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# MONUMENT<sup>38</sup>

ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

**WAREHOUSE LIVING**  
SAM MARSHALL'S CONVERSION

**CLARE DESIGN**  
A RESPONSIVE ARCHITECTURE

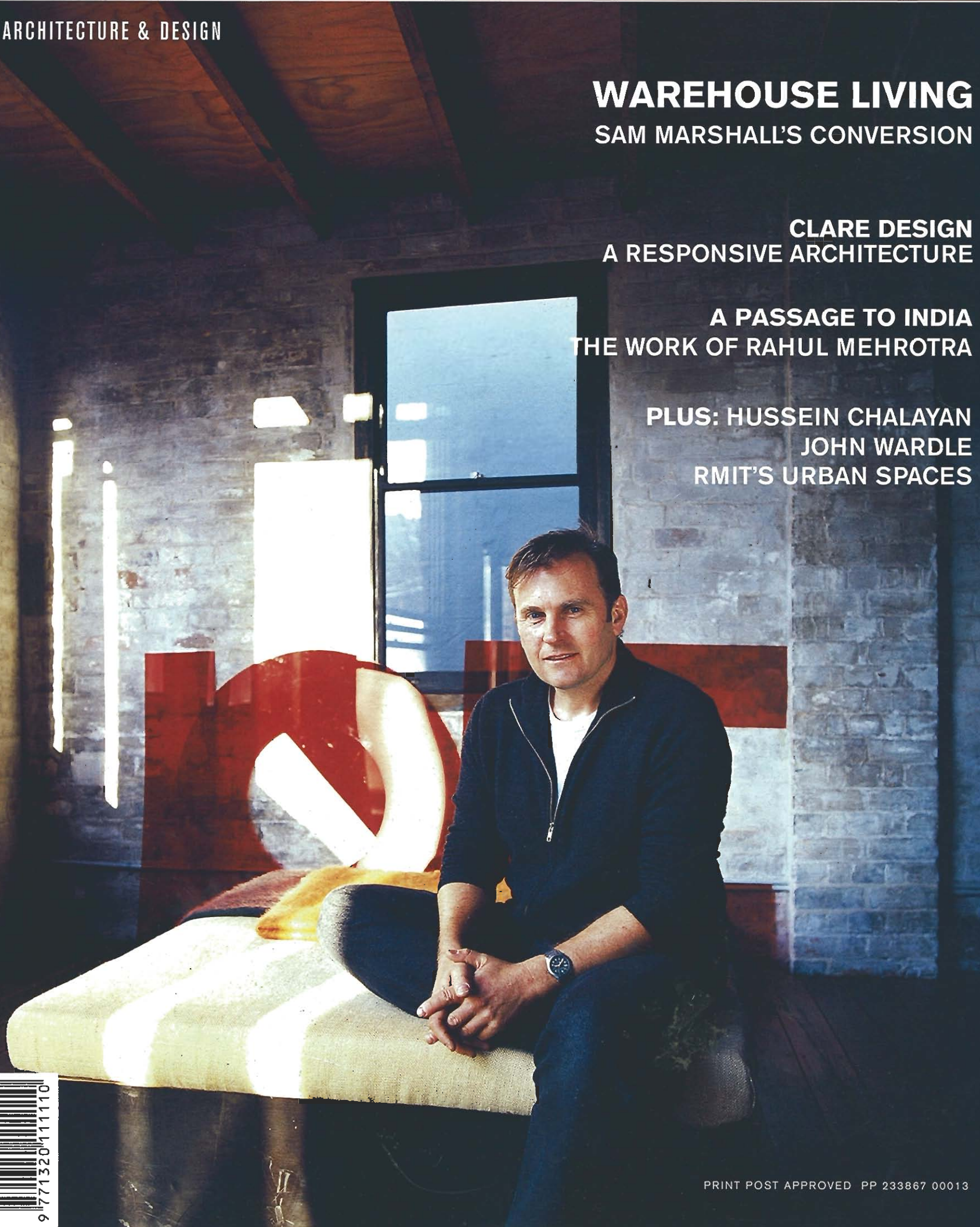
**A PASSAGE TO INDIA**  
THE WORK OF RAHUL MEHROTRA

**PLUS: HUSSEIN CHALAYAN**  
**JOHN WARDLE**  
**RMIT'S URBAN SPACES**

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2000 AUD\$16.45[INC GST] US\$12.95 CAN\$16.95 SNG\$15.90[INC GST] RM\$29.90

ISSN 1320-1115  
9 771320 111110

PRINT POST APPROVED PP 233867 00013



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COVER IMAGE: SAM MARSHALL'S WAREHOUSE  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRETT BOARDMAN  
CONTENTS IMAGE: DETAIL OF NERVEGNA REED HOUSE  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN GOLLINGS

MONUMENT



## BETWEEN MYTH AND REALITY

SAM MARSHALL: RESIDENCE AND STUDIO

Every house tells a story and some houses are stories in themselves. Ten years in the making, Sam Marshall's award-winning, inner-Sydney warehouse conversion might seem like a never ending story. GERARD REINMUTH looks at the story and why Marshall might be happy for it to remain unfinished.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRETT BOARDMAN



THE RECYCLED AND SIMPLE LIVING SPACE

**THIS HUMBLE**, almost invisible warehouse conversion has been thrust into the limelight recently as winner of the 2000 RAIA Wilkinson Award for the best housing project in NSW. This award places the project in esteemed company, including recent winners such as Seidler's Horizon Tower and Murcutt's Mount Wilson house. Subsequently, the award has been a surprise to some, with this deliberately blunt refurbishment so stripped back that in some parts it barely exists – posing a serious conceptual challenge to a Sydney design scene currently obsessed by refrigerator Minimalism. The emphasis here is far from these formalist concerns, based instead upon the matrix of stories and circumstances surrounding its realisation. Standing among the loose-fit elements incorporated into the warehouse you wonder if these stories are not the only 'glue' that holds this frail project together. Although the project results from Marshall's ideological position and a deliberate approach to the site, he too explains the work as a catalogue of the best days on site and the most unique detail solutions.

The process started in 1989 when Marshall found the property – two >>



THE SHARED COURTYARD



1-4 EXISTING AND MID-CONSTRUCTION VIEWS

>> old coach-building warehouses facing each other across an internal courtyard. Unable to purchase the large site on his own, Marshall combined forces with Virginia Kerridge and Phillip Wallace to form a syndicate. Having secured the property, Marshall was left in no position to undertake even the minimum level of work required to make his warehouse habitable. Instead, an artist used his space as a studio, while across the courtyard, Kerridge completed a highly stylised conversion that went on to win awards and establish her reputation.

Marshall commenced his own project much later, with the final result achieved after 10 years of work. His office had also continued to expand, developing a reputation for sophisticated, well-resolved fit-outs and refurbishments that reveal his lineage with Marsh Freedman during the '80s. This body of work provided a sound launching pad for the warehouse. However, the result is something of a departure for Marshall, using this opportunity to amplify and distil ideas suppressed among the circumstances and constraints inherent in previous projects.

The differences between Marshall's previous work and this project can be explained through the process from which it was realised. Rejecting normal design and procurement methods, Marshall acted as property owner, client, architect and builder. It is important to note – and Marshall would be the first to acknowledge – that he did not work completely alone, but was supported by his father (who was always present on site during construction) and Drew Heath, a graduate working in his office at the time. A number of additional collaborators also assisted during construction.

In any project, the space between the mythology and reality is rarely clear, and the role for the critic is to identify where this space between the two occurs – here it is in the drawing set. While the refurbishment features a directness to be expected from 'making do' on site – and in the spirit of a process-based approach – we find instead that each of the details were lovingly resolved well before construction commenced. All set-outs, junctions and finishes were documented, down to the bluntly manufactured steel balustrades that are almost ironically – considering their industrial nature – drawn in exacting detail. Thus, the final 'look' of the conversion is actually a carefully staged scene, determined well in

advance. The link with Marsh Freedman re-emerges. This surprisingly unconventional method differs markedly from the ultimate 'process-based' architect Carlo Scarpa, whose sophisticated details and insertions into existing buildings were often conceived on site. Scarpa achieved a formal sophistication, resolution and finesse in his work that tells of the synergy between his creative genius and workmen of extraordinary ability. Marshall desired crude finishes to complement the materiality of the warehouse, leading to the decision to enlist unskilled labour. Details were then resolved through an understanding of solutions that could survive the worst errors on site.

The planning is similarly direct and uncomplicated, with spaces arranged simply within the brick shell to take maximum advantage of the existing volume. Only a single mezzanine has been inserted (at the upper level) to form a sleeping platform, bathroom/laundry and external roof deck. The living space sits below this mezzanine and opens out over the courtyard between the two buildings. The ground level provides a home for his office. All insertions float as self-contained objects within the shell, plugged into services that distribute from the chimney, re-used as a riser. Marshall states that he felt his role was to "get the building into a liveable state", with the insertions placed so as not to "snooker the next occupants" in how they might choose to inhabit the shell. Marshall looks forward to the possibility that another architect might add to what he has done, taking a lead from his first moves.

With few overtly formalist gestures, one is left to look closer for the essence of the work. The first clues as to the process are evident from the street where a matrix of steel plate 'crosses' tie the front wall to the structure and pattern the façade. The traditional form of this detail confuses its chronology in the context of the other 'new' elements, but makes clear Marshall's claim that the existing building 'offered all the prompts' for the conversion. The accretion of 'no parking' signs and a 200mm-deep hole that has been retained over the front door deliberately retains the anonymity of the building. The entry space provides one of the few single 'designer' moments – an in-situ concrete stair featuring a free-form opening that lets light through to wash the interior. It is here too that >>



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GALVANISED SHEETING WALLS OF THE BATHROOM



THE ROOFTOP TERRACE

>> one confronts the most disarming quality of the conversion – the 'quality' of the workmanship. The concrete finish features an almost hilarious array of defects that, in any of Marshall's slick projects, would be promptly rejected. In this case, he rejoices in his collaborator's first attempts at formwork, the failure of which has resulted in bulging walls and scrappy repairs to the free-form shape. The text and patterns residual from the formwork itself yields another story, of timber saved from scrap by Marshall at a factory.

A recurring question in all of this is that of the role of architect and the value to architects of 'getting their hands dirty'. Certainly, a correlation between building experience and design quality would be difficult to prove – one can barely imagine Daniel Libeskind with a shovel in his hand – but it is a mode of working that is proving ever popular in Sydney. For example, the architecturally trained Heath, inspired by this project, now operates as a designer-builder. Of course this experience is valuable, giving designers an insight into the difficulties faced on site. However, much can be said for the confidence and humility required to hand on your project to a highly skilled craftsman, allowing an additional contribution to complete the work. In this case, the debate for architect-builder survives in Marshall's requirements for a deliberately rough treatment, with a perfect synergy existing between the roughness of the new work and the textures and complexities of the existing warehouse.

This rawness continues in the toilet tucked behind the stair, where a recycled stainless steel pan is surface-plumbed alongside a basin fed by industrial taps and formed by two woks. The dirt floor of the warehouse

was levelled by a heated concrete slab where Marshall's studio is now located, opening out via a surface-mounted B&D roller-door to the courtyard. Marshall maintains that off-the-shelf paving would have been 'too finished', favouring in-situ concrete blocks which in turn inspired a compositional exercise including a pond and seating place. This roughness continues in the studio with surface-mounted fluorescent lighting and an array of subtle timber repairs. More obvious is the pattern of the creosoted timber ends that protect them from possible termites and damp.

As one moves up through the space the quality of the detail refines – but only in minor degrees. The main living level is a large space, with all joinery pulled in from the walls to preserve the visual integrity of the shell and, again, to protect against possible damp. An array of furniture, directly assembled from form-ply, houses the whitegoods and forms a kitchen bench, shelving, two storage/sofa units and a lamp. From this space one looks up to the bedroom mezzanine – placed, according to Marshall, in the most 'defensible' location in the warehouse, protected from the stair landing by the bathroom and laundry. The bathroom is an extraordinary little capsule, formed from pressed galvanised sheeting, siliconed together in its raw state and without framing, all for \$25 per square metre. This bathroom is Marshall's favourite achievement in the warehouse, representing a uniqueness and originality borne from the desire for economy that underpins the work.

This description of the warehouse is necessarily brief – as to describe it fully is to highlight each of the countless detail moments, each >>>





THE FREE-FORM SLIDING DOOR FRAMES THE IN-SITU CONCRETE STAIRS

>> responding to a particular location, circumstance and economy. This is unfortunate, as the level of thought and accompanying story surrounding each is impressive, and has also proved difficult to convey through photographs. As Marshall keeps saying, "You must come here and look for yourself to truly experience the work." Of particular importance to the detailing strategy is the cost – and in each case Marshall describes how he worked towards the cheapest way to do things. The well-publicised project budget of only \$60,000 has caused its own controversy, as a standard construction process would have proved far more expensive, making this figure difficult to compare. Nevertheless, Marshall maintains that the unique design-build process is responsible for this budget and therefore validates both. I have to agree, although it is rare that someone can spare a few years, enlist an enthusiastic team concocted from a mix of family, design graduates and freelance contractors, and embark on a design-build project of this nature. The recent award is a triumph for Marshall and his team, and proves that, ultimately, design quality is not based in expensive finishes, but in ideas.

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WOK-FORMED SINK



ENTRY WITH PLASTIC PANNELLING