

# Life & Leisure

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DESIGN INTERIORS



Clockwise from far left: the ground floor 'nook' is anchored by Tim Storrier's *Evening Embers*; Kallie Blauhorn in the living room; the architects call the steel staircase the 'knuckle'; the house is a tall concrete box built inside an early-20th century industrial edifice. PHOTOS: TOM BLACHFORD, JOSH ROBENSTONE

# Exhibition home

The newly completed house of Telstra CEO Andy Penn and his wife Kallie Blauhorn is as much an art gallery as a living space, writes **Stephen Todd**.

"We wanted a space where art comes first and living second," says Kallie Blauhorn of her recently completed home in Prahran, Melbourne. It was a bold brief, which has resulted in a majestic, three-storey, art-filled bunker nestled within an early 20th-century industrial edifice.

On the mid-March day I visit – when visiting was still a thing, though air-kissing déclassé – Blauhorn, who is chair of The Trustee for Monash Gallery of Art (MGA) Foundation, ushers me across the red-brick facade, through a tiny courtyard vestibule and into the concrete expanse of an open-plan ground floor.

To the right, a deliciously viscous Dale Frank painting from 2003 leads to Chen Man's campy photograph, *Miss Wan Studies Hard* (2011), after which is hung Angelia Tiatia's *Narcissus* of 2019 – a riotous chiaroscuro redux of Caravaggio's tranquil painting of the same name, from 1599.

To the left, an alcove is anchored by a massive canvas seeming to emanate a gilded glow: Tim Storrier's *Evening Embers* (1995). What here appears to be a nook – replete with freestanding funnel-shaped fireplace – would be a decent-sized living room anywhere else.

The "we" Blauhorn refers to is herself and partner Andy Penn, CEO of Telstra, both passionate collectors of contemporary art.

"We focus on work that moves us rather than deciding ahead of time that we want to collect, for instance, Australian abstract painting from the 1970s," Penn tells me a week later and via Skype, now face-to-face visits are ill-advised.

Some folk agonise over an artwork to match the sofa; others select a sofa to offset a prized painting. But few seek to subsume domesticity to aesthetics altogether.

It's this spirit of daring that has allowed Technē Architecture + Interior Design to design a house that is notable for its rigour but also exemplary in its nuance.

If you look past the densely covered walls – in places, a turbocharged salon-style hang – the architectural program is extremely lucid. Essentially, the house is a tall concrete box poured into a historical carapace formed by the original perimeter walls. Rectangular cement columns support the geometrically coffered ground-floor ceiling, which in turn holds up two floors and a generous lap pool on the rooftop terrace.

In the middle of the house, a robust steel staircase articulates the link from ground to upper floors. Its rugged angularity suggests the movement it is designed to facilitate; it is

in itself a marvellous piece of sculpture.

"We call it the 'knuckle', explains Nick Travers, a director of Technē. "We designed the new concrete structure to be simple and legible, to provide an efficient backdrop for the clients' extensive collection. So the staircase serves to not only facilitate physical movement, but to draw the eye into the space."

Blauhorn and Penn had been looking for a converted warehouse for several years. Unable to find what they had in mind, they decided to build their own. When they came to inspect this site, at the end of a cul-de-sac populated by weatherboard Victorian

## We focus on work that moves us rather than deciding ahead of time what to collect.

Andy Penn, Telstra CEO

terraces and 1970s brick palazzi (complete with fading white colonnades), initially they were unimpressed.

"It was so feral," Blauhorn laughs at the memory of the industrial building that occupied the block. "The exterior was finished in horrible peach rendering that was peeling off. Inside was pretty derelict. But we could see the bare bones of the brick structure, which was about the only thing



still intact." But, says Penn, "There was a kind of mezzanine at the back and when we climbed up we could see the views across the city." That space has become the rooftop terrace.

Even when they're not up there, kicking back or doing laps, there is British sculptor Laurence Edwards' life-size bronze of *The Catcher*, its arms spread wide like a dishevelled Christ the Redeemer, surveying the realm. (So complex were the logistics of hauling the piece – covered in the artist's trademark tangle of filigree metal – to the roof that Blauhorn and Penn called on the same engineers who installed the massive KAWS sculpture at the National Gallery of Victoria.)

"Our collection is not overly cerebral," insists Blauhorn. "We hang art in a way that is

Below: Telstra CEO Andy Penn and his wife Kallie Blauhorn. Below left: the formal living room displays artwork by Chen Ping, Kate Bergin and Vicki Cullinan (see online story for full artwork credits). PHOTOS TOM BLACHFORD, ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

appealing to our eyes and also works well alongside the design of the home."

Blauhorn was raised in Nebraska, the child of a family of farmers and ranchers. She studied political science – which she says "makes me very good at bullshitting about world politics at dinner parties". After working for the United Nations in India, she moved to Melbourne in 2005.

Today, as well as holding the chair position at MGA she is on the board of the Virgin Australia Melbourne Fashion Festival, the foundation board of St Vincent's Institute of Medical Research and is an active member of the NGV Women's Association.

Penn, who grew up in rural Kent, south of London, dropped out of school at 15 but studied evenings to earn a business degree, gaining an MBA from Kingston University.

He worked for the P&O shipping group for 10 years before joining National Mutual (UK), which transferred him to Australia in 1992. After National Mutual was acquired by AXA, he eventually became CEO of that company. He joined Telstra in 2011, and has been CEO for five years.

The pair met at a book launch Penn hosted at AXA for financial adviser Arun Abey's 2008 tome, *How Much is Enough?*

Abey is among the guests Penn and Blauhorn like to invite to join them in their 14-seat dining room in which three paintings by Arthur Boyd hold pride of place.

"I love to entertain, it's an important part of my background," says Blauhorn. "For my family, if you love someone you not only feed them, you feed them very well."

But as entertaining has become more complicated, the pair have settled into their own company.

"We have a lot of fun in the house by creating these little pop-up events just for the two of us," says Blauhorn. "Drinking cocktails and chatting all things art in the back gallery, for instance." (This space is overseen by a majestic four-screen-tall algorithmic video by Japanese studio teamLab.)

"Sometimes it's screening movies on the roof, playing Go [the Japanese strategy game] in the alcove gallery, or listening to old records in our informal living room on the middle level."

What felt like a bunker when I visited now feels more like a fortress. A man's – and woman's – home, after all, is their castle. **L&L**

