



LYRICALLY MODERN

Modern is a tricky word, denoting both contemporary times and one of architectural history's most dogmatic periods. Ramon Pleysier and Simon Perkins aren't afraid to use it, though, to describe their own restrained brand of architecture. Christopher Moore chatted to them about their modernist-inspired forms and their moving lyricism, and discovered how Pleysier Perkins is infiltrating the prefabricated and project home markets.

THE GERMAN PHILOSOPHER and poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe called architecture *erstarrte musik*, or frozen music. Sitting opposite Ramon Pleysier and Simon Perkins and talking about their creative process, I found it easy to liken them to songwriters. Partners in the architecture and design practice Pleysier Perkins, the two men readily bounce ideas off each other. One starts with the kernel of an idea, a riff if you will, and the other will add a new ingredient, a different beat.

Through this incubation period, one partner will take ownership of the design project, but the input from the other continues until the creation is complete. "Each one of our projects is either an 'RP' or an 'SP,'" Simon says in reference to their initials. "But there is always a lot of each of us in everything we design."

In practice for over seven years now, their body of work shows a composure that belies their youth. There is an unmistakable maturity in their modernist-flavoured oeuvre that points to an easy understanding of each other as designers.

Based in Melbourne, they have created bespoke houses from Fitzroy

to Noosa in urban and rural settings. Recently, the practice collaborated with a builder of prefabricated houses and designed a dwelling that is built in a factory and shipped to a given location. It deliberately and confidently revokes the trend for the kitsch and twee in prefab housing.

In efforts to further democratize its architecture, Pleysier Perkins has also created a model for a Melbourne building company as part of its range of display homes. Admittedly, these are still high-end houses and unlikely to relieve us of the so-called Australian ugliness that permeates our outer suburbs. However, it is an attempt to bring good design to a wider audience, and for that we should all be grateful.

The ethos of modernism has always been to strip away the extraneous and be somewhat reductive, and it's a spirit that clearly imbues the work of Pleysier Perkins. But modernism is also criticized, sometimes quite rightly, for being cold and inhuman. On the following pages you'll see a brand of modernism that clearly has the music still coursing through its veins, and two composers who can draw the best out of each other and their architecture.

FITZROY WAREHOUSE CONVERSION, 2002



Simon: Ramon had actually started this project before we began practising together. We met while I was a work experience student at a design-build company where Ramon was working. I had decided that I was going to become either an architect or an artist. I figured that architects made more money. My brother Oli is an artist and so far I've been proven right. Although Damien Hirst has the edge on us!

Ramon: We've got some of Oli's pictures, so when he's successful it will be a win-win!

Simon: We became friends and we realized that we had similar ideas about architecture. This project involved the conversion of an old 1970s factory in Fitzroy. It was more about the creation of space than the expression of form.

Ramon: I've always had a practical head. Simon and I became friends and started working on projects together. We've always bounced design ideas off each other and that's been a massive strength in our partnership. I would go away for the weekend and scribble down some ideas and Simon would go away and do the same, then we'd come back the next week and have a chat over coffee. This kind of process

cemented our working relationship; it was quite amazing. There have been a number of times when I've found myself stuck on something and then Simon would come in and solve the puzzle. Simon has the more academic background and mine is more practical. Even though I'd already started this project, I knew that we shared the same design aesthetic, so his input was a key to the end result.

The old warehouse now contains two apartments and some ground-floor retail space. Both apartments have internal courtyards, with double-height glazing that lets light permeate throughout the interiors. A lot of the internal walls are operable. They can be reconfigured for more versatility of space. The project was quite a complicated puzzle and it was really about achieving the two apartments within the parapets of the existing building. The apartments are configured over two floors, with the lower floor essentially functioning as a one-bedroom apartment, and with two extra bedrooms upstairs. The people who live here are empty nesters, so the upper level works well as a guest retreat.

Simon: The interiors are really dramatic and dynamic. That desire to create drama spatially is really consistent through our work. Vitruvius talked about the aspect of "delight," and that's something we strive for. That's the challenge.



PREVIOUS PAGE:

The Phillip Island house carefully negotiates public and private spaces.

THESE PAGES, LEFT:

Double-height glazing to the internal courtyards allows ample daylighting to the interiors of the apartments.

CENTRE:

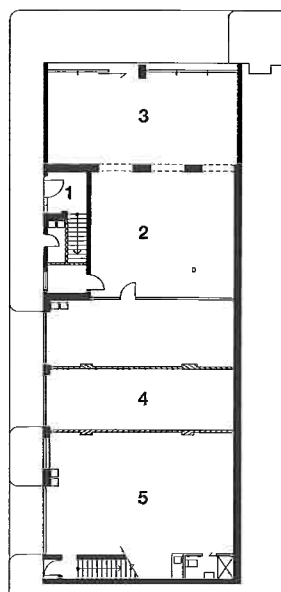
In-built bookshelves assist in achieving an aesthetic of restraint.

RIGHT:

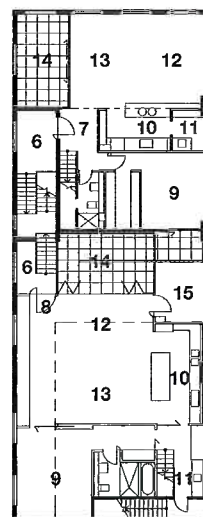
The large open spaces of the apartments give a sense of drama to the interiors.

- | | |
|-------------------|------------|
| 1 Entry | 9 Bedroom |
| 2 Showroom/office | 10 Kitchen |
| 3 Display area | 11 Laundry |
| 4 Unit 1 garage | 12 Living |
| 5 Unit 2 garage | 13 Dining |
| 6 Foyer | 14 Court |
| 7 Entry unit 1 | 15 Study |
| 8 Entry unit 2 | |

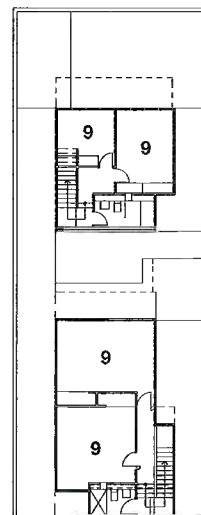
0 5 m



Ground level



Middle level



Upper level



Simon: That drama we talk about is evident here, too. The entrance to the house is double-height and we tried to encourage a sense of delight when you walk in. The materiality of the house is really appropriate to its setting. Externally it's concrete blocks, spotted gum and zinc cladding, which will age and weather beautifully as the years go on.

As it's on the coast, there are some wonderful views from this house. But it also happens to be on an estate, and there's the potential for other houses to be built next door. So we framed the views with that potential in mind.

Ramon: We really needed to decide what to screen off and what to open up to. We employed strong architectural elements to create the privacy that might be required further down the track.

Simon: One example is the large block wall that contains the fire-place and creates privacy from the upper-storey terrace. Another is the double-height timber-clad wall. The timber cladding was placed externally and internally and we broke the surface with slot windows that bring shafts of light into the house – these beautiful, interesting, double-height shafts of light – without compromising privacy.

The house is composed of two two-storey forms. One is clad in

spotted gum and contains the entrance hall and private sleeping areas. The other is more transparent and contains the living areas that open to the decks and courtyard out the back.

Ramon: The challenge was to create memorable spaces and forms but retain a muted palette so that the clients wouldn't feel as though they're living in some architect's utopian dream. The interior needed to be easy to furnish and put artworks in.

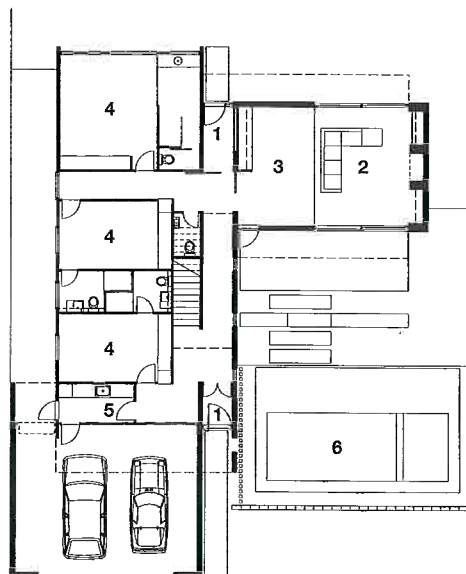
Simon: It's a canvas for the clients to develop. We tried to give our clients an architecture that would draw an emotional response. That feeling is difficult to describe, but you know it when you walk into the house. It's a sense of wellbeing.

Ramon: It's a flexible house, though, rather than being prescriptive. It doesn't require a certain type of person with a certain type of art or what have you. You don't have to live a certain way.

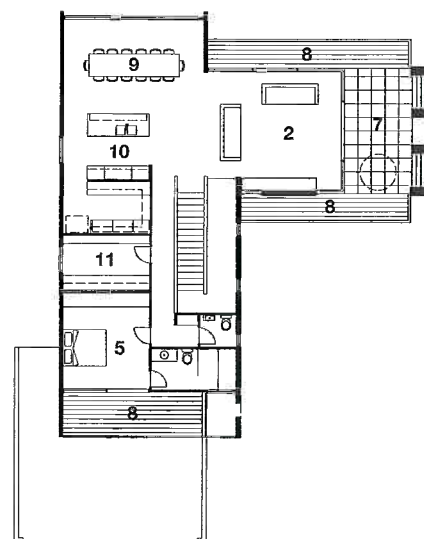


OPPOSITE PAGE: The concrete block, spotted gum and zinc cladding are intended to gracefully weather over the years.
THIS PAGE: The double-height timber clad wall is broken with vertical slot windows that allow daylight penetration but retain the privacy of the house.

- | | |
|-----------|------------|
| 1 Entry | 7 Loggia |
| 2 Living | 8 Balcony |
| 3 Games | 9 Dining |
| 4 Bedroom | 10 Kitchen |
| 5 Laundry | 11 Study |
| 6 Pool | |

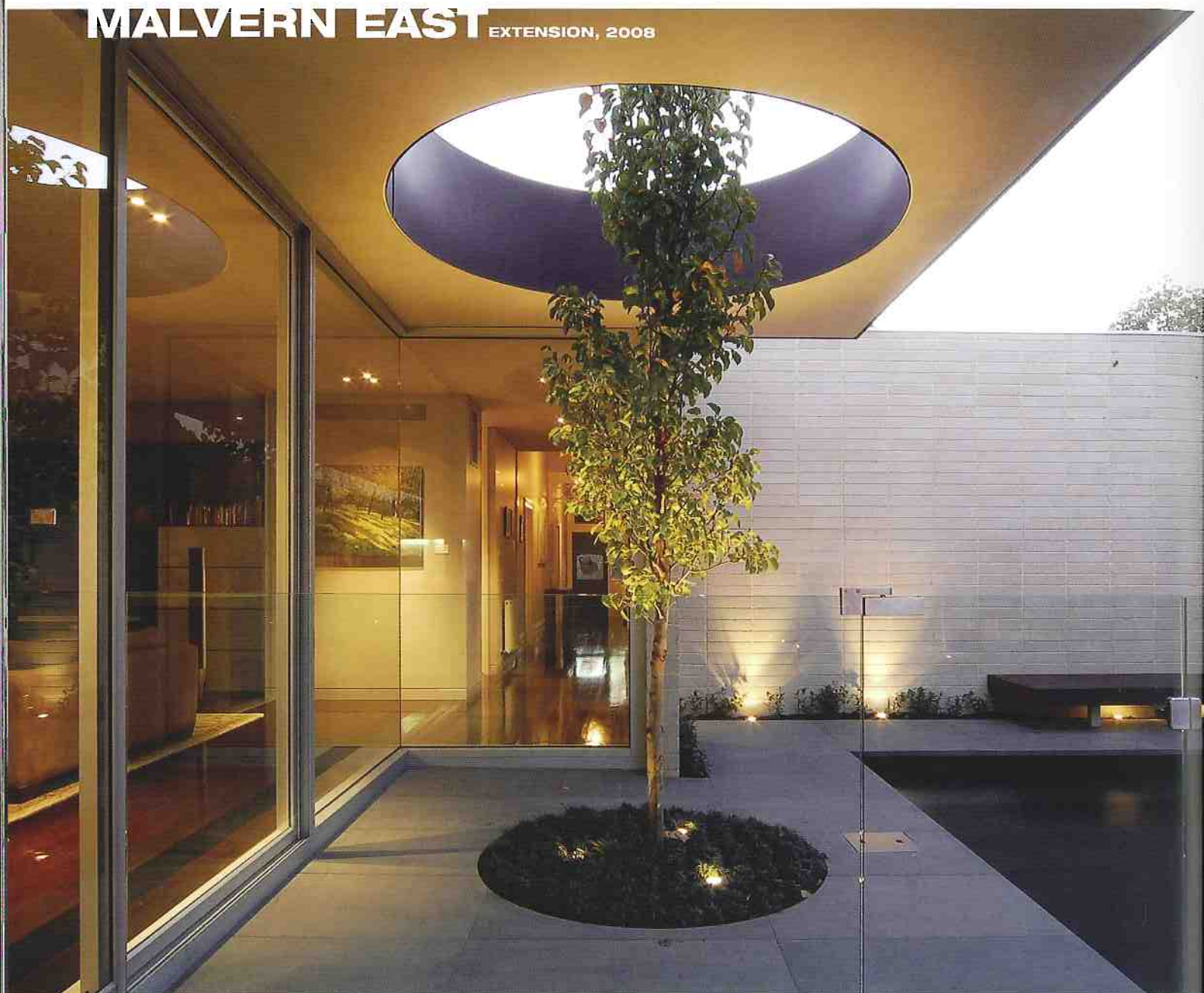


Ground level



Upper level

0 10 m



Simon: In a house that's in an urban context the drama has to be internalized. It comes from internal volumes, as compared to a place on a cliff or overlooking a forest, where you can let the house recede into the natural drama. This project is an extension to an Edwardian house in Melbourne. It's a concrete block and zinc pavilion that includes the main bedroom and ensuite, new living area and double garage.

Ramon: This house is the perfect example of the difference a great client can make to a project. He came to us with a little thumbnail sketch, which often happens.

Simon: We value that initial part of the design process. It's really very collaborative with the client. We have a lot of respect for a client who gives us the responsibility of designing a house for them and we always come to the table with some ideas – a fairly loose representation of our response to the brief. It's later that we try to see where we can take the design. This project had a client very much like that.

Ramon: The client just wanted a basic extension to the rear of the house and the first thing we did was challenge that brief. He wanted parking for a couple of large cars, so we challenged the very notion of what this

house should be, and right at the back laneway we put a two-car garage with entry to the house. The traditional part of the house, the traditional entry, is used by guests only. The family uses the new rear entry and it has worked out beautifully. The garage is automated, and the residents can walk straight into the kitchen with the shopping bags and so on. We've kept the street facade of the original house untouched.

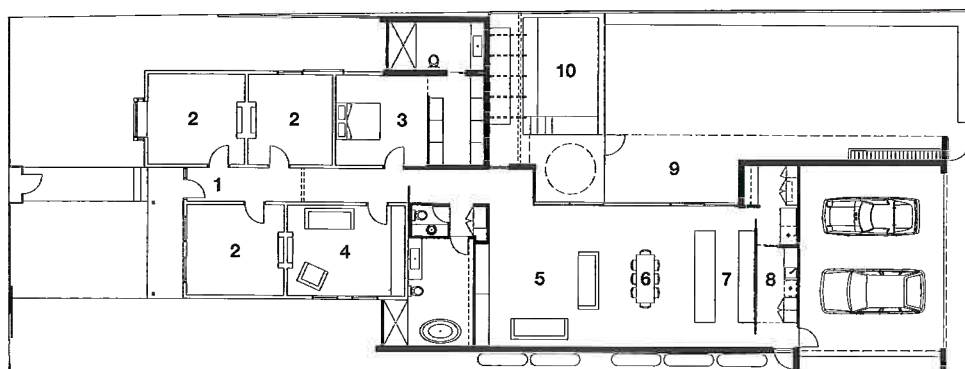
Simon: This house demonstrates the formalistic thread in our work. Something that recurs in our projects is the floating roof plane. We've used this approach on a number of extensions, as it makes a great contrast to Victorian and Edwardian houses, with their high ceilings and small openings. This horizontal spatial quality opens out to the garden and diffuses the interior–exterior relationship. It's a big floating lid that is also a great response to the Australian climate. We punctured this one with a classic motif – the circle.

Ramon: It's almost like watching a sundial as the light works its way around the interior of the house during the day.

Simon: Yes, you could tell the time by it!



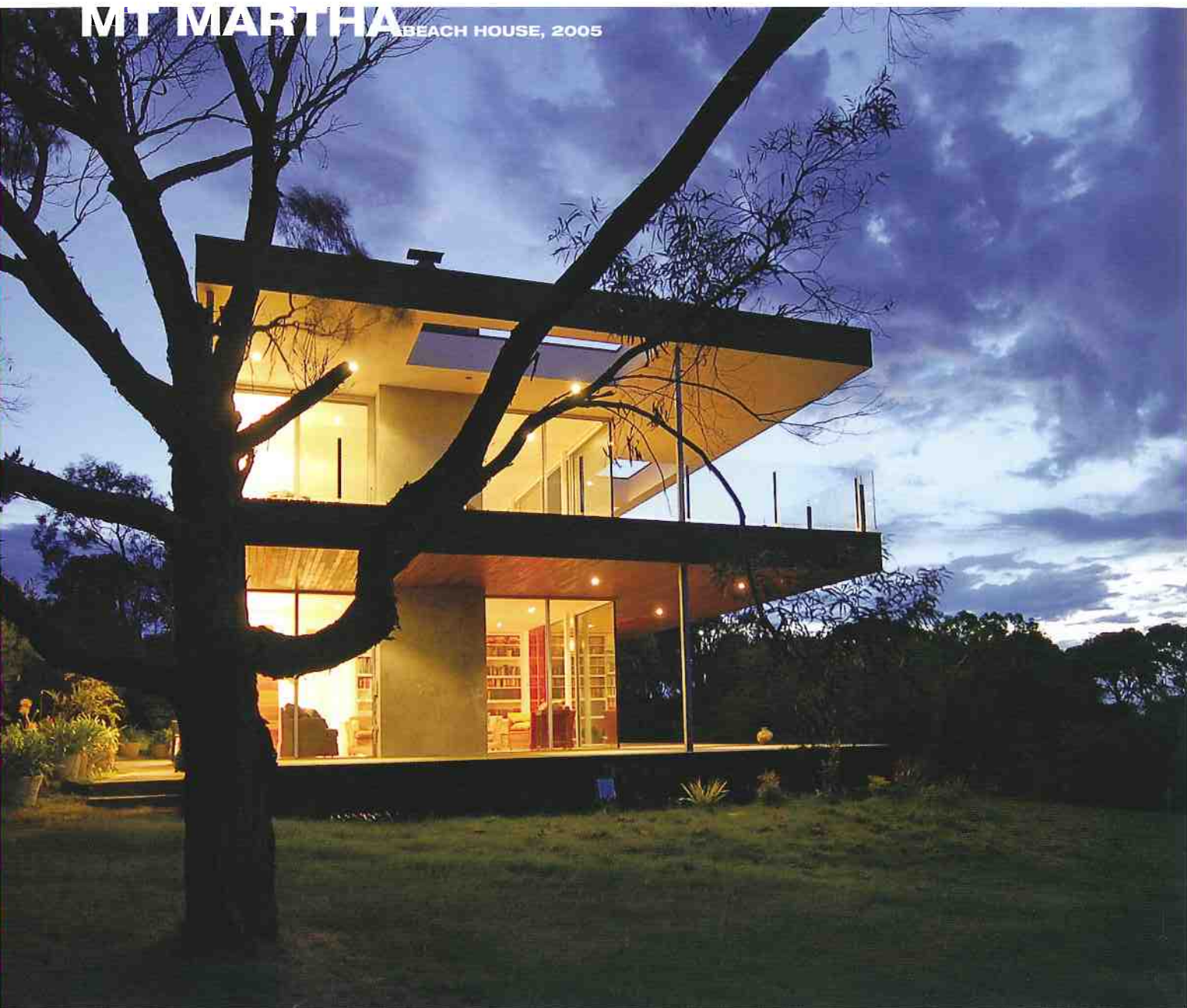
OPPOSITE PAGE: The floating roof plane is a common thread in the work of Pleyzier Perkins. The circular punctuation in this roof plane helps diffuse the interior-exterior relationship and creates a play of light. **THIS PAGE,** LEFT: Warmth had been given to the existing Edwardian house. RIGHT: The bathroom typifies the architects' modernist-inspired forms.



- | | |
|----------------|-----------|
| 1 Entry | 6 Dining |
| 2 Bedroom | 7 Kitchen |
| 3 Main bedroom | 8 Laundry |
| 4 Lounge | 9 Terrace |
| 5 Living | 10 Pool |

Floor plan

0 10 m



Simon: The views from this property of Port Phillip Bay are really incredible, so we imagined this place as two viewing platforms over three horizontal planes – the two floors and the roof. These deep cantilevering planes are a recurring theme in our work and they can be seen in the Phillip Island residence and the Malvern East extension as well. Again, these decks flow seamlessly from the interior, diffusing the exterior into the spaces.

The continuous roof plane gives a greater sense of space. We design our houses from fence to fence, rather than wall to wall. This maximizes the potential of a site, whether it has an ocean view or a small courtyard garden. Quite often that's what determines how you feel about a space; it's what you look out to.

Ramon: The upper decks on this house also perform the function of solar control, acting as eaves. In combination with the full-height sliding doors, the decks create a very open relationship with the surrounding environment.

We placed the secondary bedrooms on the lower level with a lounge. Upstairs, the main living area and the main bedroom benefit from the higher elevation to take in the views.

Simon: The design process requires solitary, rigorous thought that takes time. And that's why Ramon and I have evolved a process that allows each of us time to develop ideas. In our office, we are trying to develop elegant and efficient responses to briefs – simple, restrained responses. Detail and materiality are vital.

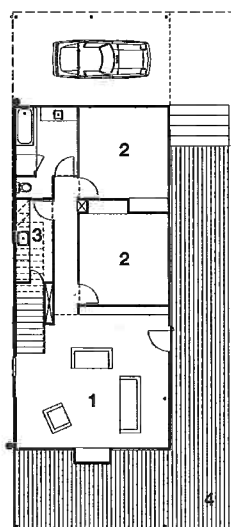
Ramon and I would say that the biggest adrenaline rush comes when we feel we've realized a design aspect of a project and we feel we've nailed it, whether it comes quickly or whether it's taken a while. With this house we certainly got that rush. I think the common thread that runs through our work, the thing that we believe in most, is the beauty of simplicity – the emotional power of simplicity.



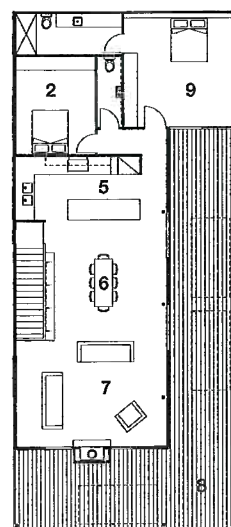
OPPOSITE PAGE: Three horizontal planes create two viewing platforms from which to enjoy views of Port Phillip Bay. **THIS PAGE:** The decks blur the threshold between inside and outside.

- 1 Lounge
- 2 Bedroom
- 3 Laundry
- 4 Deck
- 5 Kitchen
- 6 Dining
- 7 Living
- 8 Balcony
- 9 Main bedroom

0 ——— 10 m



Ground level



Upper level