

# HOUSES®

THE RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE

ISSUE 40  
\$10.95

## DYNAMIC DESIGNS

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT BROWN  
+ CAROLINE CASEY



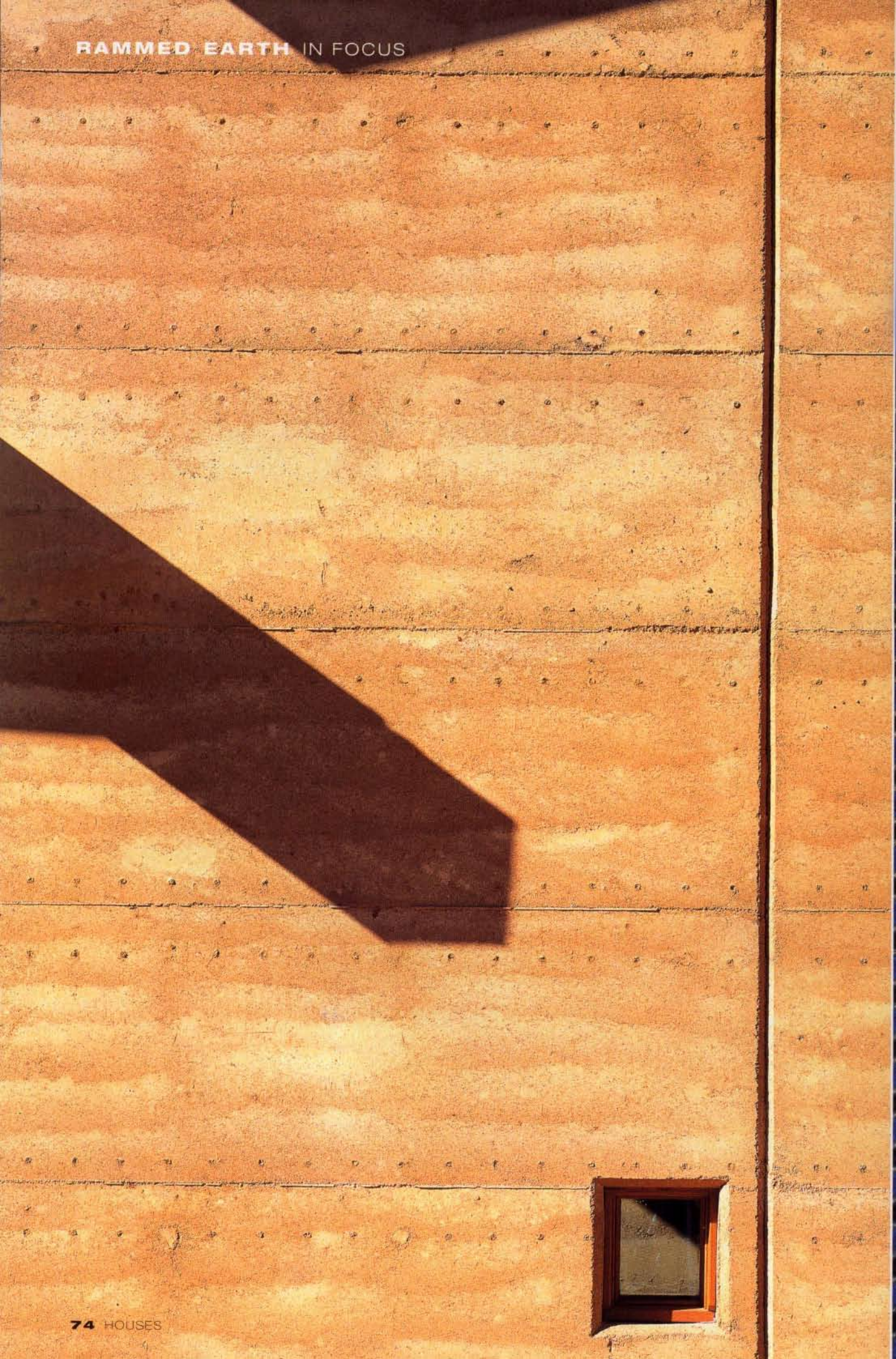
terraces **Nott**, McSteen Tan, Beattie  
warehouses **Multiplicity**, Salvadorini  
rural living **CCA**, Swaney, Welsch  
on the water **Matthews**, Jahn  
suburban pads **Room 11**, Herrenberg,  
**Rexroth Mannasmann Collective**

ISSN 1440-3382



RAMMED EARTH DWELLINGS • BRIGHT LIGHTING IDEAS







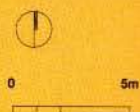
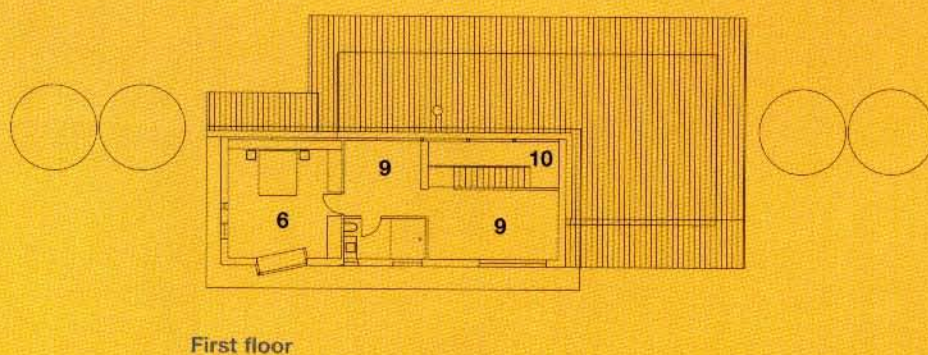
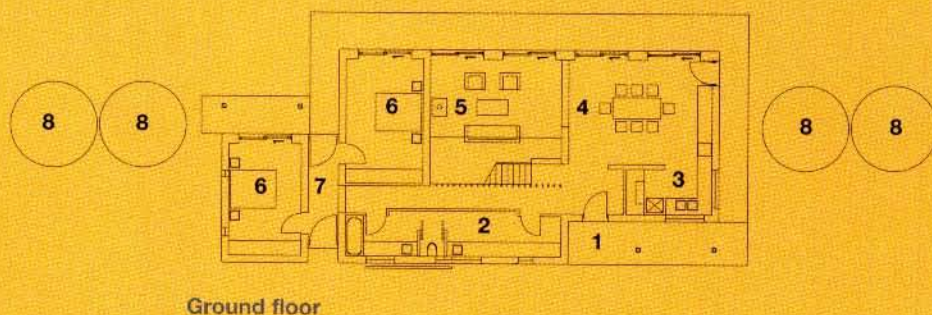
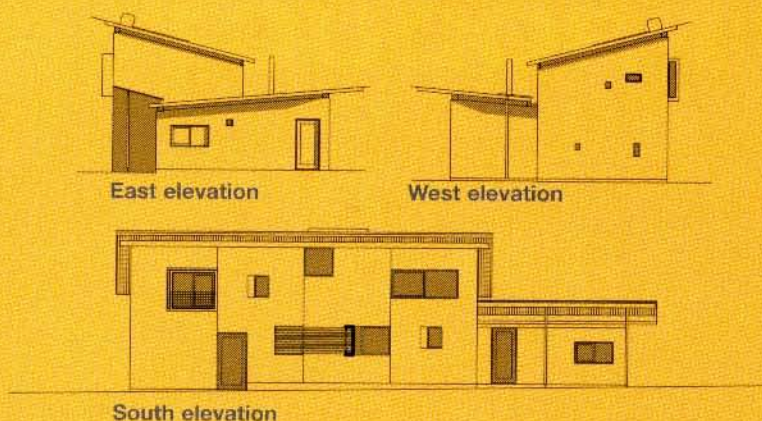
# LOCAL PRODUCT

This rammed earth house by Steffen Welsch Architects was inspired by the red soil, natural bushland and farming culture of its northern Victorian location.





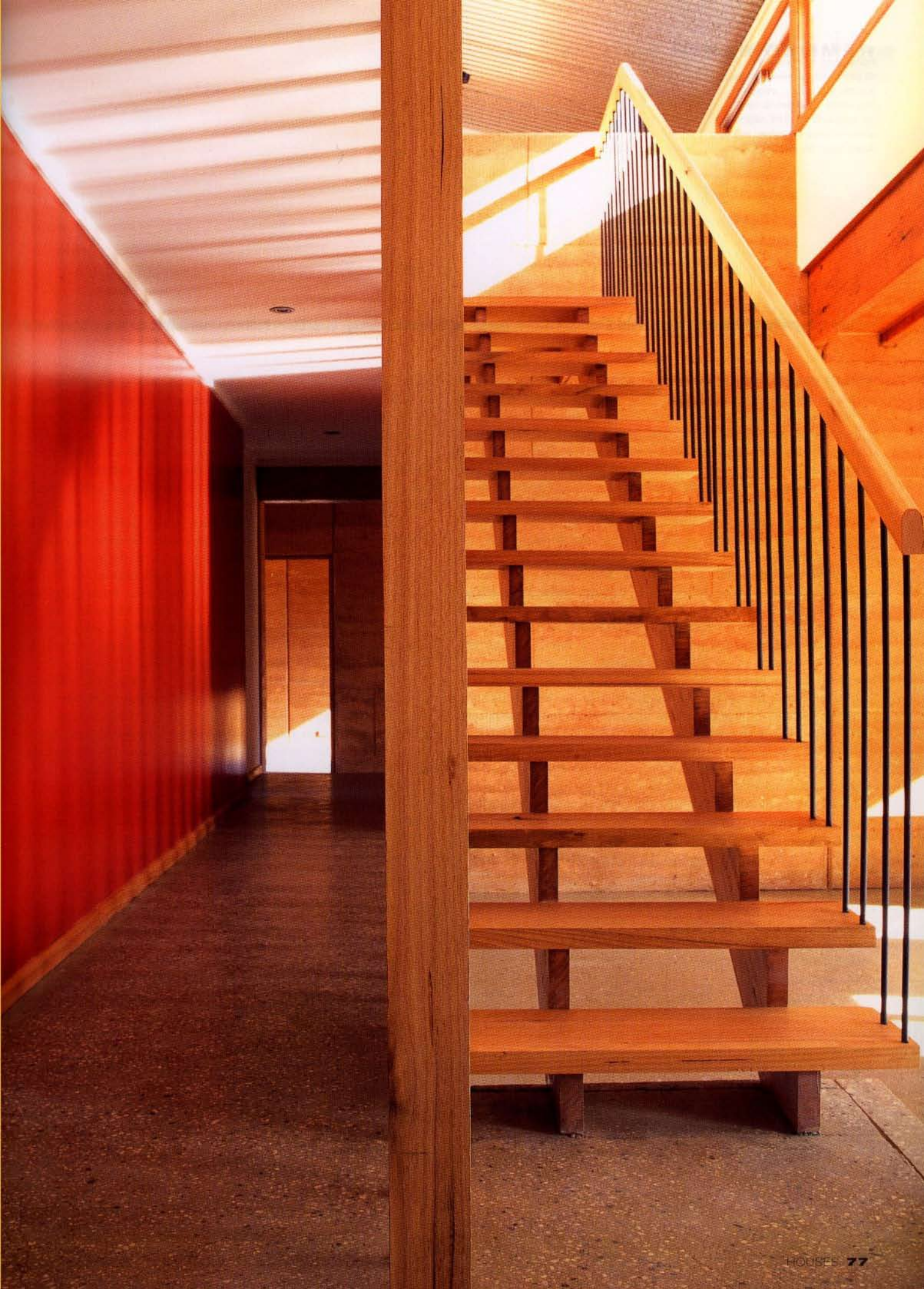
## RAMMED EARTH IN FOCUS



- 1 Entry
- 2 Laundry
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Dining
- 5 Living
- 6 Bedroom
- 7 Breezeway
- 8 Water tank
- 9 Study
- 10 Void

**PREVIOUS PAGES:** The exterior of rammed earth and corrugated iron celebrates the hardy rural character of the region. **THIS PAGE, OPPOSITE:** The polished concrete floor, with exposed aggregate, is a beautifully textured surface that works well with the rammed earth internal walls.







## “Corrugated steel forms for collecting and storing water hark back to Australia’s

**INDIGO VALLEY, NEAR ALBURY**, is anything but blue – the area is known for its glowing, reddish earth. It was this colour, along with the Chiltern Box Ironbark National Park, that attracted to the owners to their forty-hectare property a dozen or so years ago. “We always intended living here. The decision was just delayed when the children came along,” says Ann Eagle, who lives in this house with her partner Shell Morphy and their three children. “But we knew if we didn’t do something quite soon, we’d stay living in Albury,” she adds.

Originally a draughtsperson drew up the plans for a new mud brick house. However, the couple quickly realised the design wasn’t the home they envisaged – the simple open plan design wasn’t quite right. “We showed architect Steffen Welsch the initial scheme. At first, we asked him to make some adjustments. But we realised the design wasn’t going to work, even with his modifications,” says Ann, who eventually asked Steffen to come up with an entirely new design.

“Ann and Shell were still keen on mud bricks. But I thought they could be persuaded to go with the rammed earth as it has such a wonderful texture and is ideal in this setting,” says Steffen, who showed the couple several rammed earth buildings on the Charles Sturt University campus, in nearby Albury. That the earth has been sourced from a local quarry also contributes to the convincing manner in which the building appears appropriate to its context. “Shell and I didn’t have to be convinced,” adds the client. “We were drawn instantly to rammed earth. The colour is almost luminous.”

Steffen was captivated by the beautiful national park to the south of the property – and also by the mountain ranges to the north – and drew inspiration from these natural amenities to conceive a house that would appear at one with its surrounds. “I had a sense of what the house should look like as soon as I saw the site,” he recalls. “I saw the house as a platform overlooking the landscape, and I couldn’t think of a more appropriate material than rammed earth in this setting. There’s a pleasure from just touching the surface.” Steffen was also keen to use galvanised steel for the roof and the four water tanks. “There’s the obvious association with farm sheds, but it’s also the silvery colour. It will eventually weather to a dull grey, like the foliage around here.”

The house, 230 square metres in area, follows a simple rectilinear form. The front facade is relatively enclosed, and is punctuated with irregularly placed doors and windows that offer glimpses of the interior. But there are picture windows from the upstairs study and main bedroom to take in the natural bushland. In contrast, the north-facing rear facade is glazed, featuring five sets of floor-to-ceiling doors, three of which lead directly from the dining and living areas. To ensure protection from the late afternoon sun, the western elevation is almost closed down, with the exception of four pigeon-hole sized windows. To avoid creating dark corners, the architect made the staircase as skeletal as possible. The staircase is aligned with an open timber-columned

hallway, across which sunlight splashes and hits the ochre feature wall.

The internal arrangement of rooms is quite simple. The ground floor comprises the kitchen, dining and lounge at one end and the children’s bedrooms, laundry and bathroom up the other. And upstairs are the main bedroom and bathroom. At the top of the stairs is a study or second living area, offering views of the nearby national park. Views over the mountain ranges to the north are framed in the highlight windows, set below the steel skillion roof.

The kitchen and living areas are open in plan, with a change in level dividing the meals area from the living room. However, there are also discreet markings to define these areas, such as the recycled timber mullions that also act as structural supports. A rammed earth wall in the kitchen neatly hides the fridge and pantry, allowing an island bench to dominate. “The island is usually the central feature in Australian kitchens,” notes Steffen, who trained as an architect in Germany before migrating to Australia in the early 1990s. “In Europe, particularly in farmhouses, the kitchen table takes centre stage.”

The house, which is not much more than one room wide, offers good cross ventilation as well as allowing the winter sun to hit the rammed earth walls that act as a heat sink. The polished concrete floors in the main living areas also absorb solar warmth. “The only heating we have is a slow combustion wood heater, and it’s only used in the evenings,” says Ann. In summer, these spaces are protected from the sun by prefabricated insulated steel roof panels that overhang the building and form a shady column-free verandah. The rammed earth also creates a cool summer environment, almost as constant as a cave.

The site is quite remote and has no town services, so Steffen had to imbue the building with a high degree of self-sufficiency. The four corrugated steel water tanks that form such an integral part of the building’s character collect water from where it gathers in the valley of the butterfly roof – Steffen likes this roof form to holding out your hands when it rains. Grey and black waste water is treated on site in a septic unit and hot water is provided by a solar heating system.

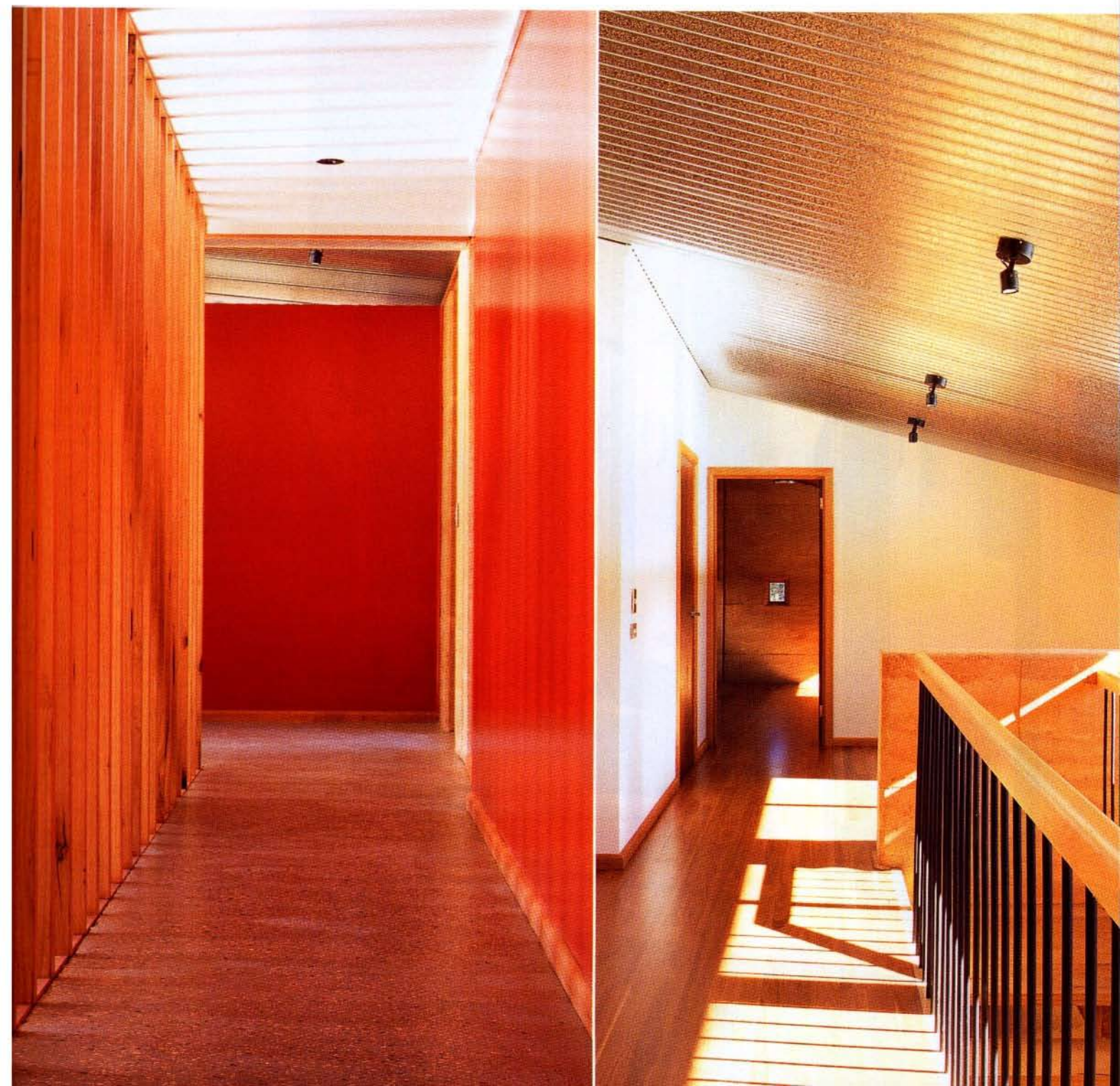
This building has a timelessness about it that suits the ancient landscape upon which it sits. The earthy warmth of its textures echoes the ochre hues of the Australian landscape and also pays homage to one of Steffen’s main inspirations, the Mexican architect Luis Barragan. “I have always admired his work, his buildings are filled with wonderfully rich hues and textures,” he says.

Barragan was driven by a desire to make buildings that celebrated their roots, while also imparting a heightened sense of spiritual beauty and harmony. Spending some time in Steffen Welsch’s rammed earth house is to appreciate that something similar is going on here. Corrugated steel forms for collecting and storing water hark back to Australia’s pioneering past, while the rammed earth walls recall the far more venerable nature of the wide brown land itself. **STEPHEN CRAFT**

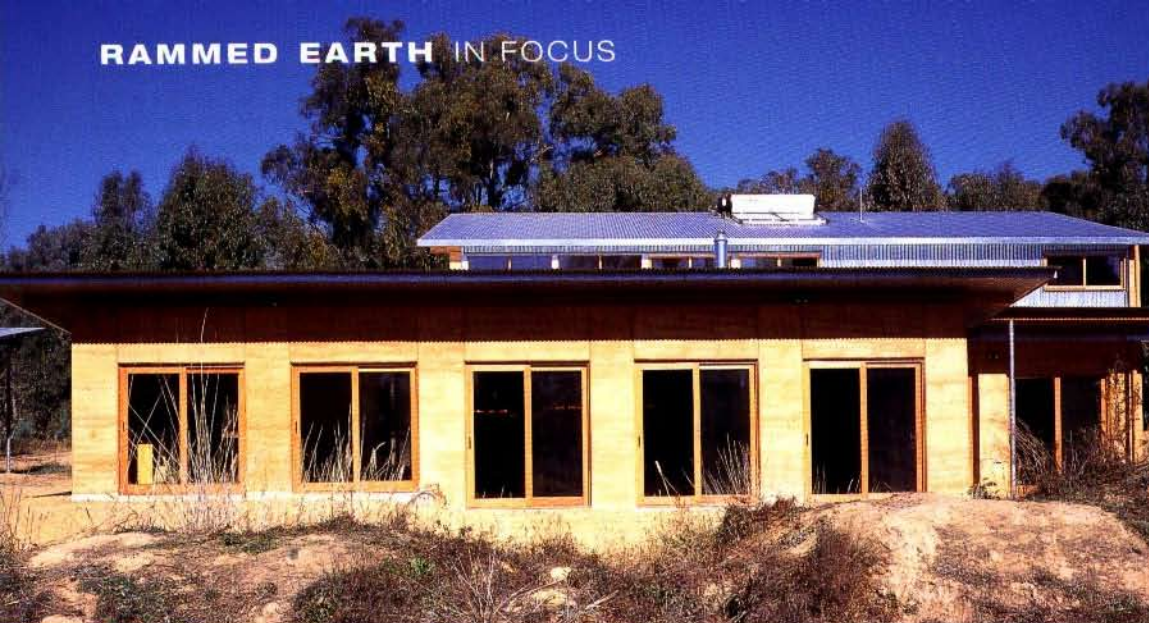


THESE PAGES, LEFT: The wall to the central circulation area has been painted red to contrast with the natural hues of rammed earth and timber. RIGHT: The stair up to the bedroom level is made from Victorian ash and steel.

pioneering past, while earth walls recall the far more venerable nature of the land itself.”







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**PRACTICE PROFILE**  
 Small practice undertaking residential, multi-residential, commercial and institutional projects. Emphasis on sustainable design.

**PROJECT TEAM**  
 Pulina Darshan Ponnampuram,  
 Damien Thackray, Steffen Welsch

**BUILDER**  
 R J Crosse

**CONSULTANTS**  
**Engineer** Belvoir Consulting  
**Interiors, lighting**  
 Steffen Welsch Architects  
**Rammed earth walls**  
 Riverina Rammed Earth

**PRODUCTS**  
**Roofing** Rilek corrugated steel panels; R3.5 polystyrene thermal insulation **External walls** 400 mm rammed earth, sealed **Internal walls** 300 mm rammed earth; plasterboard lining, Dulux paint finish **Windows and doors** Mountain ash custom frames; double glazing; Lockwood Soprano hardware **Flooring** Polished concrete with exposed aggregate; Kimberley carpet to bedrooms **Kitchen** Scala tapware from Reece; Allenz stainless steel cooker; recycled red gum and granite benchtops; joinery – Brims Wood panels with hoop pine veneer **Bathroom** Scala tapware from Reece; Caroma sanitaryware; joinery – Brims Wood panels with hoop pine veneer; Laminex benchtops; Tarkett vinyl to walls; Polysafe Vogue ultra non-slip sheet vinyl to floors; Mini Orb to walls **Heating** Nectra wood heater **Other** Central timber pillar is recycled blue gum beam from old Murray River bridge, Howlong

**TIME SCHEDULE**  
**Design, documentation**  
 10 months  
**Construction** 13 months

**SITE SIZE**  
 1.9 km<sup>2</sup>

**PROJECT COST**  
 \$300,000

**PHOTOGRAPHY**  
 Derek Swaiwell

**LEFT, ABOVE AND BELOW:**  
 North-facing windows let the low winter sunlight in to warm the concrete floor during the day, which in turn releases heat back into the house at night.