

MAGAZINE



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Life Cycle: Torbreck

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Torbreck, an apartment complex in Highgate Hill, lies two kilometres from Brisbane's CBD. Designed in 1957 by Aubrey Job and Robert Froud as a home unit block and completed in 1961, it remains immensely liveable today.

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Torbreck is an apartment complex in Highgate Hill, two kilometres from Brisbane's city centre. Recalling Bruno Taut's visionary and utopian *Die Stadtkrone* (1919), it was designed in 1957 by Aubrey Job and Robert Froud as a home unit block and completed in 1961, taking its name from the gabled timber cottage it replaced. The building's front elevation, facing Dornoch Terrace, is splayed in a manner reminiscent of The Lawn point block in Harlow, designed by Frederick Gibberd. The architects hoped it might become a small city, and strung out along a ridgeline, embedded within a suburb of timber detached houses, that seems to have been realised. Torbreck was contemporaneous with international post-war multi-storey housing estates and new towns throughout the UK and apartment towers in Rio de Janeiro, as well as the Romeo und Julia Hochhausgruppe in Stuttgart designed by Hans Scharoun (1954-1959) and Interbau. In one city quarter, Interbau

captured a range of approaches to the problem of urban housing that were being tested internationally, from the four detached urban houses designed by Arne Jacobsen, to variations of linear and tower apartment blocks in a Corbusian, park-like setting. Torbreck conflated two of these, the apartment tower and linear block as separate but super-adjacent forms, with the garden block positioned below the tower block on a steep site, generating an L figure in plan and section.



Torbreck, in Brisbane's Highgate Hill

The general schema for the tower block bears remarkable similarity to the Antonio Ceppas Building (1952) designed by Jorge Machado Moreira on a residential street in Rio de Janeiro. Moreira had also worked on the Ministry of Education and Public Health in Rio de Janeiro (1937–45) with Lucio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer and Le Corbusier acting as a consultant. The Antonio Ceppas Building was an eight-storey, square-plan structure, framed by reinforced concrete and founded on a steep slope with a basement garage and central lift. It featured vertical and horizontal ventilation louvres, with trellis and screens over balconies within the form, combined to orchestrate a *brise soleil* in one plane that frames city views. It was clad in artificial stone and fair face brick, with an undercroft supported by piloti, and featured a landscape designed by Roberto Burle Marx with paths of white, red and black Portuguese stone. Marx also designed tiles for the external facing of a wall in the undercroft and a glass mosaic mural.



The building's patterned brick skin

The eight-storey linear garden block was tripartite in composition: one penthouse level, six levels of home units and garages housed in the undercroft at ground level. The architects configured eight plan variations, ranging from 585 square feet bed-sits through to 900 square feet penthouses, all with access balconies to the south and balconies off bedrooms, and living spaces to the north to facilitate cross-ventilation. The run of penthouses at roof level was broken off-centre in front of the tower block by a restaurant terrace, framing a view back to the city and enlivening the elevation overlooking the garden. Flowerboxes integrated into the balustrade of the northern balconies and light blue spandrel panels in the aluminium-framed window system added further visual interest, arranged in a hopscotch pattern at the centre of the block and bookending the composition. This patterning, typical of a number of Interbau projects, served to draw attention to the programmatic variation of individual units. There was a uniform use of roller blinds on springs, tensioned against wind loads, which could be set in a range of retractable positions. The architects had envisioned that the northern elevations of Torbreck would be enveloped in cascading bougainvillea, but it never eventuated – unfortunately, as it would have produced a remarkable excess of colour across the form. The themed, chequerboard paving of the access balconies differentiates levels, and also featured sophisticated drainage detailing in the form of downpipes disguised as posts.



Chequerboard paving in different colours identifies each level

The idea for the garden in front of the garden block, with kidney-shaped pool and adjacent lanai, bears remarkable similarities to the image of an unnamed project published in *Architectural Record* in 1957 by Californian landscape architects, Eckbo, Royston and Williams; Torbreck was discussed as a prototype that might have been repeated at the Gold Coast had the developers not run into financial difficulty.

Job and Froud persisted with the lessons learnt in their houses. They projected domestic Californian garden ideas onto the ground plane of Torbreck, a reconfiguration of a domestic idea of outside living that frames their conception of an ultra-modern lifestyle. At every level of the project, there is an engagement with international precedents made possible by the novelty of the type and the circulation of post-war architecture journals and desirable lifestyle ideas at the time.



Access balconies at Torbreck

But Torbreck is of particular interest due to the super adjacency of two radically different multi-residential types, tower and linear block, after Le Corbusier, and the resolution of resulting tensions internally and in relation to the scale of the suburb, like the resultant narrow slot between the tower block and the garden block. A sophisticated treatment of the rear of the tower podium, with a brick skin featuring courses of uniformly patterned brick, is an aspect of the project that could have been problematic yet is articulated as you might expect in a domestic project, only at a monumental scale.



A dynamic, enduring liveliness – and great views

Today, the building remains immensely liveable. Some residents have enjoyed Torbreck for nearly 40 years, others just a short time. All are part of an environment that seems to attract architects and others from across the creative spectrum, like Fiona McAlpine from Studio MITT, an ensemble of rising architectural talents, and Danni Zuvela, a founder of Otherfilm, a local collective dedicated to avant-garde, experimental, abstract and expanded film.



The building remains a unique component of Brisbane's urban fabric

For Zuvella, Torbreck's special qualities ensure that it stands apart from other complexes she's lived in. She recalls her time in London, and the experience of inhabiting a "marvelous old apartment" that was tempered by negotiating "flights of tiny, tiny stairs to get to the toilet, hearing my housemates' every world from my dungeon below" and having to endure shower receptacles where "the neighbours could see straight into the bathroom". For her, Torbreck is radically different: "The walls are so thick and solid, by the time the sound of others reaches you it is muffled and distorted, a sort of low-frequency bump that's easy to filter out." She also speaks appreciatively of the building's "spaces within spaces", describing them as "the opposite of an everything-in-your-face open plan, meaning that you can have guests and still have privacy, a fact I really appreciated when I had flood refugees here in January." Zuvella describes one other pleasing side effect of this aspect of Torbreck's design: "My cat and I sometimes get sick of each other, as you do, so he can just slink off to another room and we can get the space we need to reconnect and remember why we love each other again..."



Spaces within spaces inside the apartments

Torbreck celebrated its silver jubilee in 2010, a milestone that generated a plethora of events celebrating the project's significance and its relationship to Brisbane's urban fabric. See for yourself: Torbreck's official website features [time-lapse footage](#) of the building recorded over the course of a day and night, a vivid testimony to the building's dynamic and enduring liveliness. www.torbreck.com.au

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