

[illegible][illegible][illegible][illegible]The cover features a photograph of a modern residential building at dusk or dawn. The main facade is composed of dark vertical wooden slats. A large, brightly lit window reveals a warm interior. To the right, another part of the building has a large white number '32' mounted on its exterior wall. In the bottom left corner, there is a barcode and some small publication information. The overall aesthetic is contemporary and architectural.

**ar**

Architectural Review Australia 104

THE GREEN REVIEW

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The cover features a photograph of a modern house at dusk or dawn. The main building has dark vertical wooden cladding. A large window is brightly lit from within, casting a warm glow. In the foreground, there's a gravel area and a low wall made of vertical wooden posts. To the right, another part of the house is visible, featuring a large white number '32' on its dark facade. The sky is a deep blue.

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# somers courtyard house

**architects**

Rowan Opat Architects

**photography**

Peter Bennetts

**text**

Shane Murray

**architect's statement**

In this new house the client's brief was for a low maintenance home to accommodate an expanding family with regular guests. They wanted a playful home that would allow them to customise and grow into it over time. Located in a semi-rural context, one hour from Melbourne, the house is designed to function independently of mains water, gas, sewerage and electricity.

I decided on a backbone concept of a tent-made-solid. I found this a conceptually, structurally, environmentally and economically appropriate response to the brief. Throughout the process, my desire to express this idea more literally created a tension with good building practice.

The house was positioned among existing trees to minimise felling. The depth (north/south) of the plan, height of the ceilings, circulation of air, catchment of heat and the controlling of seasonal direct natural light were refined to optimise passive solar effectiveness. Early in the design process a decision was made to make external walls lightweight. The fireplace and floor are the thermal mass.

The brief crystallised into a loose arrangement of discrete living and utility buildings. The need to avoid internal overshadowing was one of the factors that contributed to the arrangement of the buildings in a square. The spaces in between then grew into outdoor living areas. Introducing a courtyard house to a one-hectare site offered seclusion and hierarchy into an otherwise open field.

The result is a house comprising outdoor spaces that are an extension of living areas, the interplay of which form veranda, portico, catwalk and breezeway. All combine to offer a spectrum of indoor and outdoor experiences.

The roofscape directly responds to the interior functions, monumental over the living spaces and low slung over dormitories. The roof edge is expressed as an upper layer, a cloak over the external walls that continues on to meet the ground at the rear.

Darker external colours integrate the house into the shadows of the surrounding bushland. In contrast the courtyard employs a lighter colour, thus accentuating the courtyard as a type of interior.

The architectural process revealed a design force in the study of the sun. Sciagraphy became an essential part of this scheme and continues to be an interest in my work, as does the significance of the sun historically.





*The enclosure not only establishes a specific relationship with a specific place, but is the principal by which a human group states its very relationship with nature and the cosmos. In addition the enclosure is the form of the thing how it presents itself to the outside world.*  
 – V Gregotti 'Editoriale', *Rassegna*, 1 December 1979, 6.

### somers courtyard house

For many young Melbourne architects, experience in housing design is normally built on a diet of inner urban domestic renovations. The opportunity to design a whole country house on a large site is both an exhilarating and challenging opportunity. Gone are the conventional constraints against which the design can be pitted (and formed). In this more open field, apparently free of obvious physical and contextual limits, where does the architect begin? Rowan Opat found himself in this situation and his response has resulted in an intriguing architectural experience.

The Somers Courtyard House is Rowan Opat's first free standing house, and his decision to adopt the courtyard type as an originating gesture for the design has resulted in the series of rich spatial sequences and layered cross vistas that enrich this building.

Located in the Westernport settlement of Somers, the house is carefully positioned on a large site surrounded by reinstated native planting that completely conceals the building from surrounding roads and neighbours. Considering how the house is screened from its context of encroaching suburban development it is initially surprising that Opat has developed the house in a courtyard form. The type seems redundant because the existing vegetation that screens the adjacent settlement has already established a private domain for the family, and other natural threats are absent. Here we find the single courtyard house in a context that we would expect demands the very opposite to introspection and closing off.

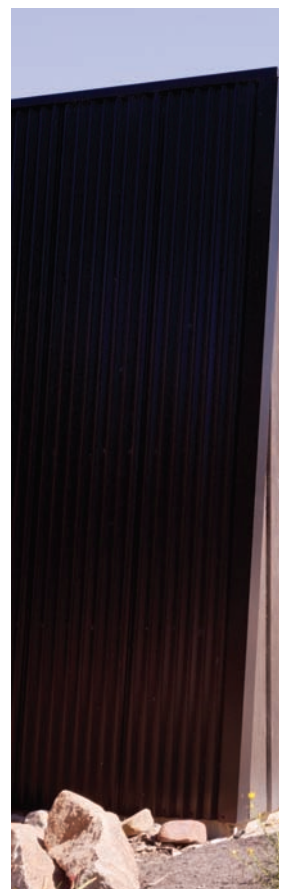
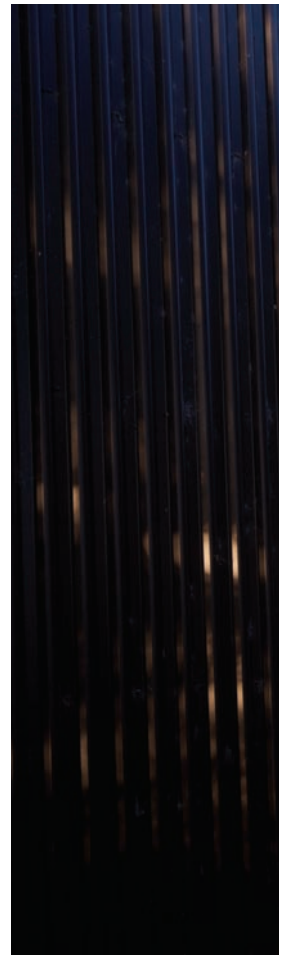
Opat claims the configuration is a response to the need to provide the equivalent of a 'backyard' on this large block, an overlooked and enclosed space for young children. While the courtyard admirably fulfils this purpose I believe the typology's application here brings many additional qualities.

Opat describes the plan of the building as a series of pavilions arranged around a central open space, with the roof of the building conceived as a fabric that drapes in a north/south direction over the pavilions and unites them. The spaces between the pavilions become outdoor rooms with varied relationships to either the interior space of the

02



04







03

- 01.**  
A monumental roofscape defines the living area, while a more sedate, low-slung form describes the sleeping quarters.
- 02.**  
Muted tones on the exterior walls serve to integrate the building with its environment.
- 03.**  
Outdoor spaces function as an extension of living areas.
- 04.**  
In curating the external spaces of the house, Opat has employed what he describes as a “key-holing” technique, framing and controlling vistas through the manipulation of building form.
- 05.**  
The building’s footprint has nimbly avoided the need for felling of preexisting native trees and vegetation.



05







courtyard or the landscape beyond the house. In some ways the arrangement is reminiscent of the clustering of farm buildings, with the house and service buildings deployed around a central circulation space, but without the unifying roof. This opening up of what is the normally bounded condition of the courtyard creates a wonderful complexity of space and layered vista. These range from a perception of full enclosure in the north-eastern area of the courtyard space through to a sequence of views, particularly as one approaches the entry and looks through the building across the courtyard and through again to the landscape beyond. While this arrangement is visually enticing, however, it is the experiential diversity of these various spaces that is, I believe, even more significant to the success of the building.

Each of the spaces is curated differently depending on its landscape and building adjacencies. This is achieved by using what the architect describes as a 'key-holing' technique to close down the physical and visual entries to these outside rooms from the exterior of the building. Opat has also proportionally and spatially differentiated these exterior rooms, as well as applying a deliberate builder-ly logic where the roof is unlined over these spaces and the wall cladding changes to a more robust material to sign the exterior nature of the space.

The interior living spaces are arranged in a long sequence with the parents' area occupying the return side of the plan and the children's bedrooms separated from

them by the main living area. This main living area contains the kitchen, dining and living areas, and a small snug or inglenook. The studio, storage and garage pavilions are then arranged to surround the central courtyard. Each of the volumes has a different relationship to the exterior view and is visually separated from the interior courtyard. The main living area is the exception to this, and the kitchen is linked openly to the courtyard interior. The main living area is also the one form that is not subsumed by the roof, and it is extended vertically in a prominent skillion that counterpoints the rest of the building form. For me this is a formally jarring aspect of the composition, but its impact recedes on experiencing the building.

Opat's careful formal inquiry, his attention to ESD principles without shouting them emblematically and the expressive use of simple construction have led to a building of great exuberance, experiential pleasure and occasional mystery. The simple but experientially complex overlapping of interior and exterior has enabled the architect to provide this family, who permanently reside in this home, with a rich variety of spatial settings. Opat is not the first architect to conduct such an experiment – think of McGlashan at Aspendale, or Romberg and Boyd's houses for Lend Lease to name a specific few. In a contemporary version of a similar pursuit, the Somers Courtyard House reveals architecture's potential to genuinely contribute as a setting for our living. **ar**

#### 06.

In a site that is otherwise open and expansive, the courtyard functions as a "backyard", a protected extension of the house.

#### 07.

The main living area separates children's dormitories from parents.

#### 08.

While the courtyard typology is typically a response to privacy concerns, the Somers house already enjoys seclusion thanks to the extant native trees that surround the site – allowing living areas a direct address to landscape.

#### 09.

Opat's desire to create a "tent-made-solid" resulted in lightweight external walls – thermal mass in the living areas is instead provided by the fireplace (far centre frame) and concrete floors.





07



08

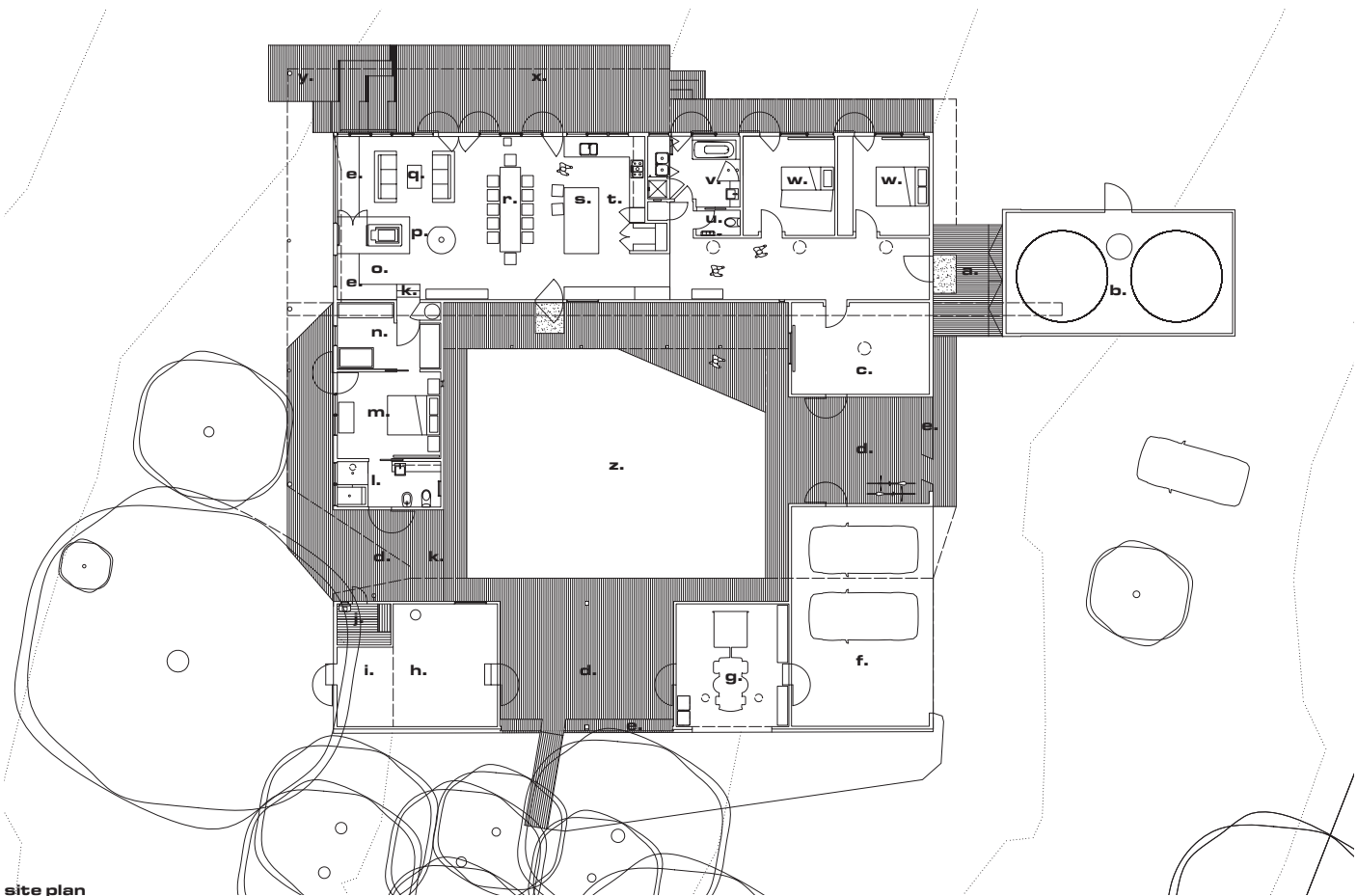


09

ar projects

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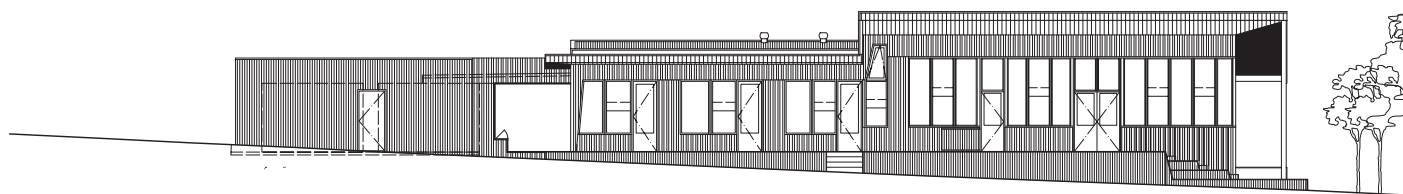
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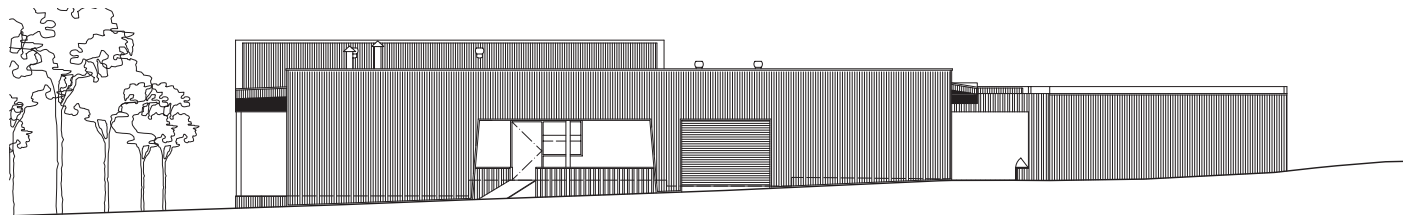
site plan



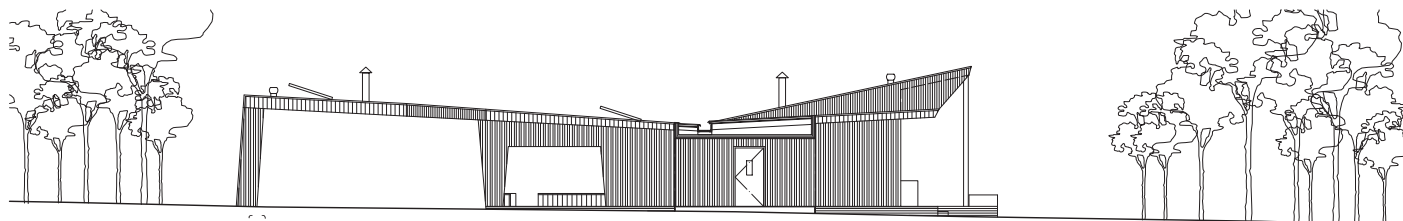




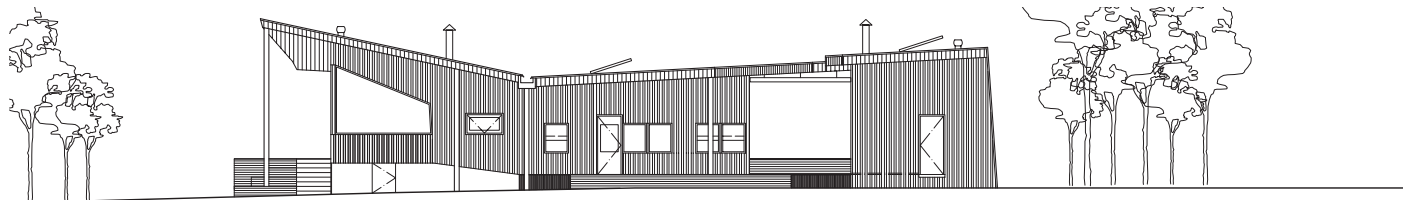
north elevation



south elevation



east elevation



west elevation

#### somers courtyard house

**principal architects** Rowan Opat Architects **project team** Jon Henzel, Nathan Marshall, Rowan Opat **engineer** JV Consulting Engineers Pty Ltd Structural & Civil Engineers **builder** PJ & OR Oldenburger **sustainability consultant** Ark Resources **size** 316sqm fully enclosed area **time to complete** 12 months **council** Mornington Peninsula Shire Council **cladding** Shadowclad Groove Eco ply, Carter Holt Harvey; radial sawn timber, New Deck Radial Sawn Timber **roof** Spandek Zinalume, Lysaght **paving** Lilydale toppings **glazing** High performance to west otherwise double-glazing throughout **heating/cooling systems** Elex 1600T **fireplace** Radiante 845, Cheminees Phillipe **ceiling** Cedar boards **flooring** Coloured concrete interior, two-pack polyurethane seal **surfaces** Calcutta marble **solar hot water** 3153RG, Beasley **bathroom** Smartflush Leda 2000 toilet suite and bidet, Caroma; Saniform Plus 373-1, Kaldewei; Trident shower set chrome, Dorf

#### legend.

- |                    |                      |                     |
|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| a. entry           | k. step              | u. powder room      |
| b. water tanks     | l. ensuite           | v. bathroom/laundry |
| c. study           | m. master bedroom    | w. bedroom          |
| d. covered way     | n. walk through robe | x. deck             |
| e. bench           | o. cosy corner       | y. amphitheatre     |
| f. garage          | p. fireplace         | z. courtyard        |
| g. shed            | q. lounge            |                     |
| h. studio          | r. dining            |                     |
| i. mezzanine store | s. island bench      |                     |
| j. sauna           | t. kitchen           |                     |

