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107

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DESIGN DILEMMAS

YES, ARCHITECTURE IS ABOUT CREATING BEAUTIFUL DESIGNS, BUT PROBLEM SOLVING LIES AT THE VERY HEART OF THE INDUSTRY. THESE THREE PROJECTS HAVE ADDRESSED A PROBLEM HEAD ON THROUGH INNOVATIVE THOUGHT AND DESIGN

There are some terrible properties in Australia. Hot interiors, treeless yards, concrete pushed to every boundary, air-conditioning a necessity, the number of garages rivalling interior rooms. These particular design inefficiencies, alongside a list of others, inhabit an ever-increasing number of Australian properties; from new builds to the current obsession with “raising and renovating”.

While the role of an architect is to create aesthetically pleasing designs, it is problem solving that provides the core of a project. Architects are solvers and their solutions need to provide function, comfort, economic and sustainable feasibility and, of course, aesthetic appeal.

Forced to inherit decades of generic property development, Australian architects are becoming extremely apt re-inventors – a good example of this is James Russell’s

redesign of the Boston Street House. Architects also apply innovative thought and design to challenges such as the unconventional geometry of sites, a problem Matthew Gribben faced when planning the Five Courts House. And they also have an important role to play in the future of our suburban landscapes, where the pressure of increased urban density requires creative approaches to the design of homes and cities. Rana Abboud and Ewen Wright’s Vault House prototype addresses the future feasibility of the great Australian dream.

This is where Australian architecture is really at its best. While each response to a design problem is unique to the architects of the following three projects, what binds them together is a willingness to rectify the problems that a lack of thought and a general cultural apathy have unwittingly bred. Given the significance of these design solutions, they could well be touted as the surest measures of good architecture in Australia.

LEFT: The award-winning Vault House brings dynamism to the quarter acre block with elements such as radial-patterned screening, inspired by Gothic cathedrals.

THE REIMAGINING

VAULT HOUSE, RANA ABBOUD AND EWEN WRIGHT

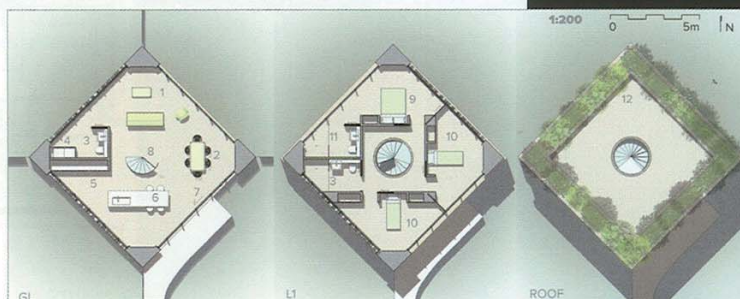
The quarter acre block may be a central theme of the great Australian dream but Rana Abboud and Ewen Wright have re-imagined that vision in their award-winning design concept, the Vault House.

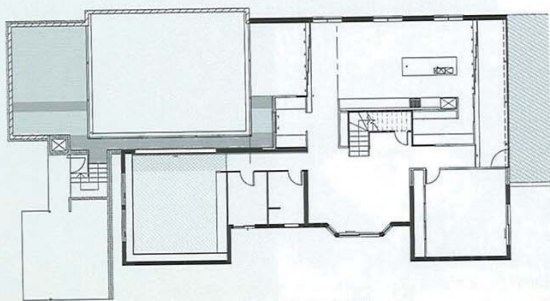
Abboud and Wright submitted their design to the Open Face category of the Think Brick Awards last year, which invited entrants to consider the future of the Australian suburb. Abboud and Wright's concept started from the premise of 'making do with what you've got' – in this case, an abundance of quarter acre blocks.

Abboud and Wright envisaged the Vault House sitting at the juncture of four suburban lots within Sydney's St Ives. It amalgamates the under-utilised corners of the blocks, addressing increased urban density and limited land resources. Despite its location on the edges of four existing lots, the neighbouring houses would be more than 13 metres away and the house is screened by a landscaped buffer.

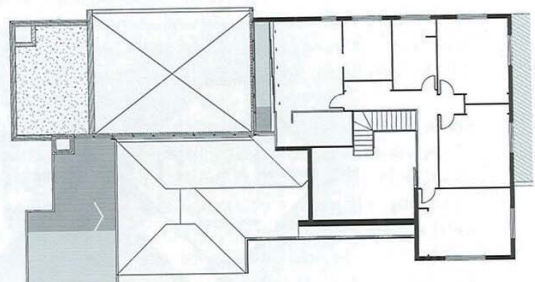
Abboud says the vault structure has all elements acting in compression. The vault ribbing reflects the suburban grid on which the building is placed and radial patterned screening adds texture to the design and casts lace-like shadows when in full sun. This element was inspired by a recent trip to Europe where the designers admired the intricate stonework of gothic cathedrals. "We felt it would be quite interesting to see how this could be reflected in a contemporary material like brick," says Abboud.

When will the conceptual Vault House be brought to life? In Abboud's opinion, it will only be possible when people change their perceptions of the great Australian dream – rather than achieving the big house on the big block with the big garage for the big car, the sense of accomplishment will come from living with a smaller environmental footprint.





GROUND FLOOR



UPPER FLOOR

THE REINVENTION

BOSTON STREET HOUSE, JAMES RUSSELL ARCHITECTS

There are two design additions that testify to the improvement of the Boston Street House. First is the ability to stand on a lush green lawn where a slab of white concrete once existed. The second is the luxury of wandering through the downstairs rooms on a thirty-five degree Brisbane day and feeling a breeze push past.

This, given the original 1990s generic floor plan, is something of an architectural miracle. Neighbours in all directions, whose homes were built in the same development push, buzz with air-conditioners while the sun hits their expansive, all-consuming driveways.

In some ways James Russell, principal architect on the Boston Street House, benefitted from the amount of land originally dedicated to the car, redesigning a significant portion of the block that was, essentially, wasted. The outcome is interesting in its ability to add to the streetscape while also creating privacy, and an applicable way of shadowing or remoulding past mistakes without destroying the existing abode altogether.

At the core of these improvements are a courtyard that sits below street level, and a brick screen which has reinvented the original front of the house. These additions mean the living space remains open to outside elements without risk of rain or sun encroaching. It allows the family a sense of privacy without having to lock doors or hide behind curtains, and presents the street with a vista which brings a moment of aesthetic joy in what is a mundane series of kit homes.

While a balance of sorts exists between what has been redesigned and what has been kept in this home, there is also a marked disparity. This difference in itself is testament to the importance of bespoke architecture, and highlights the chasm between a generic abode and a generic abode that has later had thought and creativity applied to it.

LEFT: The new brick screen enables privacy without cutting out light or air flow.

BELOW: In a neighbourhood of kit homes, the screen presents the street with an invigorated, unexpected vista.



RIGHT: Once a slab of concrete, the new, lush courtyard sits below street level, private and protected.

THE REINTERPRETATION

FIVE COURTS HOUSE, MATTHEW GRIBBEN

Some may have looked at the odd geometry of the Five Courts' inner-west Sydney site and its hefty brick walls, sighed and uttered the words "sub-divide". Not architect Matthew Gribben. Instead, he saw the unconventional site of Five Courts House as an opportunity to create a discreet single residence for his client. "I knew the unorthodox nature of it would give us scope to really develop an innovative project as well as something that's not straight out of the catalogue," Gribben says.

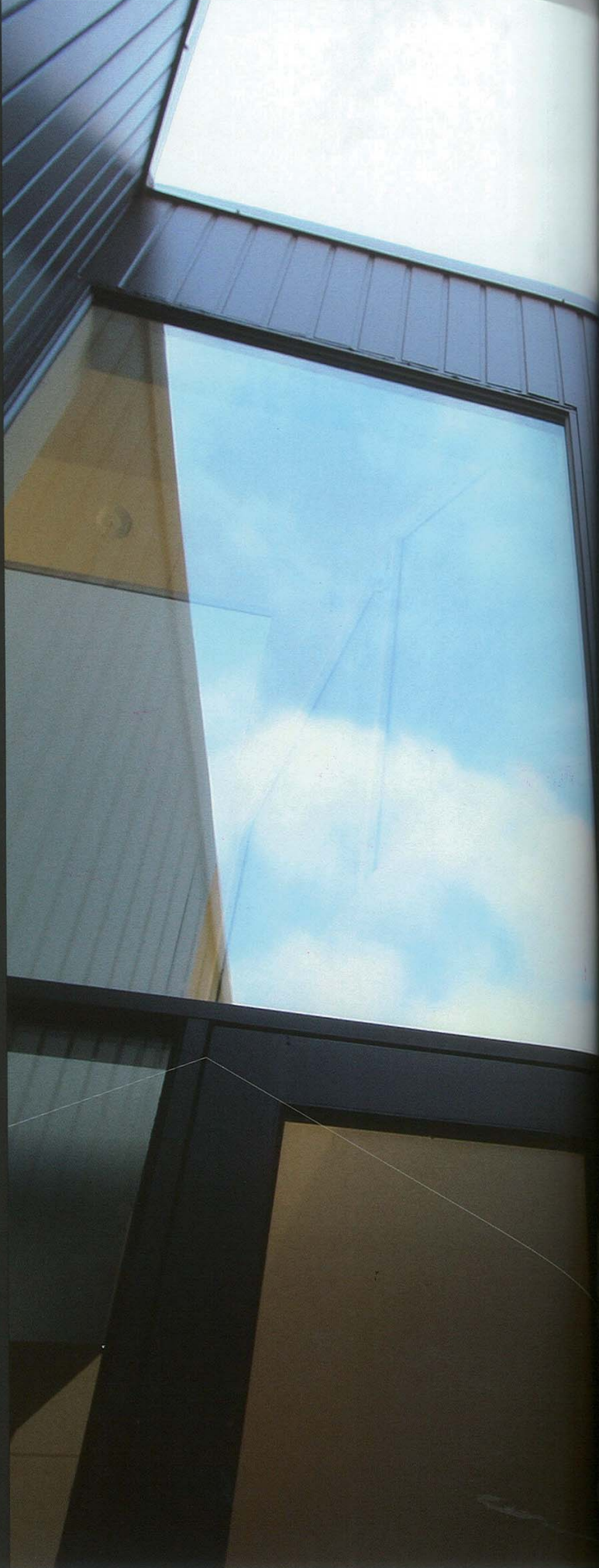
The site awkwardly launches into a sharp point on the north-west point and then tapers on the eastern side, and is surrounded on two sides by triple-brick walls. Whereas some may say fortress-like, Gribben prefers to call these walls (and the house as a whole) introspective; when you unwrap the residence from the triple-brick wrapping that protects it from a major road and side street, inside it is a maze of air and light. Five courtyards are dotted throughout the residence, each yard opening up to several interior spaces. In addition to feeding the apparently cloistered residence with air and natural light, two of the courtyards in particular close up the "left-over" spaces of the unorthodox site.

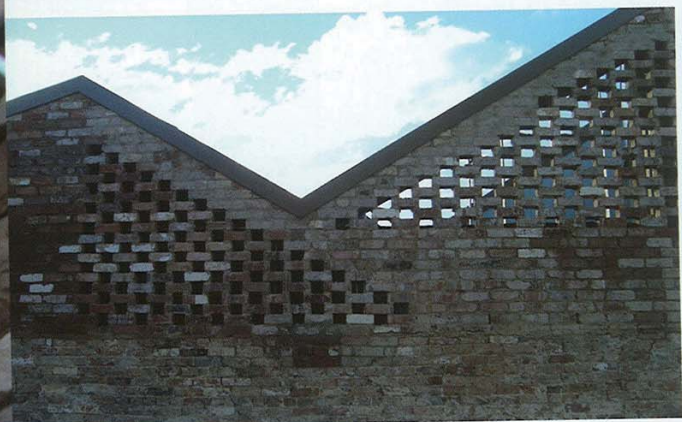
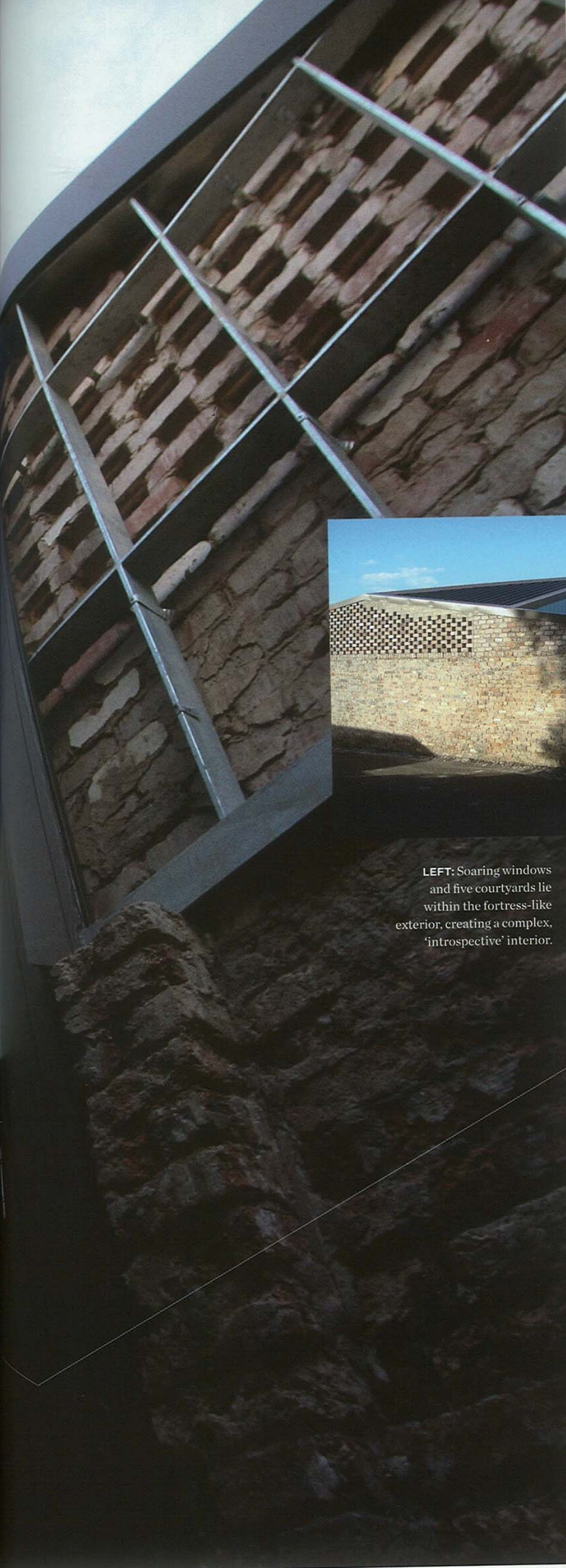
These courtyards also provide cross ventilation through the house and drench the interiors in natural light, while the courtyard on the first level is fitted with a water tank, which is fed by the water discreetly collected through gutters nestled behind the fascia.

The triple-brick walls have been added to with recycled bricks and open-course brickwork which speckles the courtyards and particular parts of the interior with dappled light, creating a lightness of touch within the heaviness of the external structure. The retention of these walls not only lessens the carbon footprint of the building, but is a core characteristic of its (seemingly) modest charm.

While around 30 to 40 models were created to capture how this complex project would work, this sympathetic addition to a densely populated area of Sydney is an imaginative solution to a complex issue, without screaming its intent out to the world. M

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ABOVE AND LEFT: Open-course brickwork breaks up the heavy line of the exterior wall and offers the courtyards and interior beautiful, dappled light.

LEFT: Soaring windows and five courtyards lie within the fortress-like exterior, creating a complex, 'introspective' interior.

