



CAREFUL HANDS

Writing an introduction to the *Houses* profile is quite straightforward. Usually, a hook or an angle emerges as we compile the images, clean up the drawings and edit the text. But in the case of Brisbane's Richard Kirk, there is no hook – his architecture eschews fantastical form-making and flamboyant gestures in favour of carefully crafted spaces and considered placemaking. The houses on the following pages are open and bright, their materials palettes are natural and honest, and their occupants are to be envied. Collectively, they are a testament to Richard's reverence for the essential elements of good architecture and to his lack of interest in showmanship and excess. And the by-product of all this hard graft?

A back catalogue of houses that are effortlessly beautiful.

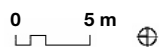
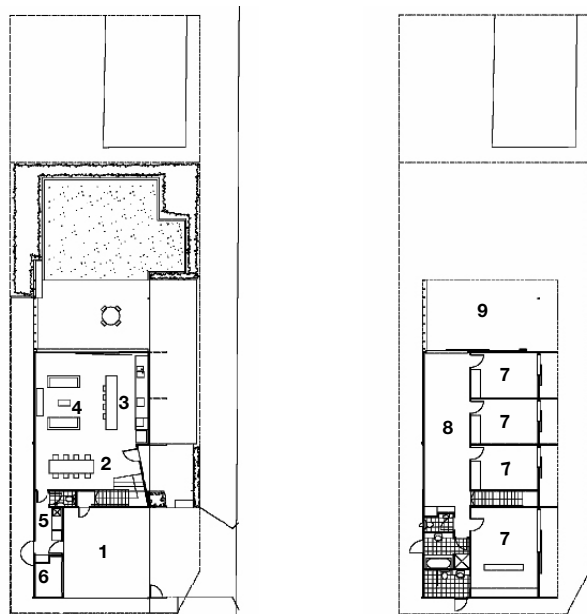
ABOVE: The Highgate Hill Residence was completed in 2007. For more images and plans, see page 114.

RICHARDS RESIDENCE, 2002

Located in the inner-Brisbane suburb of Hawthorne, this two-level family residence seeks to create a dramatic outdoor two-storey volume as its centre. This outdoor space is located to capture breezes and distant views while creating a strong link to the landscape. Contained by a two-level timber screen to the west, the space is further defined by a timber-screened ceiling and pergola roof that will eventually be landscaped by creepers. The residence's interior is simply organized, with living spaces on the ground floor and bedrooms on the upper level. The living areas are oriented to the north and the outdoor terrace, while the bedrooms direct their attention to the distant views to the east. All openings have exaggerated dimensions, providing a greater sense of transparency and openness throughout. Plywood blinkers on the upper-level eastern openings provide sun protection and privacy. The timber-framed building is clad in paint-stained eco ply, which alternates between smooth and textured, to modulate the form while retaining its volumetric qualities.

- 1 Carport
- 2 Entry
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Living
- 5 Laundry
- 6 Store
- 7 Bedroom
- 8 Playroom
- 9 Void

OPPOSITE, TOP: The heart of the Richards Residence is a two-storey outdoor volume framed by a timber screen and a vast pergola roof. **BOTTOM, LEFT:** The house is characterized by a sense of openness and transparency. **RIGHT:** Over-sized doorways and windows create an easy relationship between the indoors and outdoors.



Lower level

Upper level

Sheona Thomson: Richard Kirk Architect began as a sole practice in economically difficult times but, over the years, it has really grown. How is the practice defined today?

Richard Kirk: Ostensibly, it's still a sole practice, but in the real terms of staffing and management, RKA is a medium-sized office. We're now producing a diverse scale of work – anything from houses and small fitouts to quite large projects, like the mixed-use redevelopment of the old Defiance Flour Mill at Albion and a large general-purpose building at the University of Queensland.

Interestingly, as the practice grows and the range of work that we are realizing expands, what we find is that our knowledge and experience can be applied across scales in this diverse mix. We bring some of the discipline we need in an institutional, multiresidential or commercial

project back to the single-family-house scale. And we bring some of the interests from the domestic realm to the larger scale, in particular the interest in detail and material. Cutting Edge [a television post-production facility] exemplifies that – a commercial building that in many respects is not unlike a house in the way that we've enacted subtle hierarchies of space and patterns of engagement with the outdoors.

In many respects our approach to designing buildings is the same whether we're doing a speculative office building or a kindergarten. The same things are important to us as in the design of a house.

ST: Davina Jackson, in her recent book *Next Wave*, characterizes your work as "strongly pragmatic and humane in the programming of internal functions." What do you think she was getting at there?

RK: Well, we're not about "new ideas" per se. In the context of much contemporary architecture our work is almost traditional. I love the work of Louis Kahn and Álvaro Siza. The body of work that these architects produced demonstrates to me a careful hand in the making of architecture. Similarly, our work is careful and not at all intellectually obscure; it's not the vehicle for representing abstract ideas. We believe the work of architecture has an inherent essence. It's about space and the materials that form it, and the sequences in which you experience the building in use. For us these very fundamental aspects comprise the discipline of architecture.

This understanding, from my point of view, has developed from particular formative experiences, in particular my encounters with the work of Alvar Aalto and

Álvaro Siza. And even though the works of Siza look quite simple, they are incredibly sophisticated in the way that they are made and the way in which they are organized. Siza is an extreme case in that he uses similar finishes and materials internally and externally on every building, whether it's a church or an art gallery or a home. He's removing many things, putting them in the background to reveal what he understands as the essence of architecture. A floor is a floor, whether it's in an art gallery or a chapel. A wall is the same. For him, it's all about the volume of pure space and the way you experience that and, although that sounds minimal and austere, a real richness is activated through the way these great buildings fit in their climate and culture.

So we think there is enough in architecture to explore. We don't want to be distracted by other >

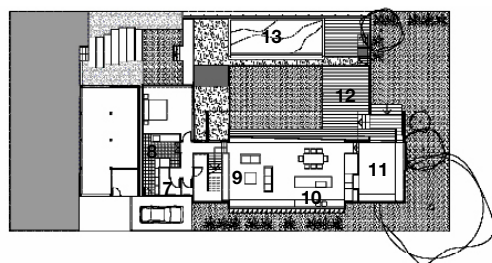


WILSTON RESIDENCE, 2006

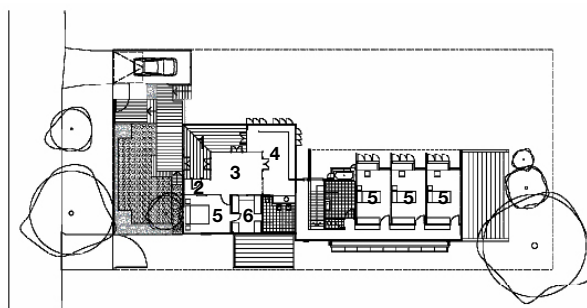
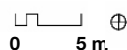
This site, with a sloping east–west axis, is located in Wilston, one of Brisbane’s older inner-city suburbs. The project involves the addition of a separate but attached building to the original 1930s residence. This original residence was stripped back to regain its formal qualities both in its relationship to the site and how it engages with the street. Placed in the existing garden space at the rear of the site, the new pavilion contains living spaces on the ground floor with sleeping spaces above. The northern facade presents as a piece of timber joinery under a folding roof. The living space has a ten-metre-wide opening to the garden, with the projecting bedrooms on the upper level creating a delicate, hovering volume above. The folding walls and soffits are clad in western red cedar, slowly weathering to silver grey. Under the roof, the protected bedroom walls are clad in teak veneer, which will maintain its rich colour and figuring. The materials will allow the building to age with authenticity and sit gently in the lush landscape.

- 1 Existing deck
- 2 Entry
- 3 Reception
- 4 Study
- 5 Bedroom
- 6 Walk-in robe
- 7 Store
- 8 Laundry
- 9 Living
- 10 Kitchen
- 11 Playroom
- 12 Deck
- 13 Pool

OPPOSITE, LEFT: The Wilston Residence is transparent to the southern boundary. Privacy from the neighbours is provided by a dense stand of vegetation. **RIGHT:** The northern facade has been designed to recede into the bushy landscape as its timbers weather and age.



Lower level



Upper level

agendas that aren’t essentially about the careful quality of place-making. This attitude also came from the work I did in Lindsay Clare’s office. There we designed buildings that, for their time and their budgets, were really exceptional. We had to be very frugal with the way we thought about materials and construction and detail. Similarly, when I started Richard Kirk Architect, a lot of the early work was for community groups with limited resources.

ST: The youth housing at Deception Bay, for example – I’ve always thought that it was a remarkable thing, to be tested so early through the discipline of a public housing brief and budget.

RK: Yes, that was something I found very hard but obviously drew a great deal from. The cliché is that the small practice starts out with a house for a family member. We were never able to realize such

work – a symptom of launching a practice in a recessive economy.

But, in doing those projects, you learn a great deal. There’s a high level of responsibility to a lot of people. We got to work with very “untypical” architectural clients. These were publicly funded community groups who were created in order to realize the project. We were dealing with people who had very little design or building experience, yet we had to learn ways to work collaboratively with them, and they with us. The principal agenda was to build something, not to win an award or to get published.

ST: The collateral bonus, in the case of the Deception Bay project, was that you did win an award from the Royal Australian Institute of Architects.

RK: Yes, and I remember one juror getting quite upset that there weren’t enough windows, and

we had to explain that this was because, according to the public housing guidelines, you were only allowed one window per room. The juror was aghast that there would be such a limitation on light, space and views embedded in the project from the outset.

ST: It’s an indicator of the significant constraints you had to work with and still achieve good architecture.

RK: I think that a lot of that kind of public sector housing work, or at least the implications of it, had not been seen by a lot of architects. It’s done in the background, swept under the carpet. For the first few years we did work on very restricted, almost nonexistent budgets. The briefs were entirely “non-architectural,” with no expectation of any good to come out of them, and we spent our time making sure that good did

eventuate, that the quality was there. By designing and building good buildings we demonstrated that good design could be anywhere and was not just for people who had the personal means to effect it.

That taught us to be careful in the way we develop our projects and in where the money gets spent. The architecture should be the core focus, space as well as materials. We never make gestures simply for their own sake, which is why we describe our work as not very esoteric.

ST: You promote RKA as a design-intensive practice, making evocative places and unique buildings. I am interested in this idea of uniqueness.

RK: I suppose it’s not in the sense of, say, how architects in the 1960s might have sought to be unique, through novel architectural forms or strong geometrical figures. Our



work is not really about novelty at all. It's more a search to build buildings that are the result of unique collaborations and very particular circumstances. It's about the site and the client. But supporting this is a set of ideas that underpins all of our work.

ST: The unique yet consistent results of your highly principled practice?

RK: We are certainly conscious of building a consonant body of work – our efforts should be perceived that way. We are quite happy to develop and test ideas, details and construction systems incrementally. Revisiting the example of the Cutting Edge studios, the simple idea in that building was to have an entry for a multistorey building that connected all of the levels, that linked them all experientially at that crucial point of entry, so that the building would be familiar and

comprehensible to people who work there and to people who visit. This is different from many commercial buildings. You walk into a single-height lift lobby and the building above you could be three storeys, it could be twenty. Your reference is signage and the floor numbers; you are situated in a slab of space.

We'll use that same idea in a house or in a commercial project, like in a speculative project we're doing. We're insisting that, in this low-rise building, all levels should be spatially connected, even if it's in a very small space so that the net lettable area is not reduced too much. We argue that there is great advantage in orientating people, making them feel some kind of assurance, whether they are visiting for the first time or are familiar with the building.

As we discussed earlier, there are some principles that are always

present. So although ideas evolve, because of the way we use materials and like to put things together, the same rigour applies to all of the work. In some way they all feel like the same type of building or like a family of buildings.

ST: You talk about ideas evolving, and adjusting over time. Are you conscious of those decisions that move your ideas on? Or of particular innovations within your framework of familiar and tested principles?

RK: There is a tension in relying on familiar and tested strategies or details. One way to characterize development is that, through repeated experiences of designing, you might tend to add layers onto a familiar approach. Or, on the other hand, you might subtract, or refine elements of an approach. The opposite altogether would be to discard your methods and try something entirely different.

ST: I can't imagine how an architect would or could entirely discard their methods, at least not easily.

RK: There have been projects where we've set out to rethink a familiar approach, which is not, by definition, discarding anything, just reconsidering it. Recently we tried that for a project where the client wanted a building not unlike one we had already done.

ST: That seems a bit contrary.

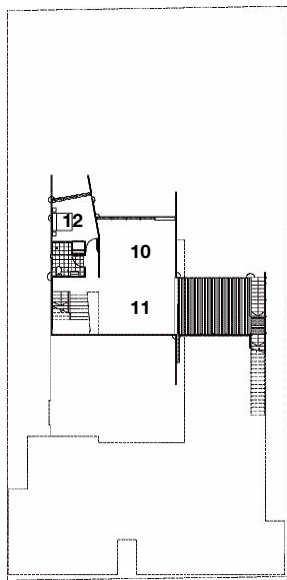
RK: Well, we were really conscious of working from a different point. We wanted the client to think more carefully about what would suit them, to lead them towards a more appropriate outcome rather than simply imitate or duplicate the other earlier work. It was a conscious decision in that case. If the opportunity is there to introduce new tactics, particularly if the brief requires it, we'll certainly follow through. >

HIGHGATE HILL RESIDENCE, 2007

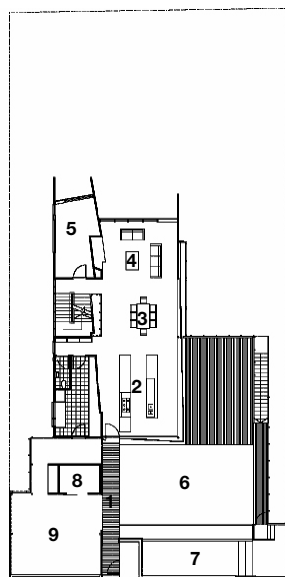
A steep embankment with a verdant landscape is the site for this robust family home. The rectangular form of the house is organized over three levels. The middle level contains living and dining spaces and the point of entry from the street, with bedrooms on the upper level and a guest room and a media space on the lower level. The site's topography places the two upper levels within the lush canopy of trees. The site's differing edge conditions required each elevation to be handled distinctly. Vertical timber slats screen the building from the street, while a timber facade on the northern walls responds to the landscape, filtering northern light and cooling breezes. The southern elevation is a taut skin of timber cladding pierced by slot openings. The western wall is dominated by vertical fins that reduce the harsh sunlight. The living spaces on the middle level open to a series of outdoor platforms of timber decking and turf. These extend the interior spaces to become part of the ground plane. To celebrate the transition from interior to exterior, the east- and north-facing walls open completely via a series of sliding glazed timber panels.

- 1 Entry
- 2 Kitchen
- 3 Dining
- 4 Living
- 5 Study
- 6 Lawn
- 7 Pool
- 8 Store
- 9 Garage
- 10 Media
- 11 Bedroom
- 12 Bedroom
- 13 Void

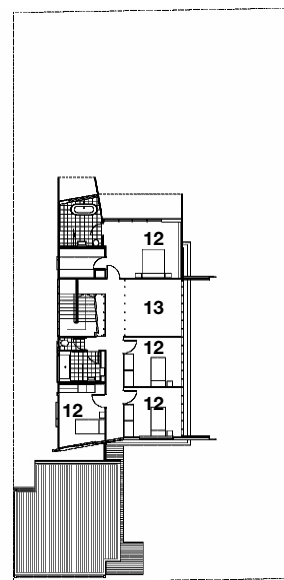
BELOW: The kitchen in the Highgate Hill Residence opens out onto lawns and decking. **OPPOSITE, TOP:** A curtain of narrow timber slats screens the garage, living areas and pool from the street. **BOTTOM, LEFT:** A void above the dining area expands the open-plan ground floor. **RIGHT:** The ground falls away beneath the rear deck, creating a direct visual link between the living zones and the lush tree canopy.



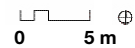
Lower level



Ground level



Upper level





TINBEERWAH RESIDENCE, IN PROGRESS

The Tinbeerwah Residence is a semi-rural retreat located in the Sunshine Coast Hinterland, designed for an international client. The design of the residence continues the practice's commitment to simplicity of form and planning to allow exploration of materiality and space. The design emphasizes the ability of materials and the construction process to articulate and define building form. The project benefited from a shared commitment between the client and the architect to produce a residence that would age and improve over time. Careful consideration went into the siting of the residence – it occupies a solid plinth that separates the main building from the landscape, delineating the made landscape from the natural bushland beyond. Openings throughout create intimate connections with the landscape – from the double-height living space, large sliding glass doors connect to the outdoor areas, while long horizontal windows in the upper-level bedrooms take in views of the bushy setting. A generous, oversailing roof plays a protective role, sheltering the house's expansive glass sections from strong northern light. A long, lean lap pool extends from the house into the garden.

- 1 Entry
- 2 Garage
- 3 Drying court
- 4 Water courtyard
- 5 Study
- 6 Kitchen
- 7 Living/dining
- 8 Terrace
- 9 Pool
- 10 Bedroom
- 11 Kitchenette
- 12 Void

BELOW: A solid white plinth anchors the Tinbeerwah Residence, delineating the built form from the natural landscape. OPPOSITE, LEFT AND RIGHT: Large openings and extensive glazing draw the bushy landscape into the interior.



ST: There's a plane on which each instance of building is an experiment, really. So complex are the variables, it seems to me that there has to be a foundation of faith in the experiment on the part of all concerned, since so much can go awry.

RK: We always have good intentions for a building. But without the support of a client, some of these intentions might get excised or reduced in quality. That can be a struggle. So there are the stories where the clients are completely supportive and allow you to do your job. They give a very simple brief or even simply a set of ambitions for their home and then they stand back and literally let the whole process unfold in front of them. I'd say they get the best outcome by far. Then there are the stories of clients who, for whatever reason, usually due to the nature of the delivery or form of contract, will

get too close to key decisions, and the final outcome of the building is sometimes compromised.

As the practice grows, my role is mainly about ensuring that projects are as good as they can be, by making sure that our communications with clients are clear and that expectations are managed. It's a whole lot of disparate people who have to coalesce around achieving that best outcome.

I think the delivery of architecture is so difficult that you've got to remove some of the variables simply in order to achieve the best result. We can do that in the way we develop our design principles or detail preferences or rules. For example, we don't like to expose light fittings, as we like to have clean, uncluttered ceilings, within reason. Materials have to be "natural". Like in the work of Siza, we

limit our material choices to those which have strong inherent value.

ST: And clients buy into that?

RK: Yes, they do. In building anything, you face a potential mountain of decisions. Clients come to us not to open up the agenda, but to focus the agenda.

The other thing we've begun to notice is that the architect tends to be the person who is on the project the longest and, in some cases, even longer than the original client. I've come to realize that, as the professional who is there at the start and there at the finish, the architect has a kind of memorial ownership of a project. It's good to remind everyone involved that we are the ones with the real "memory" of the project, in many senses of the word.

ST: I think that is something that is so implicit in what an architect does that

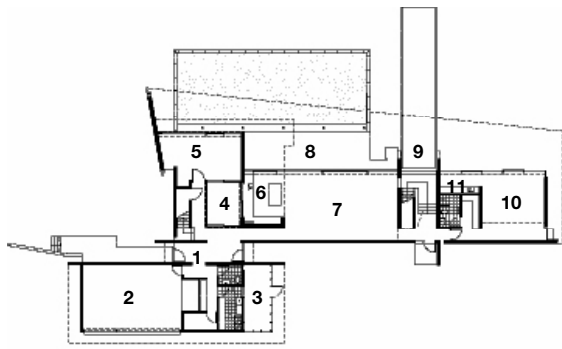
people tend not to realize it. It's quite an authority to possess, isn't it?

RK: In cases of projects that might go on for three or four years, it's a highly crucial authority.

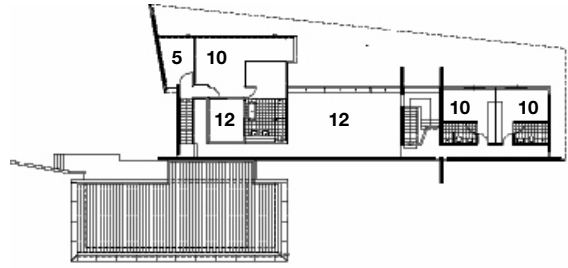
ST: I am struck by how calm and measured you are. I'd ascribe similar qualities to the architecture of your practice – it is calm and measured, considerate and disciplined.

RK: Funnily enough, a photographer shooting one of our recently completed buildings remarked, "Man, you're a really calm person. Most architects are jumping out of their skin at this stage." The things that appear most effortlessly are the result of extraordinarily hard work and tenacity. We all need a lot of stamina for the process – client and architect alike. Lots of things can arise to stall the dream.

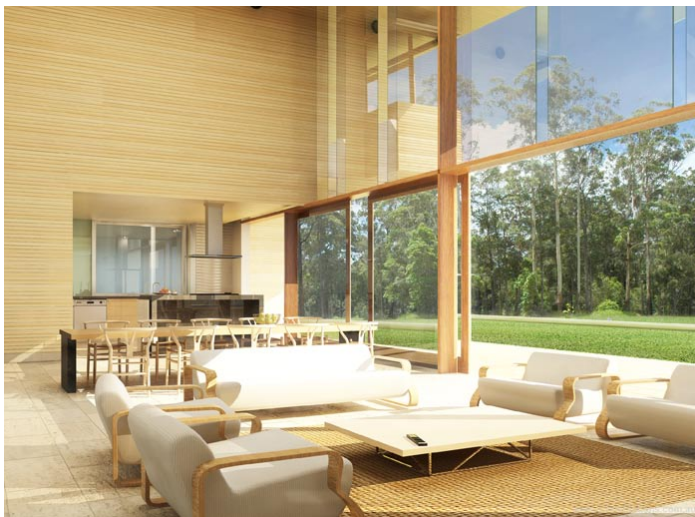
ST: You said earlier that the client can have both positive and negative



Lower level



Upper level



impacts on the built outcome. Is there one project that most exemplifies the clearly positive impact of the client?

RK: The Wilston House. Some projects strike a harmonious chord with all concerned and that project is a good example. There we worked for clients who could very clearly articulate what they wanted out of the process; they had a clear expectation of what they wanted to achieve. The concept was easy to develop and it was similarly easy to transform their wishes into a positive architectural outcome. We quite literally followed their brief.

ST: Its articulation of architectural form and space is clear and strong.

RK: This is very different from the situation where you get a brief that is laboured in its detail. The roles of architect and client become blurred, or knotted into the web of itemized wants.

ST: So there's obviously a difference between being clear and being detailed – somehow, in labouring the latter, you can miss the bigger idea that orders and frames the details? This capacity to plot strategically through a brief or set of wishes is one of the chief strengths of an “architectural way of thinking,” but again, this may be invisible to a person fixated on a detailed wish list. How do you orientate the clients to the larger potential of their project and build their faith in what you can achieve for them?

RK: The fairly simple tactic of introducing them physically to work that we have done is quite positive and engaging. We like to walk people through completed houses that we anticipate will have some resonance for them, so that they can experientially obtain an understanding of how we approach architecture – what the tangible results of working

with us will be in terms of space, quality, material, detail. We can also glean a lot from their articulation of the brief, which is where all of their ambitions for living are embedded. Some clients are particularly adept at outlining their sensibilities, what they love and want in a house, an imagined character or physicality, what role it will play in their lives. Very rarely we get clients who want a house to represent something other than this – for example to showcase their level of success. Even in our most elaborate briefs, it's typically homely warmth and a modest set of spaces that is desired.

What I try to ensure is that everyone in the practice remembers that our role is really to provide leadership in the provision of a sensibility of living. It's quite an intangible thing in some respects, but so important. We like especially to find out what our

clients' ideas are about quality, what quality means to them – is it about durability? We are quite careful about thinking through the life cycle of a building – duration, endurance, weathering, ageing.

Some of our projects are now over ten years old and we can go back and see how they've aged and performed. That's always a high point for us, a benchmark. It's not the CAD rendering, not the projection of something new, but anticipating the dwelling settling into its site, the family settling into the home, growing up into a mature and meaning-filled place. That's what's important.

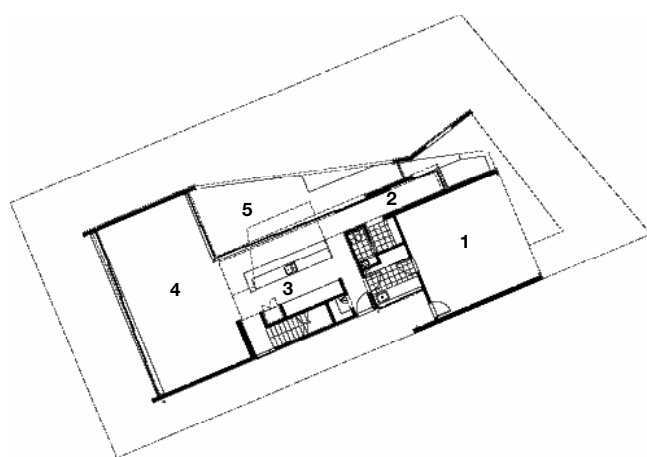
ST: So the astute discrimination of what's important in a building becomes evident in the building's future, not necessarily now?

RK: Yes. What we really love is when a client tells us they want to be in the house they're

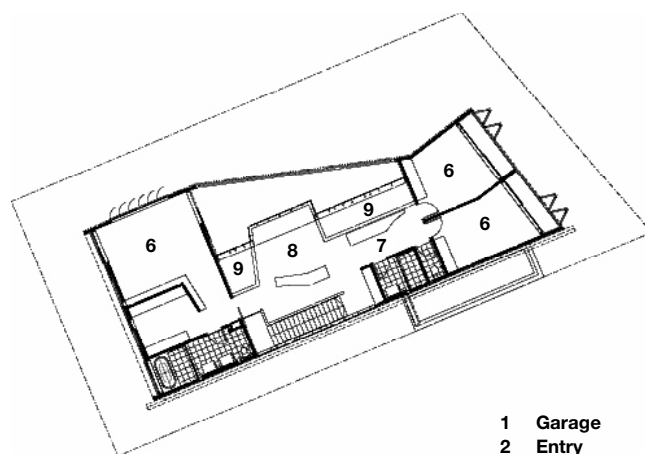
ELYSIUM_{LOT 147, IN PROGRESS}

Alongside several other architects, the practice is designing a number of houses in Pearson Property Group's Elysium Noosa residential development. Elysium aims to create a family of houses that capture the essence of the north-coast lifestyle. The houses are planned with simplicity and an emphasis on generous indoor-outdoor spaces. Each house occupies its site boldly and includes a naturally lit outdoor room contained within the main volume. The outdoor room provides an interior focus both visually and functionally. The inside and outside are united by seamless transitions and the consistent use of a restrained palette of materials. Materials are generally timbers left to weather naturally, Rheinzinc and self-finished oxide renders that will improve with time, allowing the houses to merge with the landscape.

OPPOSITE, TOP: At Elysium Lot 147, a uniform materials palette will create spaces that flow seamlessly from indoors to out. **BOTTOM:** By day, natural light will flood through the house's permeable skin of timber batten screens and glazing.



Lower level



Upper level

- 1 Garage
- 2 Entry
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Sitting/dining
- 5 Outdoor terrace
- 6 Bedroom
- 7 Study
- 8 Media
- 9 Void

commissioning for twenty years. We can talk to them about what that might mean in terms of construction quality, materials and so forth – we're interested in how a house will weather and wear – but also in terms of flexible planning. We're quite interested in making a house as a series of flexible spaces that aren't too restrictive in use. We like to leave it a little open-ended without being completely noncommittal about the way we organize space. An important consideration that drives this thinking about functional openness is, of course, thinking about how a family grows into a house. A lot of our commissions have been, and are, for robust family houses, not trophy houses.

ST: I am curious about how much reflective time an architect can obtain these days. Setting aside time to reflect on outcomes and analyse

processes is important, in order to learn through and from actions.

RK: As time goes by, I find myself becoming ever more certain of my criteria for judging our work and other architecture generally. I certainly try to understand them more. I am sure of my interest in a certain "purity" and authenticity in the way that buildings are made. I am interested in the well-made building. For me that's what a great deal of the enterprise is about, because there is a craft in the making of a building and there is an art in orchestrating that craft. That's what I think is the essential quality of architecture. It seems sometimes that many people are concerned that it's something other than that, something more complicated than that.

ST: In terms of a building being well made, there ought not be any redundancy. Every part should be

appropriate and necessary and doing the job, artfully, and not just in material or structural terms, but in spatial and social terms as well.

RK: For us it comes back to that early experience with community-based public housing projects. We are very used to getting a lot out of the resources that we have and ensuring that the architecture works on more than one conceptual level.

Our work is inherently gestural. One very obvious repeated gesture is the big, over-sailing roof. It comes from years of working on low-cost housing. Hiding a roof is expensive, so the thing to do is express it as an element with a clearly protective role. In the case of the Tinbeerwah Residence, it's the generous roof that shelters the large sections of glass from the strong northern light; at Wilston, it shelters the

bedroom windows dressed in beautiful teak veneer.

We are obsessive about quality and careful tradesmanship on site, so we do traditional inspections, we watch the work being made and we're there for all of that. The idea is that you can make evocative architecture, which is unique within itself. Because we have that method, and a clear intent, clients do enjoy our leadership in the process. I often think about clients who go to very large projects where there is potential for uncertainty about what the outcome might be, and I think that is something we've been very focused about. No matter what the project is or who the client is, we've never differentiated from one kind of client to the next. As far as I am concerned, they all get an authentic architectural response, in every sense of the word. **H**



Contact details

Richard Kirk Architect
 13 Manning Street
 South Brisbane Qld 4101
 T: +617 3255 2526
 F: +617 3255 2527
 E: mail@richardkirkarchitect.com
 W: www.richardkirkarchitect.com

Featured projects

Richards Residence, 2002
 Wilston Residence, 2006
 Highgate Hill Residence, 2007
 Tinbeerwah Residence, in progress
 Elysium, in progress

Awards (selected)

1997 RAIA (Qld) Residential
 Commendation
 Caloundra redevelopment
 2004 RAIA (Qld) Interior Award
 Hopkins and Clark
 2004 RAIA (Qld) Beatrice Hutton
 Award – Commercial Architecture
 Cutting Edge
 2006 RAIA (Qld) Interior Architecture
 Commendation Boe Lawyers
 2007 RAIA (Qld) Robin Dods Award
 – Residential, Individual
 Dekkers Residence

Publications (selected)

*Next Wave: Emerging Talents in
 Australian Architecture* by Davina
 Jackson (Thames and Hudson, 2007)
 "Paired Pavilions" by Emily Wall,
Houses 57, 2007
 "Sweet Whiteness" by John
 Macarthur, *Architecture Australia*,
 vol. 93 no. 4, July/August 2004
 "Spatial Mutability" by Antony Moulis,
Houses 34, 2003
 "Outdoor Volume" by Julie Dillon,
Houses 30, 2002

Photography: John Linkins
 (Richards Residence and Highgate
 Hill Residence), Shannon McGrath
 (Wilston Residence).

Renderers: Orbit Solutions
 (Tinbeerwah Residence and
 Elysium Lot 147).

**Sheona Thomson is a lecturer
 in architecture and course
 coordinator of the Bachelor
 of Design at the Queensland
 University of Technology.**

