

VISION

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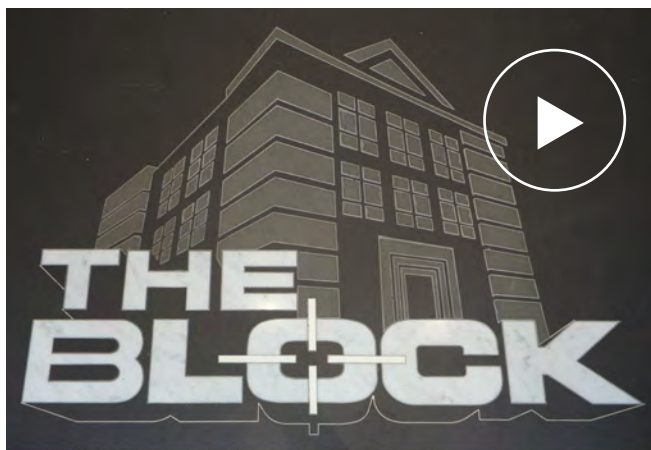
LIGHTBRIDGE
TO THE BLOCK
THE BLOCK 2016 ISSUE

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[Click to view VISION's interview with The Block's architect, Julian Brenchley](#)

LIGHTBRIDGE TO THE BLOCK

Port Melbourne, VIC

Television's powerhouse ratings performer The Block, once again featured Viridian as a sponsorship partner for its 2016 season. Two products – LightBridge™ and MirraEcho™ Bronze – played major roles in bringing to life contestants' work. High on-camera and behind the scenes energy, virtuoso retrofitting and strong sales all marked The Block's fortunes. Series architect Julian Brenchley is the talent with the Midas touch.

LIGHTBRIDGE TO THE BLOCK

The Block continues as
a runaway success in television
ratings land. Since its launch in 2002,
the renovation series has etched a
signature unmistakably its own.

PROJECT

The Block, Port Melbourne

ARCHITECT

Julian Brenchley

PRINCIPAL GLAZING

Viridian LightBridge™

Viridian MirraEcho™ Bronze

TEXT, IMAGES & FILM

Peter & Jenny Hyatt

Think adaptive reuse and intelligent recycling and in large part you have the program's prosperity in the palm of your hand.

A sharp architectural eye from day one, has given the show a huge head start on competitors hoping to cash in on the makeover boom. The result of sustainable design and turbo-charging the old and seemingly unloved, is a trademark for this marquee renovation brand.

Omnipresent at master controls, Sydney architect Julian Brenchley is instrumental in project selection and negotiating the web of planning and building regulations. Brenchley's 'silent' work continues in the conversion of the neglected and down-at-heel into celebrity real-estate offerings.





Although reluctant to overly commercialise his intent, Brenchley's success can be measured by the bidding frenzy amongst those desperate for a slice of television history and real-estate gold.

One of the major program sponsors in the past three episodes, Viridian has found a brilliant fit with its specialist, high-end glazing products from stylish kitchen splashbacks to hero windows-as-walls.

Above & Opposite:
Viridian MirraEcho™ Bronze provides a towering presence and authenticity in the main foyer.







The Art Deco staircase is artfully integrated while the bevelled bronze mirrors provide increased spatial depth and edge refraction.



The connection continues with the very latest episodes featuring two of Viridian's star performance products – LightBridge™ and MirraEcho™ Bronze. Julian Brenchley and Vision's Peter Hyatt discuss the architect's role where contestants must become design gladiators.

How do you create energised, fresh versions of The Block?

Over the years it's been more of a function of what buildings we find, and are looking for, but quite often the buildings find us. We're not waiting at a bus stop. We go out and get aggressive about it. We don't look for old heritage buildings every year. How do we keep it fresh? It's always going to be new, it's always going to be different. We just don't know what we're going to find, essentially.

How critical is it that your buildings have a good skeleton – good bones?

Pretty essential. This is a massive building to be putting only six apartments in. It's obviously really well made and it's been around for the best part of 100 years. We're lucky to be in it. As far as great bones, there's still a lot of work to be done in these buildings. Before the contestants turn up, there's two or three months of underpinning and structural retrofits and unimaginable damage before we put it back together again.

Your approach embodies this notion of sustainability in that you're not demolishing, excavating and starting all over again.

Well it is adaptive. That's one of my fundamental kick-off points of sustainability through adaptive re-use. We steer away as much as we can from a greenfields site, or building from scratch. We look for buildings that have character. From my point of view, to have the opportunity to work with some of these really beautiful old buildings in adaptive reuse is fantastic.



"You get it wrong, and, I mean, no one's perfect, but if you get it wrong, you've got to live with it and make the most of it. Time, is what it's all about. That's the nature of a show, it's the nature of the gig, and it's high pressure, but it's fun."
– Julian Brenchley

LIVING AREAS





Is there a best and least appealing aspect to your experiences on The Block?

The best aspect is that you're involved in something done so fast. It's a high-pressure environment. It's a very rewarding involvement and the scene is absolutely one of craziness. At one point, 220 tradesmen... in one day... on the site. That's phenomenal. Think about an aircraft carrier with hundreds of people crawling all over it and you wonder how that happened. When you do it on a building site, towards the end of the show it's fascinating, so it's rewarding to watch.

And the least appealing?

The least rewarding part is the same issue – time. When you want to have incubation time to think about a project, suck a pencil and ruminate on the size of the room, you've got to be able to make decisions quickly, and you've got to live with those decisions and move on. That can be quite stressful. You get it wrong, and, I mean, no one's perfect, but if you get it wrong, you've got to live with it and make the most of it. Time, is what it's all about. That's the nature of a show, it's the nature of the gig, and it's high pressure, but it's fun.



“Really, they don’t need to know that there is a fantastic new heat gain co-efficient in the glass. They don’t have to take all their clothing off and they don’t have to put a lot of clothing on. Job done.”

JULIAN BRENCHLEY, ARCHITECT





The art of glass extends to mirrored table and kitchen splash-backs.



Do you ever fret when contestants don't decorate to your vision, or expectations?

I'm excited by what they do. I get a chance to look at the floor plans, see how that works with existing windows and orientation. Where am I going to put a lift in an old building? That's a massive task, to work out where that goes so that it doesn't destroy the fabric. What contestants do inside is fascinating. It's fascinating to see people struggle with the concept of style without letting it just flow or force it on themselves and do Google searching looking for 'style'. Really it could be a little inane but the results speak for themselves. It does hang together really well and it's exciting.

It's a program that reminds us that nothing of value comes about without considerable effort.

That's everyone from the crew, to producers, to the contestants. We're talking about massive apartments up to 220sqm. When you work out how many man-hours are involved in painting, the contestants are exhausted, absolutely exhausted trying to get this done.





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JULIAN BRENCHLEY, ARCHITECT

Have you observed an improvement in the quality of work contestants are producing across your years of involvement?

I have, absolutely, and I think it's a function of the fact that the general renovation industry is more educated. The industry is just getting better educated. Viewers are better educated, the market is generally better educated.

What have you learned from working and observing the way all teams go about renovating the apartments?

Years ago when in my formative years as an architect, a mentor said 'beware of the day when you say you know everything because you won't'. What the contestants bring to the show is myriad experiences and crazy ideas, and I mean a myriad of crazy ideas. Not all are practical but I am learning as an architect constantly and watching what people do and how they approach a space. If I draw a door on the left-hand side of a wall someone is going to come in and put it on the right hand side. Why? I don't know.





Lofty ceiling heights throughout reveal the emphasis on spatial quality. Maintenance of building integrity rather than mean spaces is a hallmark of an earlier age.





Multiple windows, doors and broad balconies for outdoor dining and entertaining drive an aesthetic of polished informality.

KITCHENS







Combination lighting is used to inform and denote various zones throughout.





Is the learning for you more spatial or one of flair?

I'm learning constantly how people interpret my floor plans and how they bring great character to all of The Block apartments. It's really quite interesting to watch it unfold. You know people often ask me what's my favorite apartment? It's a hard question to answer because I drew the layouts. I see bits I love in every apartment. I love picking the bones out of what they do and I am learning, constantly learning as a professional how to approach space.

How do contestants teach you to discover?

There are different ways to approach space, different ways to approach light, different ways to approach colour, different ways to approach fittings and furniture. Over-decorating, under-decorating, how important is decorating? It's not something that an architect would generally consider. Decorating is something that someone else does, but it is a fundamental way space is used, which is really critical. Architects will talk a lot about light and a lot about proportion, but what people really do and how they function in that space from a decorative or a textural point of view is equally important. I'm learning that lesson as we go along.



BATHROOMS

One aspect here is that when you walk through the space, it just all appears to flow quite easily and logically. That trick of making it all look easy is a bit like being a ballet dancer. They make it appear effortless, but you try and you fall over.

The Devil's in the detail. Good modernist architecture is in the edges. But that's only part of it. Really, it's about the planning behind the scenes to make it flow correctly. There's no torture in design here. There's a logical flow from the front door, the revolving door downstairs, right the way through to the balcony or the roof terrace upstairs. There's a logical public space. There's a logical entry door that's private enough to each apartment.

Is the destiny of the contestants predetermined by the apartment they receive, or can they create their own destiny by simply being the best?

We've learned over the years that there's no real formula. The penthouse apartment isn't necessarily the best apartment. We find buyers downsizing who gravitate to a ground floor apartment where there's a garden. Of course talent comes into it. You can have the best apartment and completely stuff it up or a ground-floor apartment which traditionally wins, or gets very close to winning, and still stuff it up. So really, grabbing defeat out of the jaws of victory is a reality.

What would you take from this project that you might export to future projects?

We've been building on The Block's reputation for quite some time. We started the interview off talking about adaptive reuse and sustainability. It's about being constantly reassured that we're on the right track. The new owners of these fabulous apartments show that everyone's on board with that message in terms of one aspect of sustainability. I'm rapt to be able to say I am involved in that particular genre. Let's call it adaptive reuse. I really do and I would like to take the strength of that message to the next Block, and the next Block and the next Block.



“Decorating is something that someone else does, but it is a fundamental way space is used, which is really critical.”

JULIAN BRECHLEY, ARCHITECT







I understand Lachlan Austin of Viridian worked closely with you on the glazing?

Lachlan was involved very heavily. Everyone in Lachlan's team worked with the external glazing and all the intricacies involved. That is no mean feat to provide double-glazed panels that retrofit into existing steel frames that are really complex in their own right. The team has done a great job and the proof is in the pudding. It really does work.

The towering, bevelled foyer mirrors in Viridian MirraEcho™ are quite a standout.

That bronze finish is really a spectacular bit of glass work. It's a spectacular example of how to use glass in a building both for colour and for mirrors in the foyer with a bevelled edge detail. It's really such a simple thing to have bronzed mirrors and yet it offers this amazing colour against the white wall. You walk in there and don't even realise that it is a bright, stark white wall because you are so drawn to the warmth of the glass and reflection. That is fantastic.

Most bathrooms celebrate space and the results tend towards a grand luxury or room to move.

BEDROOMS





What are your thoughts about the extreme clarity of the new LightBridge™ double-glazing?

The technology is extraordinary in the double-glazing we are putting in this building. People don't even realise it and that is a good thing. They are not asking the question whether it is double-glazed because they are perfectly comfortable. If someone can walk into a room, not even notice it and walk back out again and feel perfectly comfortable – job done. Really, they don't need to know that there is a fantastic new heat gain co-efficient in the glass. They don't really give a rat's bum. They don't have to take all their clothing off and they don't have to put a lot of clothing on. Job done. In the past you probably had a glass product that may tint tile colours in the bathroom where you are putting in a warm tile and that end's up a cool tile in appearance.

What are the standout qualities that give you particular pleasure as you wander through these apartments?

The standout qualities in a consistent sense for each part of the building is how they have responded to the light. We had to reuse all the windows on the outside of the building because it is a heritage overlay. Rather than stuck with that which could be presented as a negative, where the floors chop into more than just two apartments, you had to create to make the right amount of money, you would have very compromised window scenarios, perhaps even dividing walls abutting windows. All these hideous things of developments gone wrong.





An almost nautical flavour or stretched, connected rooms flows through all apartments.





Is there a formula that really keeps the program bubbling along and fresh?

The formula is what it is, whether it's two bedrooms, three bedrooms, whatever, the formula of the show stays how it is. What keeps it bubbly and fresh? Really it's a function of the buildings environment. We could be in a converted old industrial office building which we are right now. We could be in four cottages, as we were six years ago. Really, it's about finding new typologies, new building typologies, interesting places to be, whether that's both in the building itself or in the location. That comes back to aspirational suburbs to live in. Where do people want to live? Do they want to come in to the city area? Do they want to be in a village? All these things. That's part of keeping it bubbly and exciting as much as choice of contestants.

Do you have other architects coming up to you saying, "Julian, this isn't a bad gig. If you ever get tired of it, look, here's my number?"

Most people don't realise there is an architect behind the scenes, helping out. That's not a traditional role for an architect to sit in on a TV show, even if it's behind the scenes. When it comes down to it really, I am doing exactly what an architect would do, which is to provide space. I do the planning of the space and the fundamental role is to make it saleable. It's one of the cornerstones of the whole show that we're dealing with real property. We're not building sets. It's not tacky-tacky, you know it doesn't get demolished next week and we make way for 20 apartments. These are real properties in the legal sense and they're sold in the real market, and someone is going to be living in this and it was done in the show. That's absolutely extraordinary. That doesn't happen just anywhere.







A communal rooftop terraced garden provides a BBQ area and assorted leisure areas.

**How does the 'reality television' concept sit with you?**

As the show's executive producer Julian Cress has said in the past, "Let's talk about a cooking show.... They make a cake and it gets judged and someone eats it, or it goes in the bin. Basically at the end of the show they're left with a pile of dirty dishes. At the end of The Block show we're left with beautiful apartments that are going to last another 100 years. It's extraordinary to be involved in that. As an architect it's a great challenge".

Is your role effectively finished once the program begins airing?

When the cameras are rolling, I am essentially just checking that they're building towards the plans and that there are no inconsistencies with what is actually built and what's on the approved plans. It's a real property in a real world and we don't want real problems. I inspect the works as they progress. I think that's probably the simplest way to put it. There's a lot that goes on behind the scenes. There's co-ordinating with builders and the invisible infrastructure, plumbing stacks and electrical fit-offs and common areas, and lifts, and stairs. And that's not to mention the rooftop gardens and window installs, parapet rectifications and a lot of flow on and coordination, so I'm involved in all of that to the final hand over.

PROJECT

The Block, Port Melbourne

ARCHITECT

Julian Brenchley

PRINCIPAL GLAZING

Viridian LightBridge™

Viridian MirraEcho™ Bronze

**WINDOW FRAME
SUPPLIER AND INSTALLER**

Jenmat

VIRIDIAN TECHNICAL SUPPORT

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THE BLOCK: A SPONSOR'S VIEWPOINT



Lachlan Austin
General Manager Marketing, Viridian

The Block is a unique platform for speaking to the real end-market about our product offering to consumers, new home-builders, renovators and home buyers. Ultimately the Block celebrates the power individuals have in taking an existing space and making it a better space. We might have some reservations about how much is actually represented as the contestants' work versus the designers and trades, but it's a very egalitarian idea and one we support at Viridian. We believe in "people spaces made great with glass" and behind this is the idea that the homeowner should take more control of the opportunities glass uniquely presents.

In essence The Block has provided us with a platform to a broad consumer (and trade) audience for us to demonstrate that "glass ain't glass" — glass can make your design better (for you and future buyers) but you have to choose the right type of glass to make it so.

LightBridge™

Great design emerges from clear constraints. This Block's design and location limited access to natural light and aspect throughout the rooms of the re-purposed factory. Melbourne has a climate, and is at a latitude, where people place high value on daylight, so of course abundant access to natural light was a core design principle; yet the available window area was locked down in many areas by retaining the original façade. We needed to work within the constraints of the site, and select glass accordingly.

These aspects of occupant "comfort" are often overlooked in conventional construction choices, but can be so easily incorporated by upgrading the basic glazing package.

For the whole façade glazing package we proposed our lead product in the residential range – LightBridge™ – which is all about maximising the available light while minimising heat flows through the windows (allowing those windows to be as big as possible without adversely impacting the comfort level inside). In fact, LightBridge™ offered four times better performance than the original glazing — this obviously has an enormous impact on how each apartment feels to occupy. Recognising the density of the urban environment surrounding the block site, we elected to use the Sanctuary II version LightBridge™ – for added noise control and security. These aspects of occupant "comfort" are often overlooked in conventional construction choices, but can be so easily incorporated by



upgrading the basic glazing package. We really want the consumer to make an informed choice.

Given the modest difference in cost for acoustic glazing, why wouldn't you take this as your starting point, not as an upgrade. We see a great value in keeping street noise on the street rather than in the lounge room.

We were delighted with the glazing work by Jenmat (contractor on site) and the way our LightBridge™ units were integrated with the black steel frames throughout the building. The resulting windows felt substantive and “trustworthy” — a featured “daylight appliance” essential to the human experience and premium appeal of each room.

MirraEcho™ Bronze

We feel that interior glazing is a greatly under-exploited opportunity for designers in commercial and residential spaces alike. Offering so much more than “paint, paper and tile”, glass brings a rich new palette of design elements for interior designers by giving them command of lustre, luminosity, visual and surface texture, transparent colour and deeply layered printed designs. These are things that can, like no other material, transform surfaces, softly partition rooms, and combine to challenge our perceptions of the size, form and limits of the space. Obviously, we were keen to show a little of what we had to offer on The Block!

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Early in the process, Julian Brenchley invited us into the design considerations for the grand feature of The Block development — the entrance foyer. We considered different approaches for glazing which would echo the art deco heritage of the building and be tonally aligned to the refurbished timber work. Of course we targeted options to lift the interior light levels and accentuate the scale of the double-height void, and create the ‘wow’ arrival.

Though we examined a few different approaches including digital printing options, and bold vertical line designs. In the end we arrived at a simpler treatment – clean walls of faceted bronze-mirrored panels, each with a broad beveled edge to provide visual texture. The MirraEcho™ bronze product used throughout, outlined with a fine black aluminium angle, is sympathetic to the art deco styling and also toned down the reflectivity of the walls compared to ordinary clear mirror, which may have otherwise been too affrontingly modern and clinical.



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