MONUMENT ^71

ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

ALADDIN'S CAVE
REDISCOVERING SUBURBIA
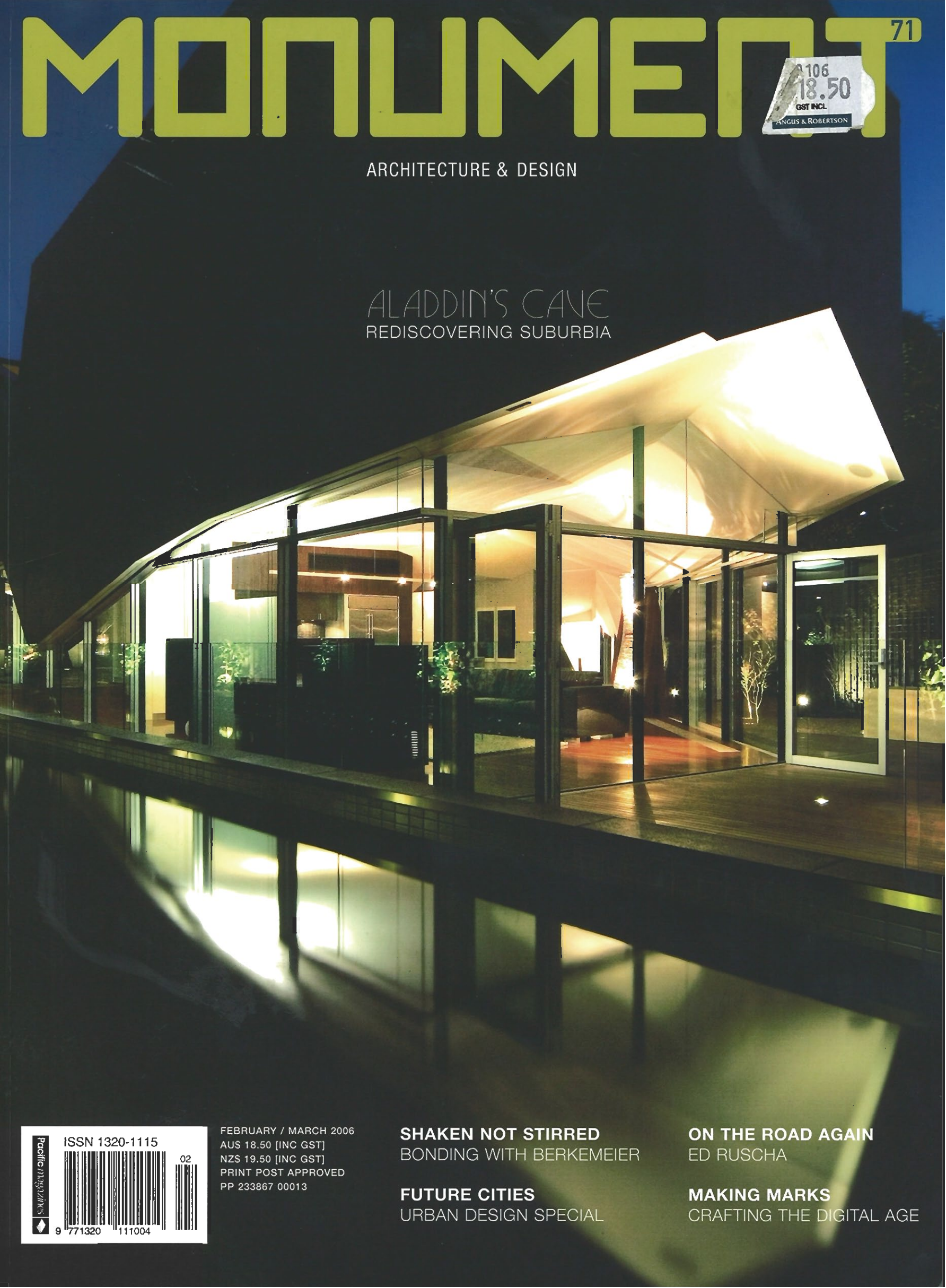
SHAKEN NOT STIRRED
BONDING WITH BERKEMEIER

FUTURE CITIES
URBAN DESIGN SPECIAL

ON THE ROAD AGAIN
ED RUSCHA

MAKING MARKS
CRAFTING THE DIGITAL AGE

LAND VALUES

The Kia Ora Homestead in rural New South Wales by Paul Berkemeier
references the seductive charm of John Lautner's work while exploring
an alternative landscape tradition for Sydney.

Review **Gerard Reinmuth** Photography **Brett Boardman**

01 The house holds a commanding position over the property
02 View over Lautner-esque pool to living space
03 The masterbedroom enjoys captured views
04 The living space is dominated by the local-stone fireplace

LIKE THE WORK of iconic American architect John Lautner, this recently completed house by Paul Berkemeier would not look out of place in a '70s Bond film. As I write, books on Lautner are being placed in the foreground of a series of Boardman photos. We joke at the impending arrival of menacing Bond babes Bambi, Thumper and Pussy Galore. I lose a drunken wrestle with the automatic pool cleaner. Cigars, red wine and long white bathrobes are the uniform of choice.

Given the nature of the brief (a pavilion for guests of a well-known horse stud) for an Australian-educated businessman who resides overseas, Lautner's work offers a far more appropriate avenue of enquiry than the limited environmental rationalism peddled by many of Berkemeier's contemporaries as the only appropriate response to Australian landscape. This house addresses landscape, place, and history, but in a sophisticated and layered way – a complex narrative that encompasses both the procurement process and future occupation of the building.

There are two key ideas in discussing this proposition. First is the reality of the project's conception and use that locates it in a tradition dating back to at least the 16th century in Italy (Villa Capra) and the 18th century in Britain (Chiswick House). This building may be many things – a pavilion, a hotel – but is certainly

not a house in the traditional sense. Second, Berkemeier's response to the project's procurement calls into play the idea of the "cosmopolitan" in philosophy and the potential this field of understanding offers design practice in Australia.

The form of the building emerged from a collaborative search between Berkemeier and his client for a building that could precisely orchestrate a series of vistas of the stud property while mitigating the impact of the building's commanding position in the landscape via formal and material strategies.

As Berkemeier explains: "The client and I had quite fundamental debates about the nature of the homestead in landscape, the nature of the Australian bush and the relationship of a building to its place. [So this debate resulted in] more than simply a 'Sydney landscape school' idea of understanding the site, but [strove to understand] the position in a much more abstract notion of landscape, and the meaning of the house. You were challenged to test every idea and debate. That made it a very intense process, but I think gave a real substance to the project."

The house operates within western traditions, offering a panoptic view of the landscape below from a disengaged survey point. Yet these strategies have enabled a beautiful three-part diagram. A stone base (built up from material excavated on site) forms a podium upon which a cranked roof plate covers the habitable spaces. The roof is broken into two-parts – a circulation band wrapping around the rear onto which the folded galvanised roof plate is grafted. This cranked roof rolls around the crest of the hill, folding and warping in response to Berkemeier's reading of the landscape form and his reconciliation of this reading with programmatic, climatic and visibility issues. The third, and least successful component of the diagram is the system of walls and glazing that form the enclosure, to which I will return later.

The house performs its key role very well. Arrival in the evening is dramatic, with fine lighting and a measured entry sequence giving way to a large living room that opens to the unseen landscape below. At night the house has an uncanny quality – mapping in its plan and form a landscape that cannot be seen, offering expansive views into complete darkness. Dawn brings the surprise of long distance vistas and a relief that the logic underpinning the form is now contextualised.

Given the success of this general arrangement, some aspects of the design and detailing are disappointing. However, to contextualise these, one has to refer to Berkemeier's approach to the project and the strategies for negotiation he >>

>> adopted. As he explains: "Complex is the best word for the process. The project had be resilient enough to survive the often conflicting inputs from varied players: a client with a passionate interest in architecture but also the detail; his fellow board members of the stud, one of whom is a major developer and architectural patron in his own right; the owners representative (another Architect); a strong-willed landscape architect; and the relationship with the interior designer. It was a process in which every idea had to survive debate and tough scrutiny, even as it was under construction."

Some of these negotiations have been to the detriment of the whole. Substantial areas of stone were cut by the client during construction (leaving larger areas of plasterboard and render with their cardboard quality) while the anodised aluminium door systems (finished neither with the calculating precision of Murcutt nor organic power of Lautner's completely mad glazing arrangements) emerged from a negotiation regarding maintenance and risk. A large timber handrail atop the glazed balustrade compromises the view and asserts an uncomfortably strong datum line in a composition built around the suppleness of the roof plane.

When viewed through the lens of its conception – a pavilion for entertaining – these criticisms are valid. The development of detail that reinforce the project's conceptual power – and unconstrained by the realities of domestic occupation – seems to have been a missed opportunity. However, an understanding of Berkemeier's character and his desire for negotiation are needed to see the other side of this argument – the sophisticated conceptual ground this project explores when compared to much of Sydney's landscape and architecture debate.

This conceptual ground also relates to the idea of the "cosmopolitan". During a recent UTS conference on the relationship between cosmopolitanism in design and philosophy Andrew Benjamin suggested that the cosmopolitan "can be used to begin to locate oppositional strategies to globalisation while at the same time allowing for the development of sites of resistance". Envisaged as a conceptual means to navigate between untrammeled globalisation on the one hand and parochial nationalism on the other, the cosmopolitan explores the possibility for effective negotiation between the two.

Meetings over Kia Ora's design and briefing were often played out on the upper level of towers in Asian metropolises but within a frame provided by debates on the Australian homestead tradition and attitudes to landscape in Australia and Asia. On the ground, Berkemeier continually negotiated these discussions with the often contrary inputs of other players, the opportunities offered by a local materials palette and the realities of collaborating with a local Scone builder on a remote site. At the drawing board, Lautner and others provide reference. Under Berkemeier's direction, the complex arrangement of approximations, overlaps and intersections between these multiple contexts has been played out in a supple way, guided by a strategic direction but not slave to it.

The Kia Ora Homestead constructs a new ground in Sydney's limited landscape and architecture debate, setting these less complex modes of thinking against something richer, more complex and pregnant with opportunity. While expositions of detail, technique and material often substitute for serious architectural discourse in the Sydney architectural fraternity, the importance of these issues is contextualised when set against Berkemeier's achievement. For, while the environmental rationalists continue to operate within frameworks that shut down possibilities and promote exclusivity – to the point that recently one of their leaders told an Asian-born Australian that she could not possibly have the same affinity for the place that he has – Berkemeier's work at Kia Ora suggests the potential of an inclusive approach to open up multiple paths for he and others to explore.
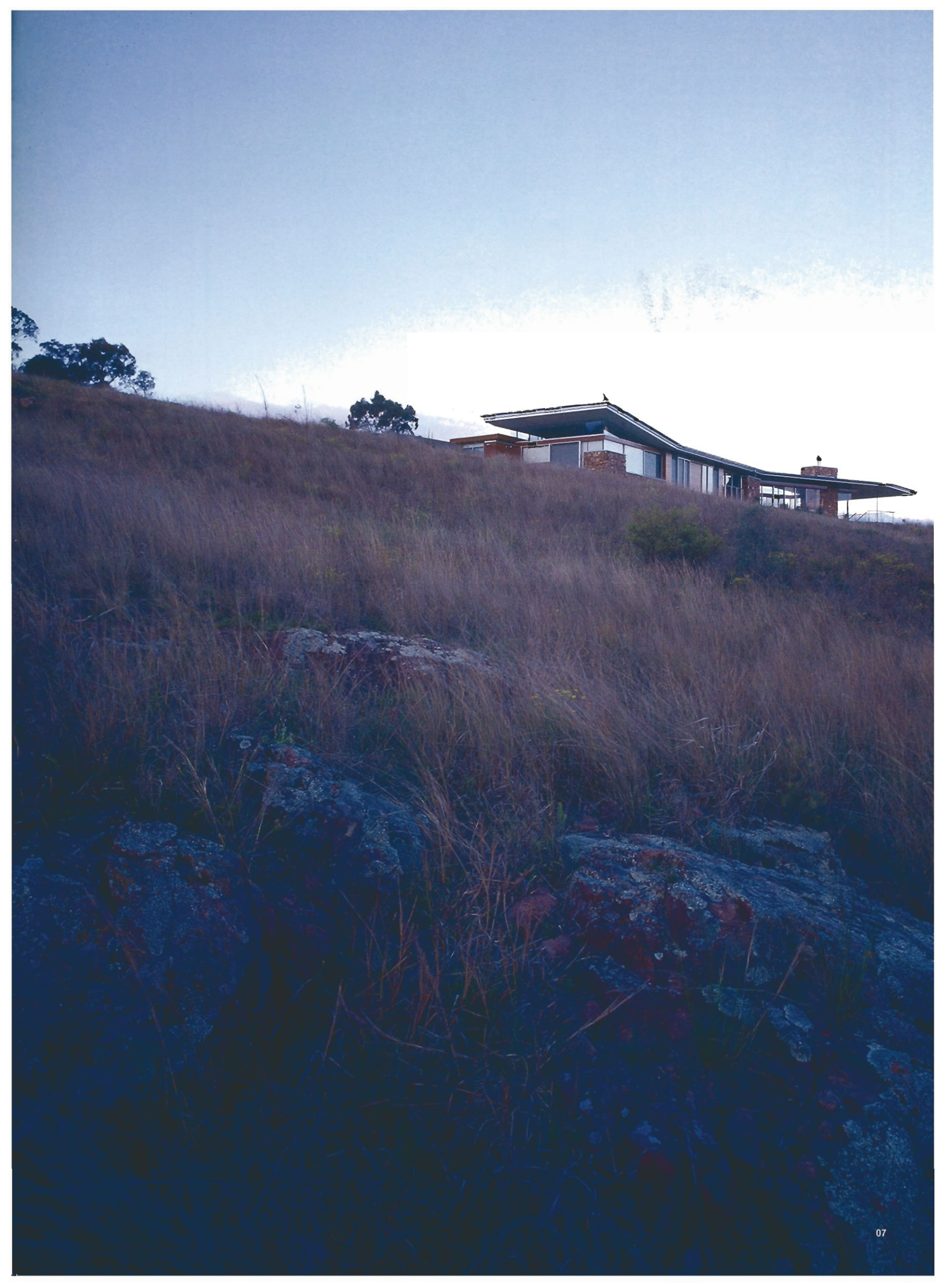
05–07 The house is carefully designed to the contours of the site
08 Timber-lined study provides an intimate space
09 The terrace enjoys extensive views over the valley
10 Pool deck provides an expansive space for entertaining
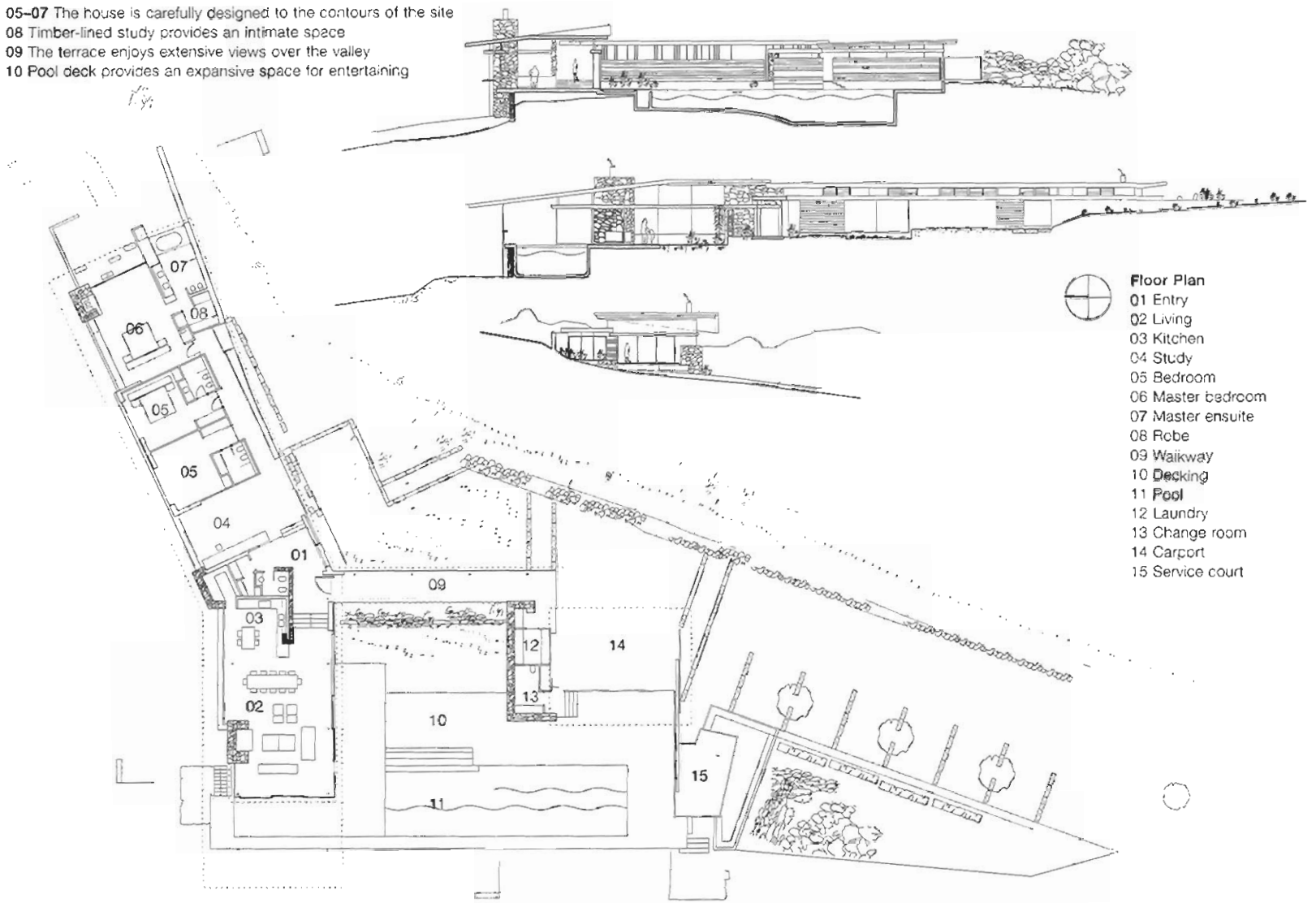
Floor Plan
01 Entry
02 Living
03 Kitchen
04 Study
05 Bedroom
06 Master bedroom
07 Master ensuite
08 Robe
09 Walkway
10 Decking
11 Pool
12 Laundry
13 Change room
14 Carport
15 Service court