

By Design

DESIGN EXTERIORS 2026



ISSUE 18 | JUNE 2026

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For most residential designers, accreditation starts at one level and one straightforward process.

If accreditation has sat on your list for years, the process is more straightforward than its reputation suggests. Low Rise Accreditation is where most residential designers begin. It covers Class 1 and 10 buildings, plus Class 2 to 9 buildings up to two storeys, the residential and low rise commercial work that fills most practices.

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application form, verify your work with a Statutory Declaration of Authorship, complete a short NCC questionnaire, then submit and let BDAA assessors review your work.

Accreditation is recognised by clients, councils, and regulatory bodies as the mark of a designer who meets the national standard. It is mandatory in Tasmania, Queensland, and Victoria, and required in NSW for Low Rise Medium Density Complying Development work. As registration tightens across the country, the designers who hold it are the ones ready for what comes next.

Editor's Note

The exterior is the most honest part of a building. It is the layer that has to stand in front of the Southern Ocean, take the salt and the UV, shrug off a Queensland summer, and still look like someone meant it. Everything else in a project can be revised, softened, or hidden. The facade is the part the weather sees first, and the part that tells the truth about the decisions behind it.

That is the thread running through this edition. Across these pages, a coastal home on the Fleurieu Peninsula resolves the old tension between opening up to the view and surviving the conditions, doing it with three materials held in clear hierarchy. Three NSW projects show why a beachside facade is a specification problem long before it is an aesthetic one. Charred timber turns up not as a finish but as a strategy. Brickworks embeds recycled content into materials most of us already specify without thinking. And in south-west Western Australia, a home built from eight tonnes of tyres and a wall of bottles asks a fair question about what a residential envelope can actually be made from.

What connects them is not a single style. It is a way of working. Every designer in this issue has treated the outside of the building as where performance and intent meet, where the brief becomes durable, and where heritage controls, climate zones, and material selection stop being constraints and start being the design.

For building designers, that is familiar ground. The facade is where credibility is earned, with clients who want the view and the longevity, and with the codes that do not negotiate. Accreditation matters here for the same reason. It is the proof that the person making these calls knows what the weather already knows.

Enjoy the issue. Then go and look at a few facades differently.



Table of Content

- 3 Editor's Note
- 8 Three Materials One House
- 14 James Hardie reveals the emerging trends shaping Australian homes in 2026
- 20 The House That Wore the Fire
- 26 Brickworks. Circular Thinking in Everyday Materials
- 32 What the Salt Does Next
- 42 More Than Masonry
- 48 Keeping the Face, Changing the House
- 56 The House With Armour
- 62 How Queensland Homes Work
- 68 The Invisible Seam
- 72 The Mediterranean Gesture
- 78 The Curve as Credential
- 84 Two Faces
- 90 The Garden Pavilion
- 94 The Plot Thickens
- 102 References

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As of 11 November 2019 all NatHERS Accredited Assessors must hold a Certificate IV in Home Energy Efficiency and Sustainability (Thermal Performance Assessment) (CPP41119). As the nation and world have come to realise that sustainability and thermal conservation are essential to the survival of the built environment, both designers and homeowners are insisting on more sustainable, ecoefficient designs. In order to expedite the accreditation process, ABSA has set out the steps that will need to be fulfilled in order to gain accreditation.

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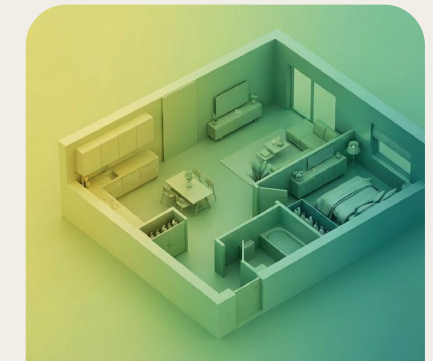
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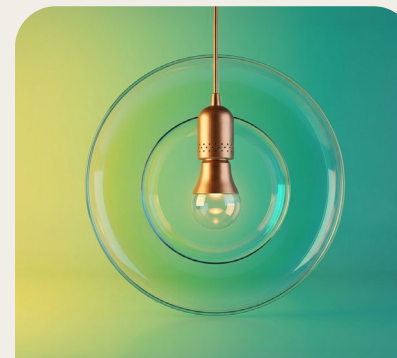
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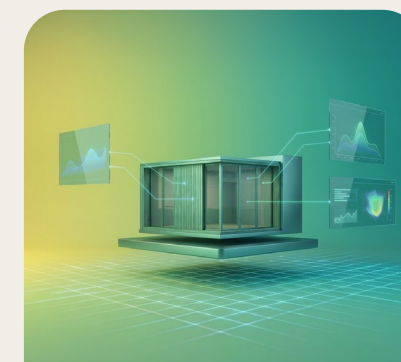
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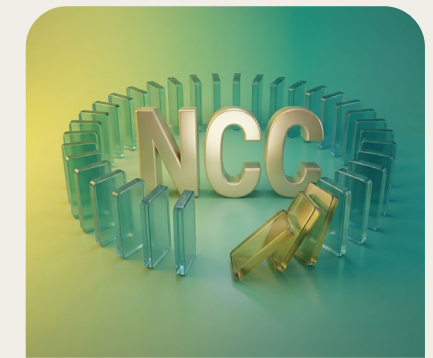
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Three Materials One House

The Australian coastal home has always been subject to competing forces: the desire to open up to landscape and ocean, and the practical necessity of durability in a salt-laden, UV-intense environment. A recent residential project on South Australia's Fleurieu Peninsula resolves this tension through a material palette of vertical natural timber battens, white render, and grey standing-seam metal – three materials held in clear hierarchy. Timber is primary, render is secondary, metal is accent.



Set on Seaview Avenue in Middleton, the house sits on a stretch of coast where the Southern Ocean defines the microclimate and the character of the land. The vertical batten cladding runs the full height of the primary facade. Vertical orientation accelerates drainage – a critical performance detail where driving rain tests every joint. The rhythm of the battens creates a textural richness that reads as both contemporary and warmly residential, avoiding the cold minimalism that can afflict all-render or all-metal schemes.

What is particularly considered here is the decision to carry the timber batten language to the front boundary fence. The house and its boundary treatment speak the same material language, giving the street frontage a resolved quality that many projects – where house and fence are designed independently – never achieve. The fence is not an afterthought; it is the first sentence of the architectural story. At the western end of the house, a black steel blade wall terminates the timber rhythm and signals the entry – a juxtaposition in which each material amplifies the other.

The rhythm of the battens creates a textural richness that reads as both contemporary and warmly residential, avoiding the cold minimalism that can afflict all-render or all-metal schemes.

White render in a coastal context requires careful specification: alkaline substrates, polymer-modified systems, and UV-stable pigments are standard expectations. In salt-air environments, the breathability of the render system and the risk of efflorescence must be considered. Acrylic-based render systems are the default recommendation for exposed coastal sites. The grey Colorbond roof – a hybrid flat-to-skillion form – completes the palette; a THERMATECH finish in a light-reflective colour reduces cooling loads and minimises thermal expansion of the metal substrate.



Australia's contemporary coastal vernacular has stabilised around a recognisable language: timber, render, metal.

For building designers, stainless steel fixings at minimum Grade 316 to AS/NZS 4600 are standard practice for any project within one kilometre of the coast. Timber selection must account for UV, moisture, and salt exposure – either through species selection, H3.2 treatment or above, or a prefinished system. The paint specification for rendered walls should include a high-build acrylic topcoat with a warranty period appropriate to the coastal exposure category.

Australia's contemporary coastal vernacular has stabilised around a recognisable language: timber, render, metal. This Middleton project demonstrates that the question for building designers is not which materials to use, but how disciplined, how considered, and how climate-smart the execution can be. When the hierarchy is clear and the specification is rigorous, the result is a coastal home that earns its setting.





James Hardie

reveals the emerging trends shaping Australian homes in 2026

Australian homes are entering a new era, one defined by joy, creative expression, and deeply personal design choices. The James Hardie Modern Homes Forecast reveals the defining themes influencing the future of Australian architecture and showcases eight modern home design styles shaping Australia's residential landscape.

Drawing on a globally informed view, including a comprehensive research study by WGSN and insights from Milan Design Week, the Forecast captures a move beyond homes designed purely for functionality, toward spaces that ignite joy, celebrate individuality and actively support wellbeing.

To showcase how these shifts translate into real-world design, the Forecast features eight home styles influencing Australian suburbs.

BOX MODERN

offers dynamic and purposeful homes designed for imagination, creating a flexible canvas for personal stories and bold ideas.



BARN is elevated by intricate details, layered materials and deep tones that prioritise a restorative home.

MODERN COASTAL

becomes an elevated, joyful and effortless style for any location.



MODERN CLASSICAL weaves graceful curves, minimalist outlines and seamless indoor-outdoor connection.



MID-CENTURY MODERN evolves into a more layered and comforting direction with bright colours and expressive geometry.



JAPANDI prioritises smart layout and intuitive, nature-integrated design.



Together, these styles reflect how Australian homes are evolving to support the way people want to live.

Read the Forecast to learn more about the influential lifestyle themes shaping home design and explore how these themes are reflected in the popular, enduring and emerging modern home styles.



[CLICK HERE: Read the Forecast 2026](#)

MODERN HERITAGE
integrates old-world charm with modern functionality through layered detail and bold finishes.

MODERN FARMHOUSE
blends traditional charm with smart, contemporary features.





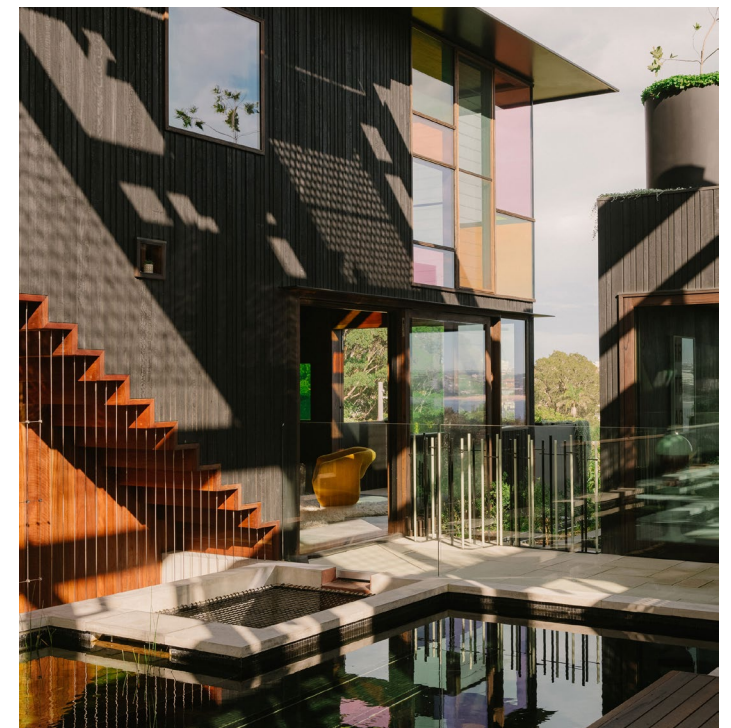
The House That Wore the Fire

Charred timber is having a moment in Australian residential design, and the moment is not about looks. Charred timber has become one of the most distinctive materials in contemporary Australian residential architecture. While its deep black appearance attracts attention, its growing popularity is driven less by aesthetics and more by performance.

Two recent projects demonstrate why.

In Sydney's Manly, Holocene House by Clinton Cole of CplusC Architects + Builders uses hand-charred spotted gum cladding across its exterior. Located in Climate Zone 5 with a BAL-29 bushfire rating and significant coastal exposure, the project required a durable facade capable of withstanding harsh environmental conditions. The charred surface carbonises the timber's outer layer, improving resistance to UV degradation, moisture, fungi and insects while reducing maintenance requirements over time.

The cladding forms part of a broader sustainability strategy that includes low-carbon concrete, recycled hardwoods and reused site materials. Holocene House became Australia's first home certified under the international Active House standard, demonstrating how material selection can support both environmental performance and architectural expression.



A very different interpretation appears at Scamander Passivhaus A in Tasmania, designed by Matthew Purves of MAP Architecture. This compact 129-square-metre home combines cross-laminated timber construction, external woodfibre insulation and locally sourced charred hardwood detailing. The project achieved Passive House Classic certification, a NatHERS rating of 9.2 stars and an annual thermal demand of just 16.2 megajoules per square metre.

Here, the charred timber serves as the outer protective layer within a highly efficient building envelope. Combined with ventilated cavities and durable zincalume cladding, the system protects the structure while supporting exceptional thermal performance.



Despite their differences in scale, budget and location, both projects reveal the same lesson.

Charred timber is not simply a design statement. It is a practical response to durability, maintenance and embodied carbon considerations.



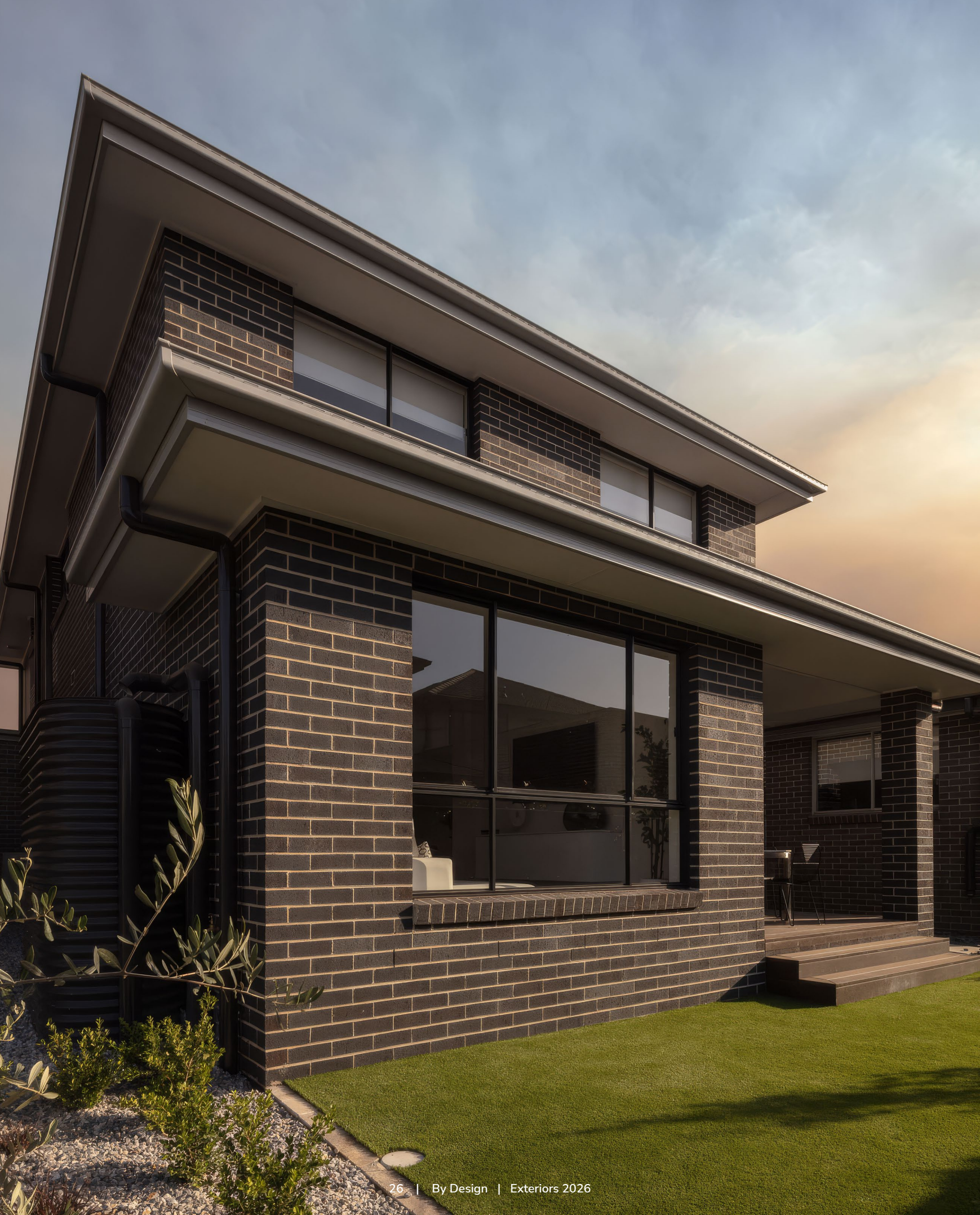
For building designers considering yakisugi, material selection and detailing remain critical. Dense Australian hardwoods such as spotted gum and blackbutt produce a stable charred surface, while exposed cut edges require careful treatment to ensure consistent weathering. Although charred timber can contribute to bushfire resilience, it is not a substitute for full BAL-compliant construction systems.

What makes these projects significant is the way they challenge the cycle of short-lived architectural trends.

Rather than relying on finishes that require constant renewal, both buildings use materials intended to improve with age. Over time, the charred surface softens, deepens and develops character while continuing to protect the structure beneath.

The black facade is not merely an aesthetic choice. It is a long-term commitment to durability, performance and thoughtful design.





BRICKWORKS

Circular Thinking in Everyday Materials

How Brickworks is embedding recycled inputs into modern Australian exteriors

Exterior materials are evolving beyond performance and aesthetics to support more sustainable outcomes. Brickworks is embedding recycled inputs into its product ranges, reducing reliance on mined materials while maintaining familiar construction systems.

For designers, the challenge is finding materials that balance performance, durability and visual appeal while reducing environmental impact without introducing complexity into specification or construction.

Rather than creating niche alternatives, the focus for Brickworks has been on improving mainstream materials already widely used across Australian housing.

Brickworks takes care in its sustainability claims and has recently worked with a third party to review and verify the recycled input of their products across select ranges. This way customers can trust they can rely on these claims for their projects.

“Recycled inputs are already embedded into everyday product choices—no redesign required.”

*Our Austral
Brick range
made in NSW
contain between
25% to 45%
recycled material,
depending on
the blend and
product type.*



Clay bricks with high recycled content

Clay brick remains a staple of Australian construction, valued for its durability, thermal performance and enduring aesthetic.

At Brickworks' Horsley Park facility, reclaimed clay from construction and excavation activities is reintroduced into the manufacturing process. Material that might otherwise be sent to landfill or directed to other lower-value uses is recovered, processed and blended into controlled clay stockpiles.

This approach delivers two key outcomes. It diverts material from landfill or less productive uses, and it reduces the need for newly mined clay.

From a design perspective, however, nothing changes. These bricks:

- maintain consistent colour and finish
- meet expected structural performance
- integrate seamlessly with standard detailing and installation

Sustainability benefits are embedded at a manufacturing level, allowing designers to specify confidently without changing their approach.

Concrete masonry with built-in recycled content

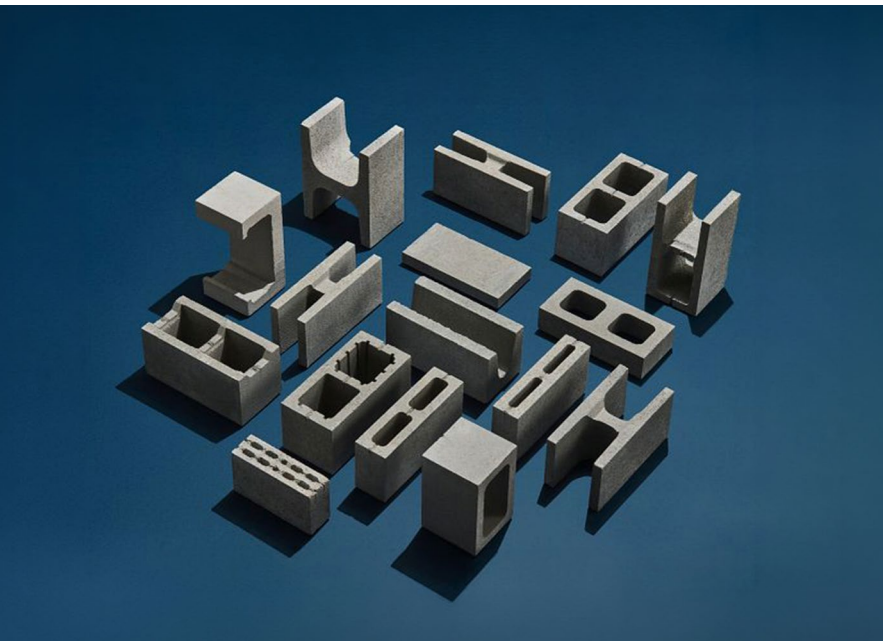
Brickworks is also advancing recycled inputs across its concrete masonry products. At the Oakdale plant, products incorporate industrial by-products such as fly ash and bottom ash into our standard grey block range. Their inclusion also helps to reduce reliance on virgin raw materials such as sand, aggregates and cement components.

These materials are used in everyday applications, including structural walls, retaining systems, landscaping and paving. This highlights an important shift: recycled content is already part of standard construction solutions.

"Sustainability gains are achieved through smarter material sourcing—not design compromise."

Our standard grey block made in our Oakdale facility now have recycled content of at least 20.7%¹ with selected products achieving up to 30% recycled content, depending on the mix design.

¹ This excludes 5031SG-1 capping units which use 3% recycled content.



Designed for practical performance and consistency

Brickworks' approach is grounded in practicality. Products incorporating recycled inputs remain easy to specify, with familiar sizes, formats and construction compatibility, and are designed to meet established performance expectations.

This allows designers to continue using proven systems without modification. Sustainability outcomes are achieved through better use of existing material streams and reduced reliance on mined resources, rather than introducing complexity.

Performance consistency is supported by controlled manufacturing. These systems ensure recycled inputs are repeatable, traceable and reliable, embedding sustainability into everyday production.

For designers, this simplifies specification. By integrating recycled inputs into core product ranges, Brickworks enables:

- reduced reliance on virgin, mined materials
- diversion of waste from landfill and lower-value uses
- maintained construction efficiency and design intent
- a trusted and reliable recycled material claim for our products



There's no need to seek out unfamiliar alternatives or redesign systems—the improvements are already embedded into the materials being specified.



A practical step toward circular construction

Exterior material selection has always been about performance and appearance. Increasingly, it is also about resource efficiency.

While many products already incorporate meaningful levels of recycled input, Brickworks is continuing to develop and expand its range. By incorporating recycled material and recycled content into everyday masonry products, Brickworks is supporting a more circular approach to construction.

For designers, the opportunity is clear: select materials that perform, endure and help reduce waste and reliance on newly mined resources by design, all backed by trusted reliable claims.

What the Salt Does Next

Three NSW coastal projects show why a beachside facade is a specification problem before it is an aesthetic one.

Coastal architecture is often defined by its appearance, but the real challenge lies in durability. Every coastal building must contend with salt-laden air, UV exposure, moisture and corrosion. Long before aesthetics enter the conversation, designers must decide how the building envelope will withstand these conditions over decades.

Three recent NSW projects demonstrate how successful coastal design begins with material performance.

The Kiama Courtyard Beach House

The Kiama Courtyard Beach House, designed by Helen Lloyd-Martin of 3D Environment, responds to its Climate Zone 5 location through a carefully considered envelope. James Hardie Scyon Linea weatherboards provide a durable exterior finish, while a Surfmist Colorbond roof helps reduce solar heat gain during summer.

The home is arranged as three pavilions surrounding sheltered courtyards, creating protected outdoor spaces while improving natural ventilation and daylight access.

Behind the coastal appearance sits a robust sustainability strategy. Low-emissivity glazing, thermal mass through recycled aggregate concrete flooring, solar panels and rainwater harvesting all contribute to long-term environmental performance. The cladding works as part of a broader climate-responsive system rather than as a decorative finish.



Designer of this project: Helen Lloyd-Martin



Designer of this project: Tony Ross

Arrawarra Headland

Further north at Arrawarra Headland, Tony Ross of Design Studio 22 faced the harsher conditions of an absolute beachfront site in Climate Zone 2.

While the home adopts a classic Hamptons-inspired aesthetic, the critical specification decision is less visible.

The roof uses Colorbond Ultra, a marine-grade product specifically developed for severe coastal environments. This upgrade provides significantly greater corrosion resistance than standard steel roofing and is essential for long-term durability so close to the ocean.

Additional material selections follow the same logic. Sandstone, brass external fixtures and fibre-cement weatherboards were chosen not only for appearance but also for their ability to withstand exposure to salt and moisture over time.

Avalon Beach Wave House

The third project, Avalon Beach Wave House by Peter Downes, demonstrates a different approach. Rather than introducing new cladding systems, the renovation focuses on upgrading performance while preserving the character of an iconic 1970s home. New low-emissivity glazing dramatically improves thermal comfort and energy efficiency while allowing the distinctive reverse-curve roof form to remain the visual focus.

Together, these projects highlight an important lesson for building designers.

Coastal cladding should never be specified in isolation. Weatherboards, roofing, fixings, flashings, glazing and shading must operate as a coordinated envelope system.

For homes located within a few hundred metres of the surf, material durability becomes critical. Fibre-cement weatherboards, marine-grade roofing products and stainless-steel fixings may carry a higher upfront cost, but they significantly reduce future maintenance and replacement requirements.

The salt will always be part of the coastal environment. Good design ensures the building is prepared for it.



Designer of this project: Peter Downes

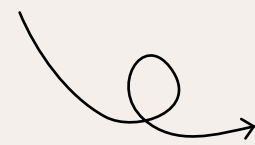
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More Than Masonry

A Canberra house proves that the most overlooked cladding material in residential design has been waiting for someone to take it seriously. Concrete block rarely appears on a client's list of dream-home materials. More often associated with industrial buildings and utilitarian construction, it is seldom considered a premium residential finish. Off Frome, a contemporary Canberra residence designed by Adam Hobill, challenges that perception entirely.

Designer of this project: Adam Hobill



Located in Griffith, one of Canberra's established inner-south suburbs, the project demonstrates how careful specification can transform a familiar material into something refined, durable and architecturally sophisticated.

The defining move was simple but effective. Rather than using conventional concrete blocks, Hobill specified slim-profile masonry units that were cut lengthways and honed to expose their aggregate content. The resulting finish has more in common with natural stone than standard masonry. By revealing the internal texture of the material, the facade gains depth, variation and a subtle horizontal rhythm that softens the scale of the building.

By revealing the internal texture of the material, the facade gains depth, variation and a subtle horizontal rhythm that softens the scale of the building.

The 738-square-metre home is organised around a basement garage, allowing the primary living levels to address the street without the visual dominance of multiple garage doors. This decision contributes significantly to the building's calm and civic presence within a mixed-character streetscape.

The material palette remains deliberately restrained. Honed concrete block forms the primary exterior surface, complemented by spotted gum castellated cladding, pre-finished fibre cement panels and a striking off-form concrete feature wall.

Rather than relying on decorative screens or applied features, the design allows texture, proportion and material junctions to create visual interest.

Performance has been considered as carefully as appearance. The home incorporates thermally broken wall systems, double-glazed low-emissivity windows, external shading to control summer heat gain and a substantial rooftop solar array with battery storage. A 5,000-litre rainwater tank further supports sustainability outcomes. Despite its size and extensive glazing, the home achieves a NatHERS rating of 6.8 stars in Canberra's demanding Climate Zone 7 conditions.



One of the most successful elements is the off-form concrete wall that anchors the courtyard. Cast against timber formwork, the surface captures the texture of the timber grain, creating a subtle connection between concrete and wood. Beyond its visual role, the wall provides valuable thermal mass within the insulated envelope, helping to moderate internal temperatures throughout the year.

For building designers, Off Frome offers an important lesson. Concrete block has never been limited by the material itself but by how it is specified and detailed. Scale, jointing, finish quality and material pairings all influence how the final result is perceived.

The project demonstrates that durable, low-maintenance materials can also deliver architectural warmth and sophistication.

More importantly, it shows how thoughtful specification can turn an everyday building product into a defining design feature that improves with age rather than requiring constant renewal.



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ALUMINIUM

Keeping the Face, Changing the House

Three small-lot heritage-overlay projects reveal different ways to create contemporary homes behind century-old facades

Designing within a heritage overlay often feels like balancing competing priorities. Streetscapes must be preserved, heritage facades protected and planning controls satisfied, while clients still expect homes that meet modern standards for comfort, performance and liveability.

Three recent projects demonstrate how building designers are successfully navigating that challenge.

Itty Bitty House

In Footscray, Victoria, Sky Tiong's Itty Bitty House occupies an exceptionally narrow site just 4.88 metres wide. Heritage controls required the original Victorian cottage frontage to be restored, preserving its contribution to the streetscape. Behind that familiar facade, however, the home becomes unapologetically contemporary.

Horizontal weatherboards, Hebel wall systems and a carefully detailed roof terrace create additional living space while maintaining privacy and minimising visual impact from the street.

The project also incorporates double-glazed low-emissivity glazing, integrated stormwater management and a highly insulated wall assembly, allowing the contemporary addition to deliver the thermal performance that the original structure could never achieve.



Designer of this project: Sky Tiong



Wrights Terrace

Wrights Terrace in Prahran takes a different approach. Designed by Darrin Albert in collaboration with Sketch Studio, the project restores a late-1800s Victorian cottage before extending it with a two-storey contemporary addition. The wider-than-average site provides opportunities for generous courtyards, large glazed openings and abundant natural light.

One of the most successful features is the use of external louvred screening.

Positioned on upper-level west-facing windows, the screens provide privacy while simultaneously reducing solar heat gain. By combining planning compliance and environmental performance in a single design element, the project demonstrates the value of integrated problem-solving. Supporting measures include rooftop solar, solar hot water, rainwater harvesting and high-performance glazing.

Designer of this project: Darrin Albert

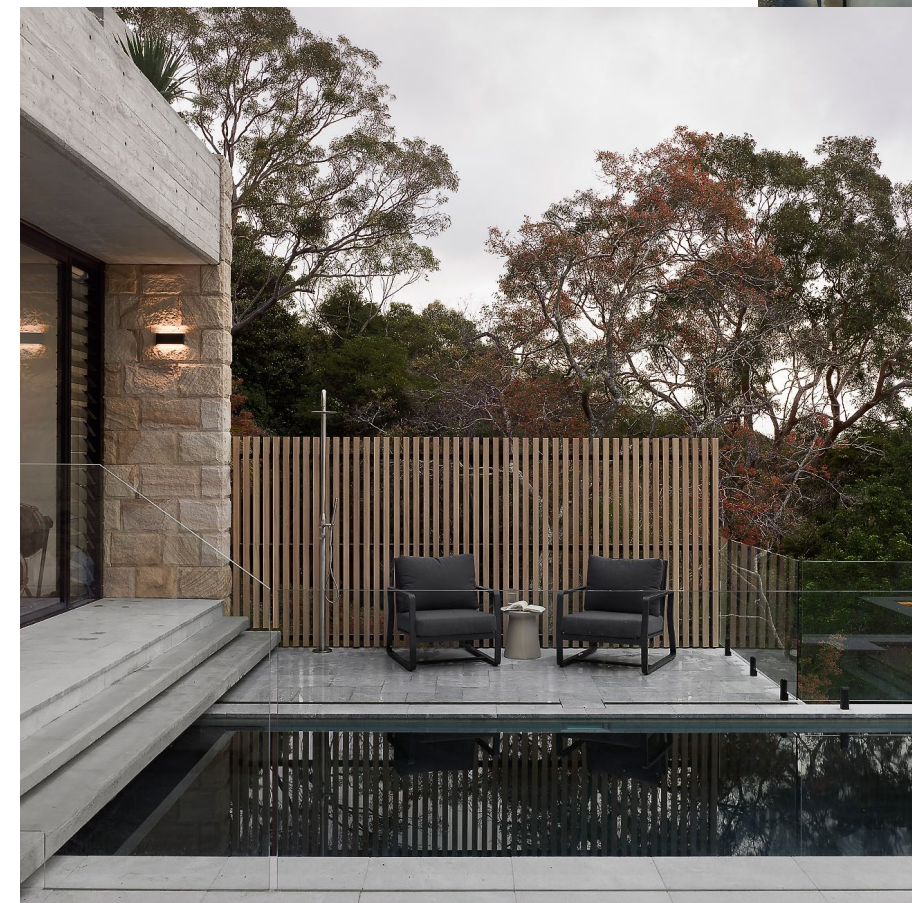


L'Arc Maison

At Gymea Bay, L'Arc Maison by Jake French of SBD Studio responds to a sloping site overlooking the Royal National Park. The original sandstone cottage frontage has been carefully preserved, while a multi-level addition steps down the site behind it. Rather than imitating the existing building, the extension introduces off-form concrete, contemporary detailing and expansive glazing.

Despite its modern expression, the project maintains a strong connection to the original home through the continued use of sandstone. High levels of insulation, hydronic heating, double glazing, solar generation and rainwater collection ensure the new addition performs to contemporary standards.

Together, these projects reveal a common principle.



Successful heritage adaptation is not about blending old and new into a single architectural language. Instead, it requires understanding where preservation is essential and where innovation can occur.

The heritage facade protects the character of the street. The contemporary addition delivers the performance, daylight, comfort and flexibility required for modern living. When both roles are clearly understood, heritage constraints become less of an obstacle and more of a framework for better design.



The House With Armour

In Brisbane's subtropical climate, western glazing is one of the most difficult design challenges to solve. Late-afternoon summer sun can introduce intense glare, increase cooling loads and make living spaces uncomfortable. Most solutions rely on shading devices that remain largely hidden. Bliss, a contemporary home in Nundah designed by Michael Ross, takes a different approach by making solar protection the defining feature of the architecture.

The home's most distinctive element is a series of fixed aluminium blades that wrap the primary facade and upper level. Positioned to intercept low western sunlight before it reaches the glazing, the blades significantly reduce unwanted heat gain while preserving daylight, ventilation and views.

Rather than treating shading as an afterthought, the project makes it central to the building's identity. From the street, the facade appears almost protective, giving the house a strong visual presence while serving a highly practical purpose.



Curved forms play an important role throughout the design. A central curved void and staircase organise the interior, while sweeping external walls soften the geometry of the L-shaped plan.



The blade system also resolves a second challenge: privacy. Upper-level bedrooms enjoy views towards Mount Coot-tha without being exposed to neighbouring properties or the street. By combining solar control and privacy screening into a single architectural element, the design achieves multiple outcomes with remarkable efficiency.

Behind the screen, the material palette remains deliberately restrained. James Hardie Linea boards define the primary facades, while Weathertex Weathergroove cladding is used on the curved sections of the building where greater flexibility is required. Each material has been selected for its performance characteristics rather than purely aesthetic reasons.

Curved forms play an important role throughout the design. A central curved void and staircase organise the interior, while sweeping external walls soften the geometry of the L-shaped plan. These gestures create a sense of flow while helping connect indoor and outdoor living spaces.



Performance considerations extend beyond the facade. A rooftop solar system, solar hot water and a courtyard pool contribute to the home's environmental strategy. The pool also assists with cooling by creating a more comfortable microclimate around outdoor entertaining areas.

For building designers, the aluminium blade screen offers an important lesson in climate-responsive design. Fixed vertical fins can dramatically reduce solar heat gain on western facades while still allowing useful daylight into the home. However, their effectiveness depends entirely on correct orientation and geometry. A solution that performs well in Brisbane may not be suitable in cooler climates where winter solar access is desirable.

Bliss demonstrates a broader principle that has long underpinned Queensland architecture: the building envelope should filter the climate before enclosing it. By adapting this idea through contemporary materials and detailing, the project creates a home that is both visually distinctive and environmentally responsive.

The result is a facade that performs first and looks striking because of it.

A solution that performs well in Brisbane may not be suitable in cooler climates where winter solar access is desirable.



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How Queensland Homes Work

Designing for Queensland's coastal climate demands more than good-looking materials. Three recent projects show how a single architectural gesture can become both a climate solution and a defining design feature.

Nalu

At Burleigh Waters on the Gold Coast, Bianca Gemmill's Nalu embraces the enduring value of breezeway blocks. Combined with vertical cladding, smooth render and natural material accents, the home centres around a freshwater pool and a series of indoor-outdoor spaces connected through filtered light and airflow.

The breezeway block remains one of Queensland's most effective climate-responsive elements. Its perforated structure allows natural ventilation while reducing direct solar exposure, helping create comfortable outdoor rooms without sacrificing openness. Although long associated with mid-century architecture, contemporary manufacturing and detailing have given the material renewed relevance in modern residential design.



Cayman

At nearby Clear Island Waters, Stuart Osman takes a different approach with Cayman, a pair of three-level villas designed around deep timber batten screens. Wrapping the upper levels and softened by curved corners, the battens provide privacy and shade while becoming the project's defining visual element.

The depth of the battens is critical to their success. Rather than functioning as decorative features, they create meaningful shadow and reduce solar exposure to upper-level glazing. Combined with internal voids that draw natural light into the lower levels, the screening contributes significantly to both environmental performance and occupant comfort.

The curved corners further distinguish the design, softening the scale of the buildings and creating a more welcoming street presence than a conventional rectilinear form.



Designer of this project: Stuart Osman

Arches On Saleng

The third project, Arches On Saleng by Chris McCabe on the Sunshine Coast, adopts a completely different architectural language. A custom Spanish-style textured render wraps the dual-occupancy development, while white timber arches sit above cantilevered planter beds to provide shading and visual identity.

The textured render serves both aesthetic and practical purposes. Its surface variation helps conceal minor weathering over time, while the light colour palette reflects a significant portion of the subtropical solar load. The arches simultaneously frame views, soften sunlight and contribute to the building's distinctive character.

Despite their visual differences, all three projects share a common principle. Each relies on a single, well-resolved exterior strategy that performs genuine climatic work. Whether through breezeway blocks, timber screens or shading arches, the design gesture is directly linked to environmental performance.

For building designers working in Climate Zone 2, the lesson is simple: clarity matters. One strong idea, carefully detailed and suited to its climate, will almost always outperform a collection of competing architectural features.

The best subtropical envelopes are not decorative. They are purposeful responses to the climate they inhabit.



Designer of this project: Chris McCabe

The Invisible Seam

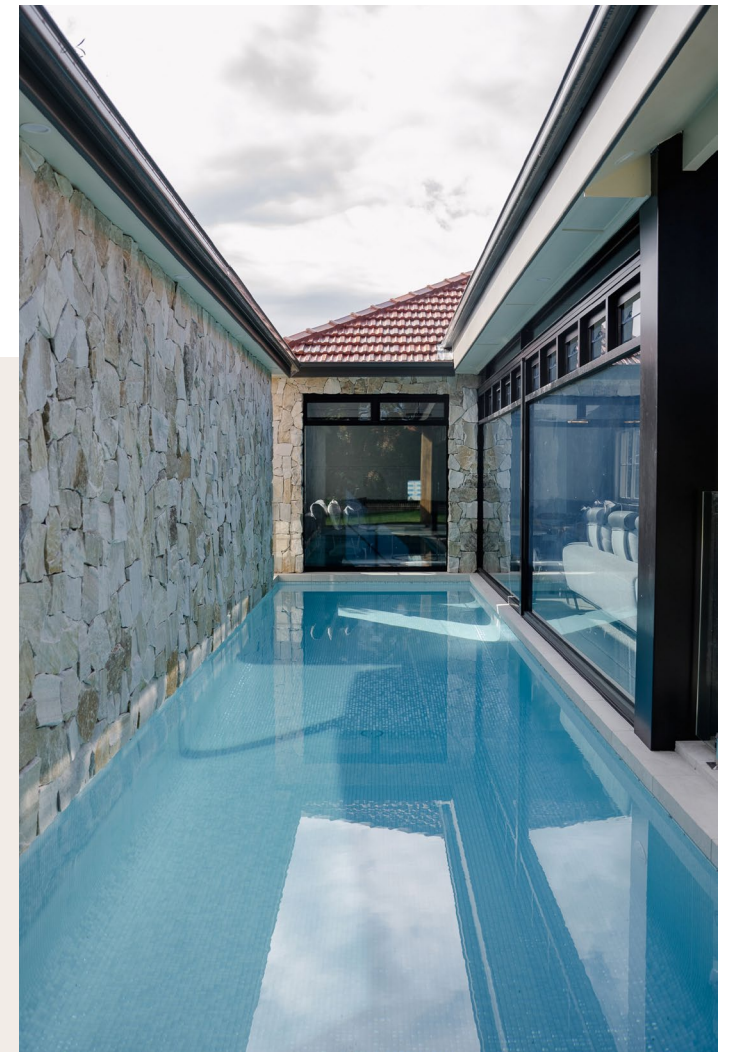


Designer of this project: Luke Van Jour

The heritage residential alteration is among the most demanding project types a building designer can undertake - requiring deep knowledge of heritage fabric, technical skill in contemporary addition, and a confident answer to the central design question: do you contrast or comply?

In Concord, an Inner West suburb of Sydney built largely between 1900 and 1930, a project on Salt Street answers that question with unusual clarity. A Federation-era brick bungalow presents its heritage credentials to the street without apology: warm red-brown brick, cream render string courses, a projecting bay window, clinker brick details, and double-hung timber sash windows speak the language of a century-old neighbourhood. This facade is conserved and restored - from the street, the project is almost invisible.

From the rear, the project reveals itself as a confident act of contemporary design. A dramatic full-height glazed gable - slender black steel sections enclosing clear glass - rises above the rear living zone: a glass cathedral abutting a brick terrace. The intervention makes no attempt to mimic its host and is all the more successful for this refusal. The contrasting approach rests on a clear premise: heritage fabric has its own integrity, and new work should be legible as new work.



For building designers working under heritage overlays – increasingly common in inner-Sydney councils including Canada Bay, the local authority for Concord – this approach has both design and planning implications. Most heritage overlays permit contemporary additions provided they are set back from the primary facade, readily reversible, and do not obscure significant heritage fabric. The black steel gable at Salt Street satisfies all three conditions: it is set behind the heritage roof line, structurally independent of the original masonry, and makes no physical alteration to the brick fabric.

The embodied carbon argument for adaptive reuse has gained significant traction in recent years. An existing Federation bungalow in Concord holds a substantial quantity of embodied energy in its century-old brick, old-growth hardwood framing, and lime mortar. Demolishing and replacing this fabric releases that stored carbon at a point in the construction lifecycle when carbon accounting is increasingly rigorous.



The most useful question in a heritage alteration is not 'how do we comply with the overlay?' but 'what kind of addition gives this building the most compelling future?' The answer found at Salt Street – a glass gable transforming the rear while leaving the street face intact – demonstrates that the heritage overlay and genuine architectural ambition are not opposites. At their best, they are collaborators.

Adaptive reuse is, in this sense, the most sustainable design strategy available.

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The Mediterranean Gesture

It is not difficult to understand why building designers in subtropical climates keep returning to Mediterranean architecture. Whitewashed villages, courtyard houses and cubic forms all emerged from conditions that closely resemble coastal Queensland: intense sun, high summer temperatures, and the enduring challenge of turning those constraints into beauty.



A recent project in Tallebudgera – a semi-rural enclave of the Gold Coast hinterland in southeast Queensland – takes this inspiration to a disciplined extreme. The renovation uses white render on all surfaces, a concealed flat roof behind rendered parapets, black anodised aluminium arched frames at all windows and doors, travertine-look porcelain paving, and architectural urns with agave planting. The arched window to the street facade is the project's defining element – approximately two metres wide, arched to the full parapet height, and subdivided by a black steel grid. It is the kind of architectural statement that defines an address for decades.

White render in subtropical Queensland requires specification that goes beyond temperate-climate defaults. NCC Climate Zone 2 subjects rendered surfaces to high UV intensity, monsoonal rainfall, elevated humidity, and a biological load – algae, lichen, mould – that temperate specifications do not anticipate. The key requirements are: a breathable substrate to prevent moisture entrapment; a mould-resistant topcoat (Dulux AcraTex and Parex both offer subtropical-grade systems); a light reflective value above 80 per cent to meet NCC Zone 2 thermal compliance; and control joint spacing at maximum 4.5 metres to manage thermal movement.



The thermal performance logic of the Mediterranean approach maps directly onto subtropical Queensland. White render reflects solar radiation that would otherwise heat the wall. Deep-set windows – the arched recesses here are set 200 to 300mm behind the wall face – create their own shade from direct radiation.

The concealed flat roof behind high parapets removes the ceiling plane as a solar gain surface. These are climate-responsive strategies refined over centuries in similar conditions.

The black aluminium arched frames serve a precise compositional function in a monochromatic white scheme: they provide definition, depth, and graphic interest that prevent the facade from reading as a blank white surface. The arch form – inherently structural in its logic even when expressed in aluminium – adds scale and monumentality appropriate to the facade's ambition.

The ancient Mediterranean builders solved, with lime and thick masonry, many of the same thermal problems that Queensland building designers now address with insulation, thermal breaks, and NatHERS modelling. The forms that result are often convergent: thick white walls, deep-set shaded openings, flat roofs behind parapets, outdoor rooms. That these also happen to be beautiful is not a coincidence – it is the signature of a climate-logical architecture finding its natural form.



The arch form – inherently structural in its logic even when expressed in aluminium – adds scale and monumentality appropriate to the facade's ambition.



The Curve as Credential

There is a persistent assumption in sustainable architecture circles that high environmental performance comes at the expense of formal ambition – that Passivhaus certification produces buildings that are thermally excellent but architecturally cautious. A recently completed project in Elanora Heights, on Sydney's Northern Beaches, challenges this assumption without reservation.

Designed by Talina Edwards of Envirotecture, Curvaceous is a new residential building of continuous oval plan. The upper storey wraps in an unbroken ellipse, its curved white fascia following the oval perimeter without a single straight line. A cylindrical element of vertical timber battens reads as a tower at one end of the composition; a wrap-around balcony follows the full curve of the upper level; and a curved eave projects outward in a continuous horizontal band. The building has been awarded Passivhaus certification from the Passive House Institute – a significant result for a building of non-rectilinear geometry.

Designer of this project: Talina Edwards



The challenge of certifying a non-rectangular building to Passivhaus standard is substantially greater than certifying a box. The Passivhaus Planning Package (PHPP), the required modelling tool, works from accurate surface area calculations across all envelope components. In an oval building, every exterior wall panel, balcony soffit, and curved eave represents a non-standard geometry that must be modelled in three-dimensional detail. Airtightness continuity around a curved form demands detail drawings of unusual resolution. That Envirotecture achieved PHI certification with this plan speaks to the depth of the practice's Passivhaus expertise.

Elanora Heights sits in NCC Climate Zone 5 – warm temperate, with mild winters and warm humid summers. The Northern Beaches microclimate is ocean-influenced: sea breezes moderate summer temperatures, but winter nights require meaningful heating provision. The Passivhaus standard addresses both: in summer, the well-insulated envelope retains coolness; in winter, near-perfect airtightness prevents heat loss. A heat recovery ventilation system provides fresh air without sacrificing the thermal envelope – mandatory in any certified Passivhaus building where the airtight skin prevents adventitious infiltration.

The Passivhaus standard addresses both: in summer, the well-insulated envelope retains coolness; in winter, near-perfect airtightness prevents heat loss.



The curved fascia follows the elliptical geometry using pre-formed or site-formed fibre cement or metal panels. Curved balustrade posts are mild steel shop-bent – the radius at the tightest point of an ellipse this size is typically five to eight metres, within standard shop-bending range. The vertical timber battens of the cylindrical tower are applied to a curved framing substrate in the standard way, their visual effect being warmth and texture against the dominant white form.

Curvaceous is not a building that asks permission for its formal ambition. The oval plan, the wrap-around balcony, and the cylindrical batten tower are confident choices made by a practice with a clear design language. The Passivhaus certification confirms those choices were not made at the expense of performance.

For building designers, this is the lesson: the most sustainable home on the street can also be the most formally ambitious.



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Two Faces

The dual occupancy occupies a peculiar position in Australian residential design. As a planning mechanism it is pragmatic: two dwellings, one lot, shared site costs. As an architectural opportunity it is frequently squandered — producing matching facades, mirrored plans and symmetrical garage doors that meet the brief while contributing nothing to the street.



A project in Northcote, in Melbourne's densely built inner north, refuses this formula. The two dwellings at 32 and 32A have been given such architecturally distinct identities that they barely read as a pair. Northcote Noir is clad in dark vertical timber battens with a black powder-coated steel fence and black window frames.

Casa Di Archi is white rendered, with a trio of arched windows defining the upper level. Dark and light. Noir and archi. Together on one lot.

The decision to differentiate two dwellings this completely is commercially unusual and architecturally brave. Most developers assume matched facades are easier to sell and maintain. This project suggests the opposite: genuine architectural differentiation is a competitive advantage, attracting buyers with distinct aesthetic preferences.

Northcote Noir draws on the aesthetic language of Melbourne's inner north – dark materials, laneway culture, and industrial references – referencing the charred timber yakisugi aesthetic prominent in inner-Melbourne residential design. Casa Di Archi is its formal counterpoint: white, lightened, Mediterranean in reference, with a triple-arched upper facade that reads as a contemporary Italian loggia.



In Victoria's cool temperate Climate Zone 6, a white render facade with large arched windows requires careful thermal analysis. North-facing arched glazing provides valuable winter solar gain in Melbourne's cool climate; south-facing glazing of this scale demands careful NCC Section J compliance modelling. Arched window forms increase total glass area beyond a standard rectangular opening – this has implications for the dwelling's glazing area calculation under the deemed-to-satisfy pathway. The planning framework for dual occupancy in Northcote is administered by Darebin City Council, with amenity standards for side setbacks, overlooking, and private open space governing what is achievable on a given lot.

For building designers, this project poses a productive question: why should a dual occupancy look like a matched pair when the two dwellings will be lived in and loved differently? The most enduring dual occupancies give each dwelling a coherent architectural identity – one that sustains long-term investment without requiring the other dwelling's cooperation.

The Taj Mahal quartzite stone specified for Casa Di Archi confirms that the Mediterranean narrative carries from exterior to interior – a project that treats its residents as people with individual aesthetic commitments worth honouring, and a streetscape that rewards looking at.



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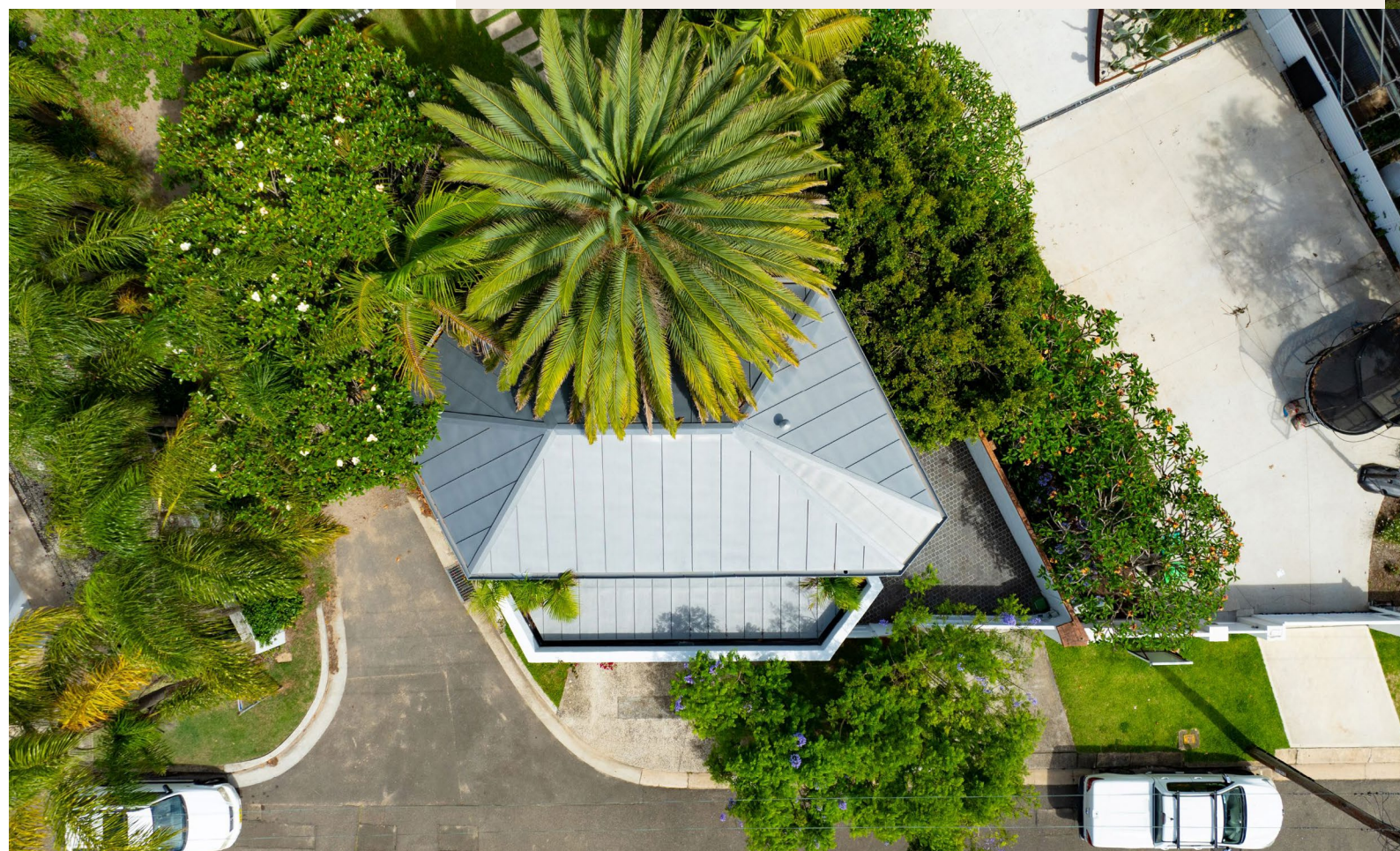


The secondary dwelling carries an unfortunate architectural stigma — associated with minimum lot calculations, maximum floor areas and the design conservatism that emerges when the brief is simply ‘not too expensive.’ Most are competent and forgettable. A very few are extraordinary.

The Garden Pavilion

A project at Palm Beach, at the northern tip of Sydney's Northern Beaches, belongs to the latter category. The Palm Beach Studio is a secondary dwelling set within an extraordinary tropical garden on a property adjacent to the Pittwater waterway. From the street, the building is largely invisible – a mature garden canopy of date palms, cycads, magnolias, and large-leafed ficus shrouds the studio in vegetation. But seen from above, in the aerial photograph that is the defining image of this project, the architectural ambition becomes immediately legible: a multi-faceted pavilion roof, a complex geometry of hip surfaces meeting at ridges and valleys, clad in light silver-grey standing-seam metal.

This level of roof geometric investment is rare for a secondary dwelling – it is the kind of form a carefully considered garden pavilion in Japan or Singapore might receive.



The walls are white rendered, with white louvred Venetian-style external shutters at the openings. The shutters have a practical function in Palm Beach's warm coastal climate: they shade glazing, control glare from the waterway, and allow ventilation independent of rainfall. They also give the building a distinctly tropical character that resonates with the garden setting – the white-shuttered studio nestled in green is a visual archetype of the garden retreat.

Palm Beach sits in NCC Climate Zone 5 – warm temperate, coastal humid. Summer temperatures are moderated by ocean breezes from both the Tasman Sea and Pittwater. The building's BASIX certificate confirms NSW sustainability compliance. In this climate, passive design strategies – cross-ventilation, shading, garden microclimate – are more effective than mechanical conditioning; the louvred shutters and mature tree canopy together do the heavy lifting.

For building designers working on secondary dwellings in NSW, the Housing SEPP 2021 has streamlined the pathway. Secondary dwellings up to 60 square metres – or 10 per cent of the principal dwelling's floor area – are permitted across all residential zones, with provisions that remove the requirement for development consent in many circumstances. The reduced consent pathway has stimulated significant construction across Sydney, much of it architecturally modest. The Palm Beach Studio makes the case that it is not an argument for reduced design ambition.

The complex pavilion roof – seen best from above – is the project's quiet argument for a higher standard. Even the smallest, most peripheral building on a site deserves a roof that someone thought about. When that thought is as carefully expressed as it is here, the result is a secondary dwelling that generates genuine long-term value: for its occupant, for the property, and for the garden it inhabits.

The Plot Thickens



Designer of this project: Richard Lutze

There is a tendency in contemporary renovation to treat the heritage building as raw material: strip the ornament, simplify the profile, and relaunch the house retaining only its footprint. Architrave and cornice are removed; fretwork discarded for blank white walls. The result is frequently a house that is neither adequately heritage nor adequately contemporary.

A project in Binna Burra, in the rural Northern Rivers hinterland of NSW, takes the opposite approach. The designer has restored a Victorian-era timber farmhouse with a level of ornamental commitment that most renovation projects would not consider. The ornate timber fretwork to the veranda spandrels, the decorative window hood to the bay window, the lattice shutters and turned veranda posts: all have been retained, restored, and where necessary replicated. The result is a farmhouse that reads as confident heritage architecture rather than a survival – a building that owns its ornamental language rather than apologising for it.





The single contemporary material gesture in the project is a set of corten weathered steel steps at the garden entry. The warm rusted orange of the corten against the white building and natural gravel surround is a subtle signal that considered design decisions are at work – that the restoration was an active, knowing engagement with the building's past, not passive replication.

It is precisely the right quantity of contemporary intrusion: legible, respectful, and unhurried.

Building designers undertaking heritage restoration in rural NSW must navigate a layered regulatory context. For buildings listed on the NSW State Heritage Register, the Heritage Act 1977 applies directly. For buildings of local significance listed in Council Heritage Schedules, a Statement of Heritage Impact is typically required for development consent. In the Northern Rivers region, the combination of heritage obligations and rural fire service requirements – BAL ratings may apply to exposed rural sites – adds further complexity to material specification.

The ornamental timber fretwork is the project's most demanding specification challenge. Victorian fretwork profiles are no longer available as stock products; restoration requires either a specialist joiner working from original moulding profiles, or CNC-routed replication from a suitable species. Western red cedar and radiata pine are common reproduction materials; both take paint well and are dimensionally stable externally. The corrugated metal roof is specified to match the colonial 23mm corrugation pitch, in a light grey consistent with heritage intent.

The aerial photograph reveals the full ambition of the intervention: an above-ground pool with timber deck, fire pit, native garden and separate outbuilding, all organised around the restored farmhouse.

The most interesting question in a heritage restoration is not how much of the original can be kept, but how to make the original's future as compelling as its past.





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