouse apartment could be."

Amore worked as a student in the mid-1990s for Nonda Katsalidis, a formative time for both architects and for the Melbourne skyline. "That was a really exciting time to be working for that practice," Amore says. "They were doing great things. Nonda was really changing Melbourne at that stage. He was pushing things, there was beauty in his work. It's kind of gone down the commercial road of late, but at the time the work was original so it was a good place to work."

Amore's three-bedroom Loft Apartment in a former butter factory off King Street doesn't have expensive finishes. There's minimal wood and stone; plasterboard dominates. It's very white, creating an environment the judges praised for its beauty, calmness and simplicity. Surfaces and shapes have been used to give the apartment a distinctive character. A sculptured, bending staircase gives the otherwise calm loft a flash of drama, as it twists dramatically towards a roof terrace.

Amore, who dresses simply in black jeans, black suede boots and a grey pullover, brushes off the win. He says he only entered the project because his wife – also an architect –

insisted he do so. "I don't know how that happened, that this project won," he says. "There were so many moments through that project where it could have gone in so many ways."

The staircase took some doing. "It started as a conventional circular stair and through a process of transformation it stretched and was elongated. I wanted the shape to be a bit more dramatic."

Amore's initial hope was to create a paper-thin staircase purely out of steel – "I thought that would be beautiful" – but the cost would have been prohibitive. Framed with steel and timber and then plywood to get the curved shapes right, the staircase is covered in six-millimetre plasterboard, thinner than the normal household variety, but still cheap and easy to work with.

"Plasterboard is inexpensive," he says. "It's about exploiting a medium that builders are comfortable with and doing something interesting with conventional materials." There's another benefit to that, too. "As soon as you've got something that is slightly unconventional, the builders don't understand. If it is something they don't understand, they just put a bit of fat in their quotes to compensate for the unknown."

For Amore, cost is tied up intrinsically with trends – and trends don't interest him. "There are a lot of designs out there that tick all the boxes as to what's hot right now. You see a lot of repeated things occurring in different designs because it's what everyone's doing at the time. Trends end up being commercialised, there's a trend that's cool initially then the market gets flooded, it becomes mainstream, it infiltrates even into volume building ... it's everywhere," he says. "When you start thinking in those terms, that's when you produce

something that will date and once it dates no one wants it and it's going to be ripped down or painted over." By contrast, he wants to build structures that will be used in 50 years' time, perhaps for a different purpose than the original intention. Amore waves again at the cardboard office models on his table. While the client wants an office, there is no knowing how subsequent owners or tenants may want to use it. "If it's not going to be an office, what could it be used for? I'm looking at the different possibilities of what it could be in the future. If you spend an extra \$50,000 you could transform it into an apartment."

And this is what underlies the Loft Apartment. When asked to renovate the warehouse apartment, Amore had no idea who the end user would be. While the original two-bedroom space was residential, another unit in the warehouse had been turned into an office for a lighting company.

"It was going to be an investment property, so when I looked at the brief and who was going to be living in it, I thought it could be someone who wants to run an office from that space. [Or] it could be a family."

Thus Amore created a space that could be adapted by whatever the end user wanted. "It's got that ability to be transformed depending on how it's used. That's important. Ultimately it had to be a generic living and working space."

The May win hasn't led to a flood of new work yet – "I'm waiting for more projects" – but Amore already knows what material he wants to use next time round.

"I'm obsessed with concrete. I'm dying to do something in concrete. Steel has been around for so long. Concrete's been around so long. It gives the building a sense of timelessness, especially when used in its raw state." ■