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arm.rpvht
McBride Charles Ryan
Bates Smart
RBB *terroir*
Morris-Nunn & Associates
dECOi

Culture Shock

Capital of cultural clichés
or home of our national heritage?
The National Museum generates
its share of mixed metaphors.



Architectural Review Australia 075

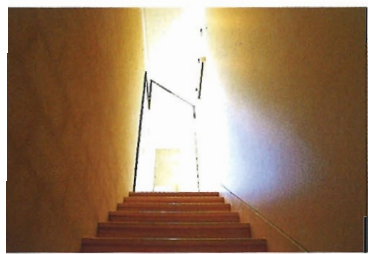


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Fractured Landscape.

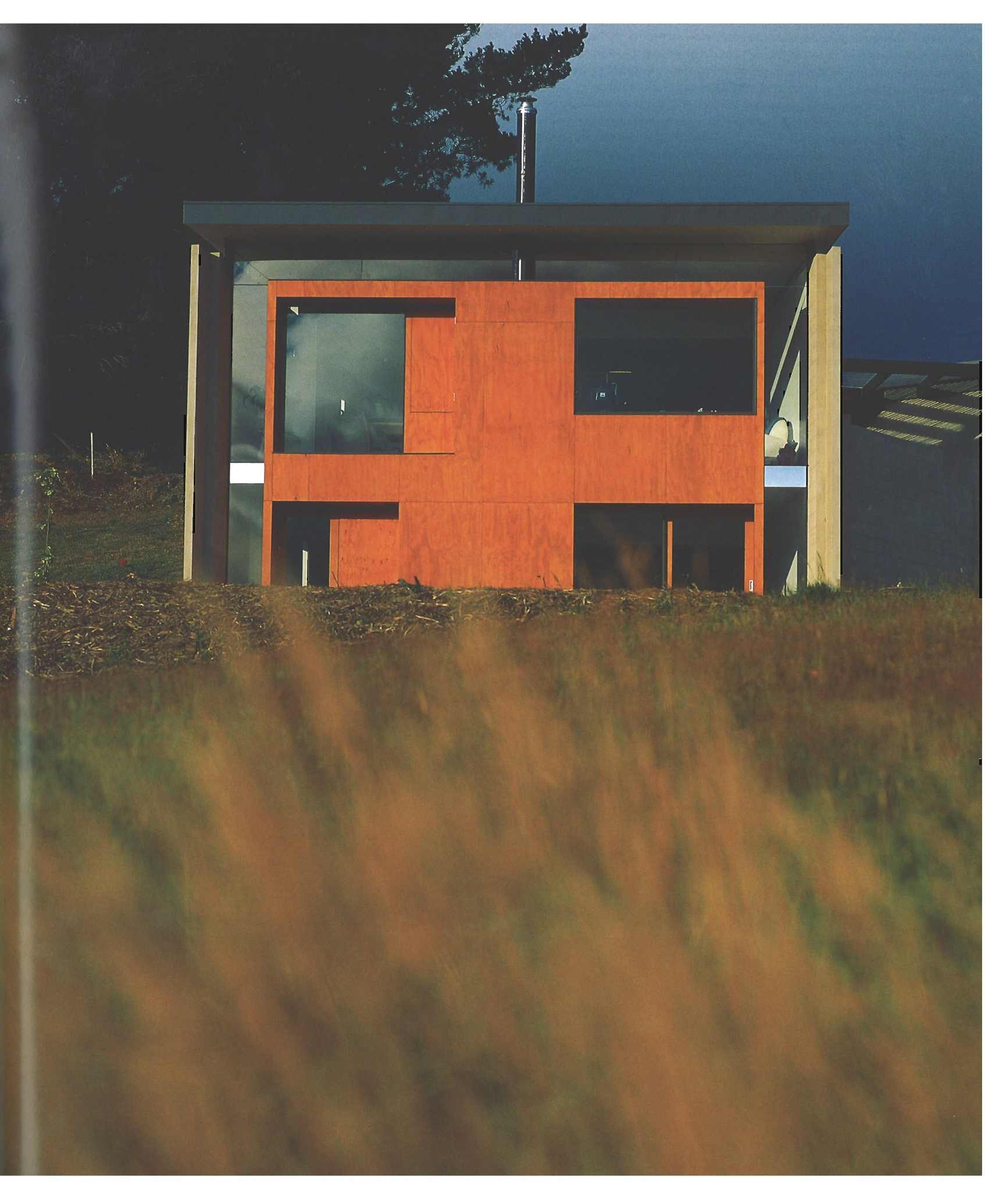
The references within this house in Tasmania's south are as broad and profound as it is remote and modest.

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Private house. Longley, TAS
Reinmuth Blythe Balmforth *terroir*.
Architects

Rory Spence. Review
Richard Eastwood. Photography

01 - 02 Entry details.
03 The stepped ceiling facilitated the inclusion of clerestory windows.
04 Roof detail and wall to deck area.



Architects' Statement ■ We have chosen the French word *terroir* to name our practice. The term is used colloquially (and more specifically in the wine industry), to describe unique qualities attributable to the ground of origin of a thing. It is a word that has no direct English translation and yet captures something that we feel is important in the way we make buildings and which has grown from our early architectural training on the island of Tasmania. This has allowed us to develop a landscape-based approach that is outside the lightweight environmental rationalism unfortunately heralded as 'typical' in Australian architecture. ■ While Tasmania is poor in financial terms it is extremely wealthy in its natural landscape and among its many hills and valleys multiple and picturesque views are almost common. The valley occupied by the Longley house is such a place. The question of how you deal with the view was therefore important to the way we approached this project. We were interested in moving beyond the traditional plate glass approach used with great effect by earlier architects (Esmond Dorney's own house on top of Mount Nelson, Hobart, for example). ■ Circumstantially our practice formed out of a series of discussions regarding the potency of the 'threshold' both to an external, physical space and also an internal psychological one. The architectural threshold is not just about a physical moderation of light, temperature and moisture, between inside and out, but is also a space of engagement and exchange – projection and introjection – between the world and us. We began thinking about Longley in these terms. ■ We are interested in the possibilities of the archaeological mark in the landscape acknowledging that this land is not an empty, unmarked wilderness but, as recently discovered, the oldest known place of human occupation and by which it has been substantially modified. The idea has taken different form in two recent projects: the Tranmere and Longley Houses. In the Longley House two parallel walls mark the site. While they aspire toward an essential, irreducible quality, they are complex in nature, reflecting the site's complex form. The varied outlook does not lend itself to a single landscape idea captured in built form, but rather a series of fragments, each of which provides a separate alignment and focus point. ■ A 'filter' was placed between these walls modulating the threshold between the house and the landscape both climatically and metaphysically. The three dimensional 'zone' is a critical response to the 'louvred skin' endemic in current Australian architecture. Through the intercession of carefully placed personal objects this architectural prosthetic allows the occupant to escape the distancing effect of objective 'looker' and to become subjectively engaged, an 'actor' and participant in (rather than simply an observer of) the landscape. The Longley threshold began to take architectural form as a result of a visit to Le Corbusier's Maison Jaoul and the discovery of the timber 'contraptions' that infill the open ends of that masonry structure. The timber 'contraption' was also a key idea for our Masonic Club Boutique Hotel and our experience on that project also informed the Longley House 'filter'. Extending over two levels, the filter also increases the façade scale, responding to the scale and power of the landscape. ■ Reinmuth Blythe Balmforth *terroir*.



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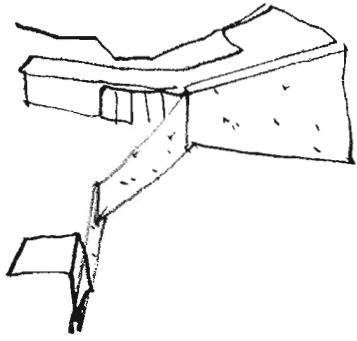
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05 The 'Jaoul' facade, which refers to the timber infills in Le Corbusier's Maison Jaoul, has become the focal point of the house – inside and out.

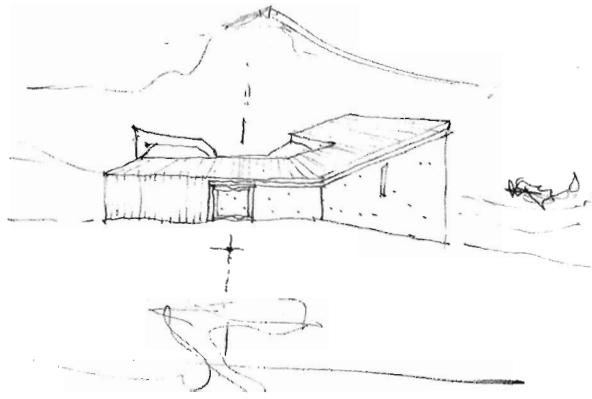
06 The north elevation with the deck located at the junction of the two main volumes.

07 Angled perspective of the north-east elevation.

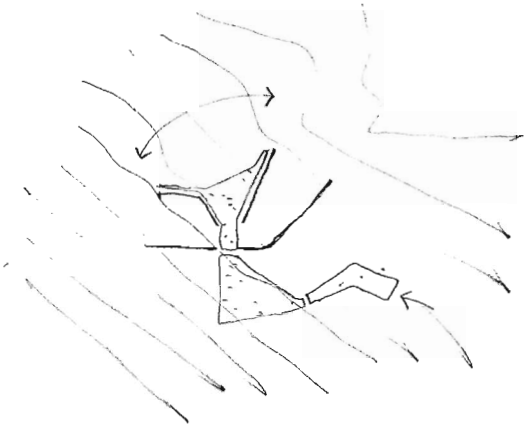
08 Evidence of the design process that evolves from faxed and emailed diagrams.



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09 Two key axes informed the plan: the axial mountain view which passes through the knot in the plan to form the entry, and the valley view to the right with which the 'filter' engages.

10 The final 'bow-tie' plan with the living spaces caught between two masonry walls.

11 Inside-outside view of the living area to the right and the deck to the left.

12 Views of the surrounding landscape are spectacularly framed by cutouts in the 'Jacul'.

■ **The recently formed** Reinmuth Blythe Balmforth (RBB) *terroir* partnership (Masonic Club of Tasmania *ar* 71) has just completed two houses in the Hobart area, at Tranmere and Longley. Despite their differences, these buildings give a clear indication of the firm's direction, which grows out of the Hobart late modernist idiom established by Heffernan Nation Rees and Viney, three of whom went on to form independent Hobart practices. Gerard Reinmuth has worked for Forward, Viney & Partners and written a university thesis on the work of HNRV, before spending time in the Sydney office of DCM and later the office of Scarpa enthusiast Richard Murphy in Edinburgh. Richard Blythe has worked for Gary Forward & Partners (pre Viney), as well as Christine Vadasz and Ian Athfield, while Scott Balmforth was in the office of Heffernan Bulton Voss. RBB has given a new twist to this Hobart idiom by introducing some surprising sources of inspiration, notably Carlo Scarpa, Alvar Aalto and late Corbusier. This eclectic mix has resulted in two highly complex but spatially rich buildings. It is refreshing to find that the three partners openly discuss the influences on their work and lessons learnt both locally and internationally, which have become part of their ongoing inter-city debate over current projects through the medium of faxed sketches.

■ The small Longley House is tucked into an intimate valley below a bend in the highway and seems to emerge, lizard-like, from the earth, dwarfed by a monumental copse of radiata pine trees. The approach takes the form of a spiralling movement, encircling the house and looking down on its complex roof, and finishes moving back up to a front door, discreetly recessed into the otherwise blind south wall. Once inside, the house opens up to the site and unwinds in a reverse spiral, culminating in the set piece of the living room window wall overlooking the valley to the north-east.

■ This experiential double spiral is the primary gesture of the building. Looked at another way, the shallow entrance hall forms a metaphorical hinge in plan, from which three wedges of space, flanked by splayed walls, open out to three different aspects of the site. On axis with the front door is a partially roofed deck above the rainwater tank, a social (and liquid) gathering point embraced by the two wings of the house, oriented north towards the back of Mount Wellington, which is immediately visible on entry; a sliding glass wall connects dining room and deck. To the west are the bedroom and bathroom, looking into the hillside and future garden. The dominant spatial event, however, is the expanding space of the living/dining area and kitchen. A lower ceiling in the hall and dining area rises to three metres in the living space and kitchen, breaking free of the walls, so that the roof reads as an independent plane suspended above them, giving a sense of increasing lightness and openness.

■ The flanking walls of the living space cut out the views to three neighbouring houses to the south-east and above the highway to the north-west, ensuring privacy. All attention is focused on the dense growth lower down the valley and the wooded hillside opposite. The outlook is modulated, however, by a deep, free-standing timber screen or framing device, incorporating window openings, ventilation panel, cupboards and stove. (Internal folding shutters are also intended for one of the windows.) This screen runs through two storeys, serving a similar function for a second living room and laundry/shower on the lower floor, where the ground falls away.

■ This humanising, double-storey screen, scaled to the wider landscape and unquestionably the face of the house, was referred to by the architects during the design phase as the 'Jaoul' (jowl?), in honour of its Corbusian inspiration, the Maisons Jaoul (1951-54), Neuilly. Le Corbusier's use of precise timber window walls inserted into a primitive brick and concrete armature has had a rich progeny,



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13 The bedroom joinery features the 'peeled back' layering and cutouts evident in earlier work.



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14 View from the kitchen across the living area – the language of detailing is carried through from outside in.

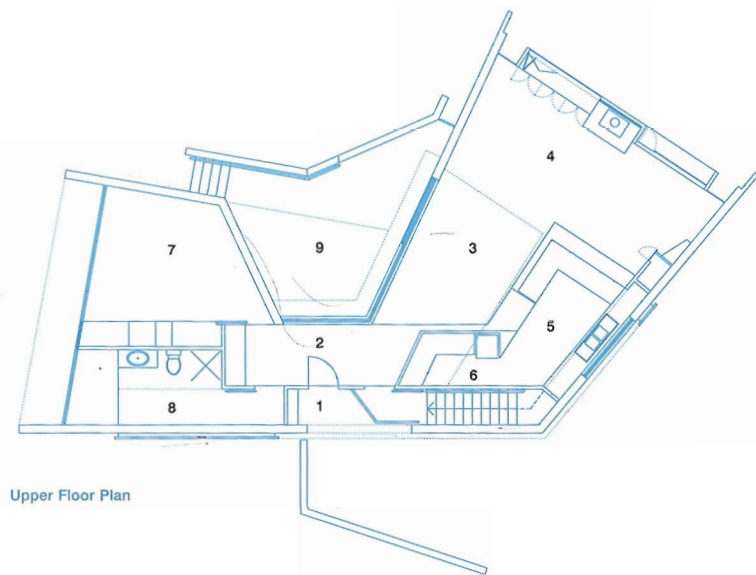
especially in the work of Louis Kahn. Indeed, the Longley screen resembles the deep timber window walls of Kahn's Esherick House (1959-61), Philadelphia, which are also set into rendered concrete block walls. Both are 600mm deep, incorporate a similar variety of fixed glazing, opening panels and internal storage, and act as a kind of architectural giant order. In both cases the glass is sometimes on the outer and sometimes on the inner face, creating a rich, ambiguous intermediate zone, an interpenetration of internal and external space. At Longley, however, the screen floats free of walls and ceiling in a glass surround, providing a protective frame, allowing the space to read as both open and enclosed. Externally, as noted by Kahn of the Esherick House, the play with depth and shadow produces a wall that is always 'alive'.

■ Partially sheltered by the hill and pine trees behind it, the house also turns its back to the strong southerly winds, at the same time providing privacy at the entrance. As in RBB's Tranmere house, there is a rich sense of layering in plan, section and use of materials. The grey roof cladding appears to partially fold down over the walls (though it is actually timber cladding of similar colour and texture, concealing downpipes), like a reptile shedding its skin, exposing the rendered blockwork beneath. At the entry, the incision through the block wall reveals its thickness and the porch is detailed to indicate a zone of space between this outer layer and the inner white-painted wall incorporating the front door. This spatial zone extends to accommodate the staircase and reappears in the living area as an internal wall which frames part of the kitchen worktop and window, analogous to the 'Jaoul' screen. This zone is indicated externally by a narrow snaking portion of raised roof and clerestory which extends back from the higher roof of the living area, like a tail, reinforcing the initial reptilian impression of the house itself. An opportunity seems to have been missed, however, to use this clerestory to induce additional summer ventilation.

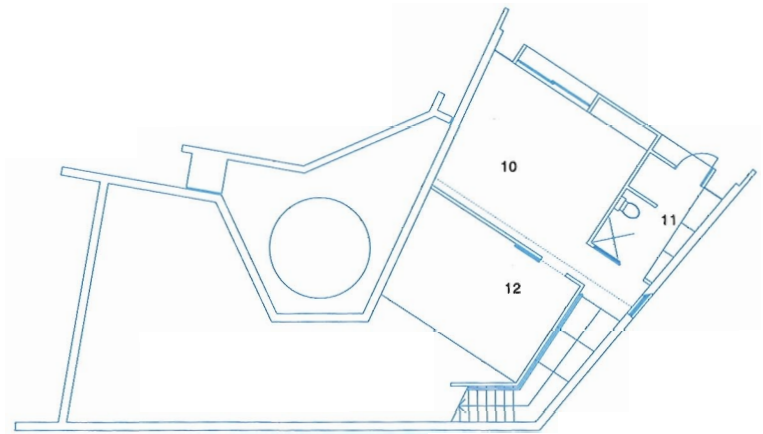
■ The layering is continued in the use of materials. The floor changes from off-white tile in the entry porch, to flecked black tile in the hall and timber floorboards in bedroom and living area, while the kitchen units metamorphose, chameleon-like, from a natural timber to a white finish when they enter the interstitial zone between inner and outer wall planes. This interest in layering and cutting through planes even extends to the detailing of cupboards in the hall and bedroom, where doors are irregularly cut away in lieu of handles, as in the firm's Masonic Club. This intricate peeling back of layers, revealing their thickness and enjoying the resulting pattern of cut away and overlapping planes seems to have its sources in Carlo Scarpa and the collage-like layering of materials in the work of Aalto.

■ RBB has sought spatial elaboration and richness rather than honed minimalism, where money is concentrated on intrinsic material qualities. The Scarpa-like intricacy is thus achieved with block veneer and MDF rather than more expensive materials, though finer finishes are used where perhaps they count most – floor surfaces and kitchen units. The warmly coloured living room screen turns out to be faced in regular external-grade plywood sheets rather than the fine timber of Kahn's window walls. The architects have developed richness and spatial intricacy with modest means. It would nevertheless be interesting to see this talented trio experimenting with reduced complexity balanced by greater textural quality. This richly modulated casket nestles confidently into the folds of its site, drawing its surroundings in from three directions, and will soon be embraced by the owners' rapidly growing garden.

Rory Spence is a Lecturer in the Architecture Faculty of the University of Tasmania.



Upper Floor Plan



Lower Floor Plan



- | | | | |
|----------|-----------|------------|------------|
| 1 Alcove | 4 Living | 7 Bedroom | 10 Rumpus |
| 2 Entry | 5 Kitchen | 8 Bathroom | 11 Laundry |
| 3 Dining | 6 Pantry | 9 Deck | 12 Store |

■ **Project summary** Longley House, Tasmania ■ **Project team** Gerard Reinmuth, Richard Blythe, Scott Balmforth, Daniel Lane ■ **Consultants** ■ **Engineer** Gandy & Roberts Consulting Engineers ■ **Quantity surveyor** Davis Langdon Australia ■ **Builder** Wilkins Constructions ■ **Size** Internal 170 sq.m, deck 25 sq.m ■ **Time to complete** 15 months ■ **Council** Kingborough Council ■ **Materials** ■ **Walls** Besser block, one coat oxide render by Scott Rowbottom ■ **Cladding** 15mm marine ply; 9mm fibre-cement sheet ■ **Roof** Colorbond Trimdek Hi-Ten, Slate Grey ■ **Guttering** Zincalume box gutters, formed mild steel plate gutter at deck ■ **Windows & doors** Ullrich/Noyes Pentagon 60 Series by Hobart Glass & Aluminium ■ **Hardware** Lockwood; Howard Silvers ■ **Interior materials** ■ **Ceiling & internal walls** Boral plasterboard ■ **Paint** Dulux, low sheen acrylic ■ **Flooring** 18mm Tas Oak tongue & groove, satin finish water-based polyurethane ■ **Decking** Jarrah ■ **Joinery** Polyurethane 2-pack and timber veneer finishes by Kingston Joinery