

HOUSE IN SOUTH YARRA

Architects: GROUNDS, ROMBERG & BOYD
Owner: ROBIN BOYD
Engineers: ALAN J. BROWN & PARTNERS
Builder: JOHN MURPHY

The site was a narrow slice of an old garden (40' x 126') in Walsh Street, South Yarra, in the City of Melbourne area. It has a high, old building on one side, and a private garden on the other. But in this area there is always the possibility of high flats being built on either side. Thus privacy demanded an introverted plan, but a view over roof tops to the Dandenongs also called for an outlook to the rear. A pre-planning decision was: virtually separate flats for parents and children. Hence the division of the house into two separate boxes, two-storey in front, single-storey at rear for the children, tied together by a single roof in which a hole is cut over the central court. Both sections look inward to the court as well as to the view at the back, the upper level of the front box gaining its view through the hole in the courtyard roof. The courtyard has glazed side walls, obscure where necessary for privacy.

Each box has cavity brick walls reinforced with 3" steel tubes in the cavities. A 4 ft. module was adopted. The roof is carried on 3" cables 4 ft. apart draped from front to back, tied at the ends to the steel frames in the brickwork and propped at intervals by the timber posts of the internal, glazed partitions. The cables are not highly tensed and produce a series of gentle catenaries between supports. The central cables are slightly slacker than the outer ones, so that the roof deck is also curved laterally and is in fact a series of shallow stabilized saucers. Vines will eventually grow along the cables above the courtyard. The two boxes have separate heating and cooling units. The front block is treated as a single room, for the upper-level platform within the box is 4 ft. clear of the walls.

Other materials: brick floor, plasticised. Structural oregon is preservatised, not dressed or painted, but stained grey. Internal timber walls are lined with jarrah. Joinery timber is limed mountain-ash. Roof: 1" decking between the cables, 1" 'Caneite' insulation board, built-up felt.



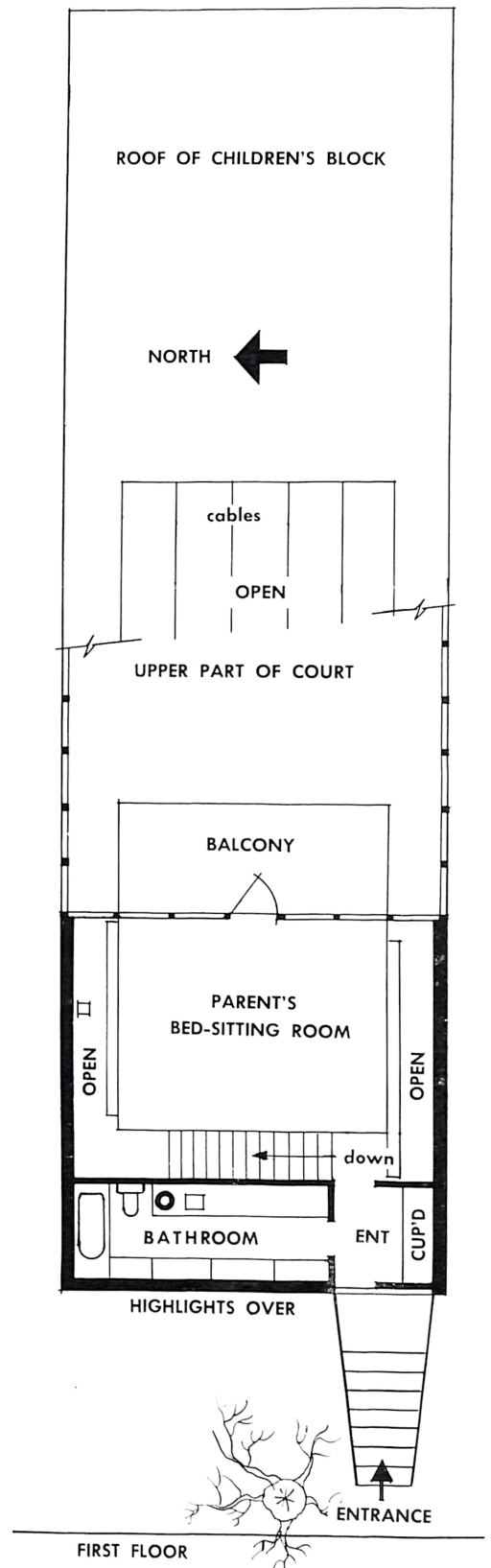
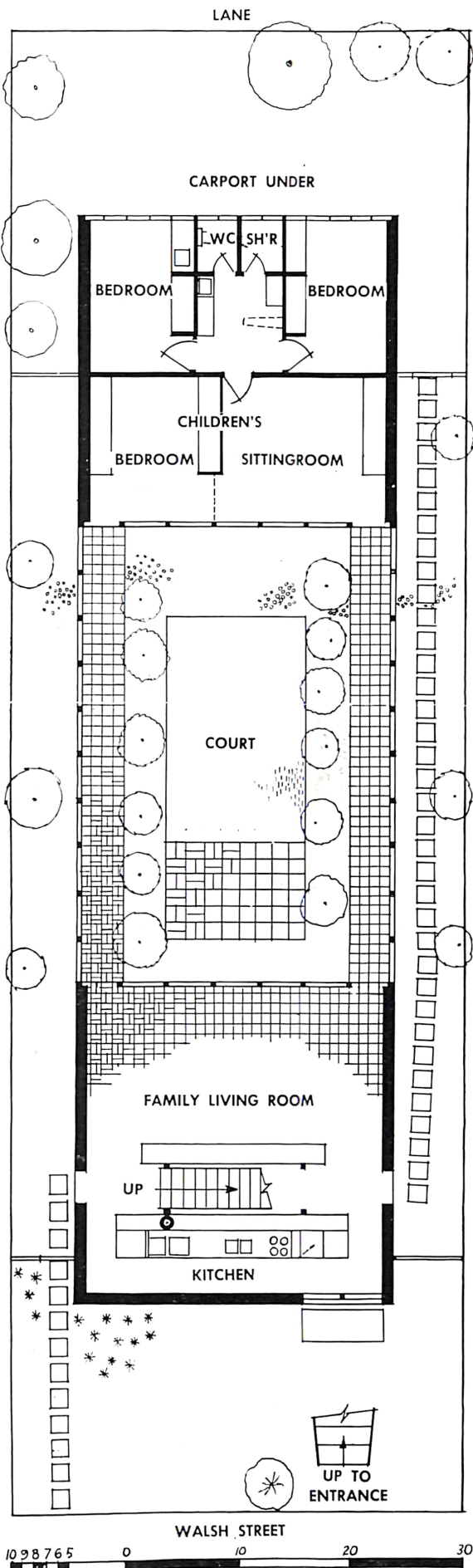
Mark Strizic

VICTORIA

Front Entrance

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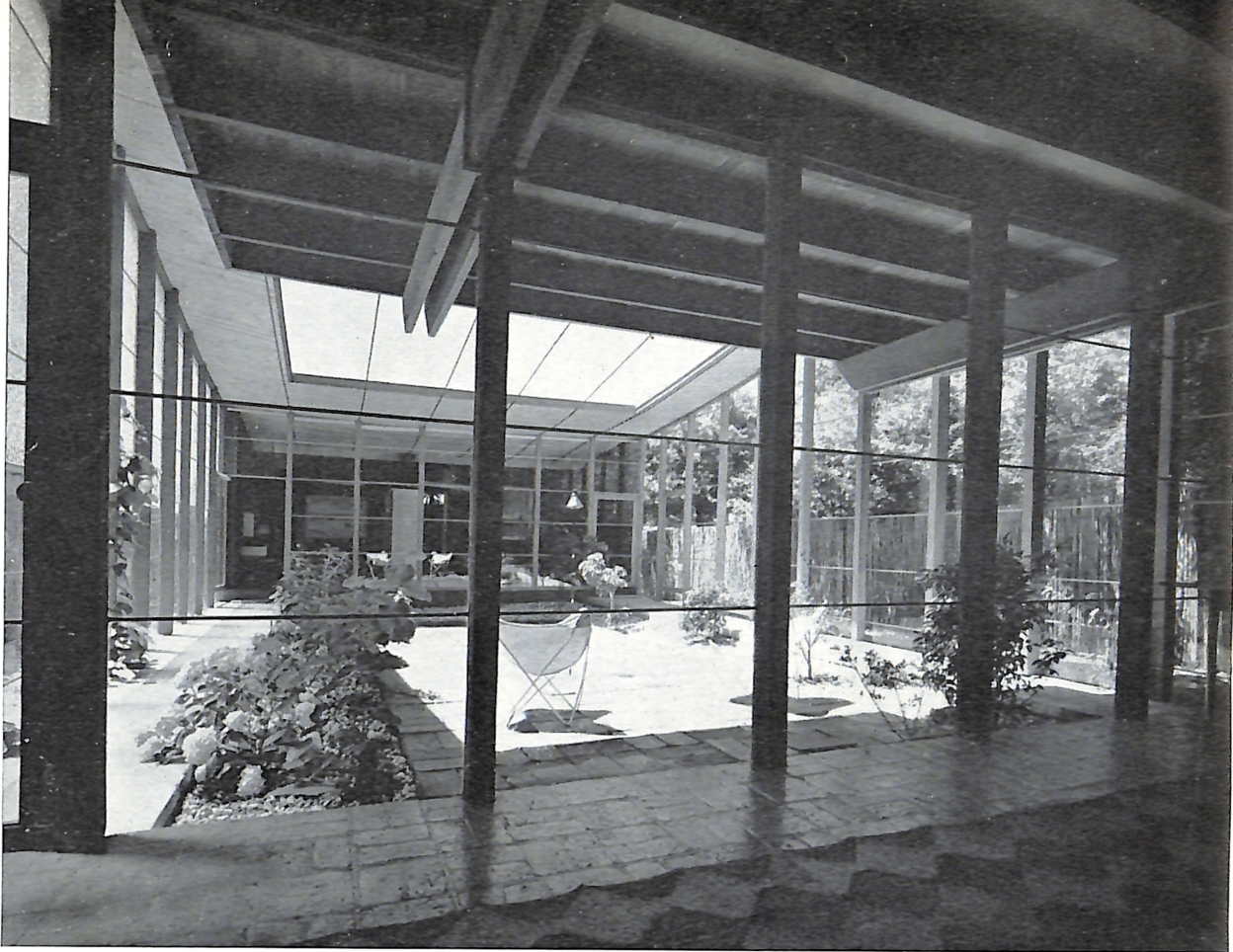




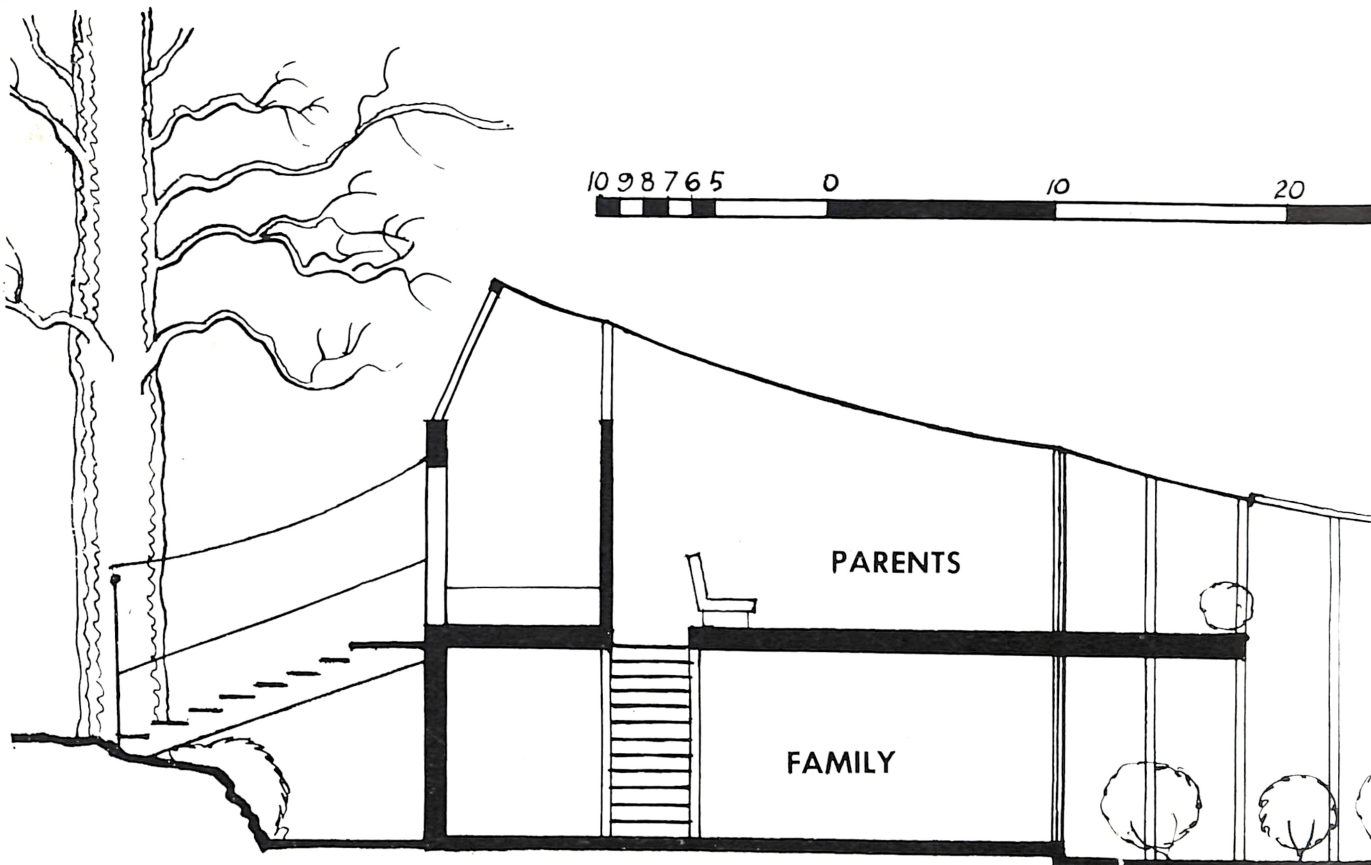


Family living room viewed from courtyard;
balcony cantilever above.

Mark Strizic.



Courtyard looking towards children's wing

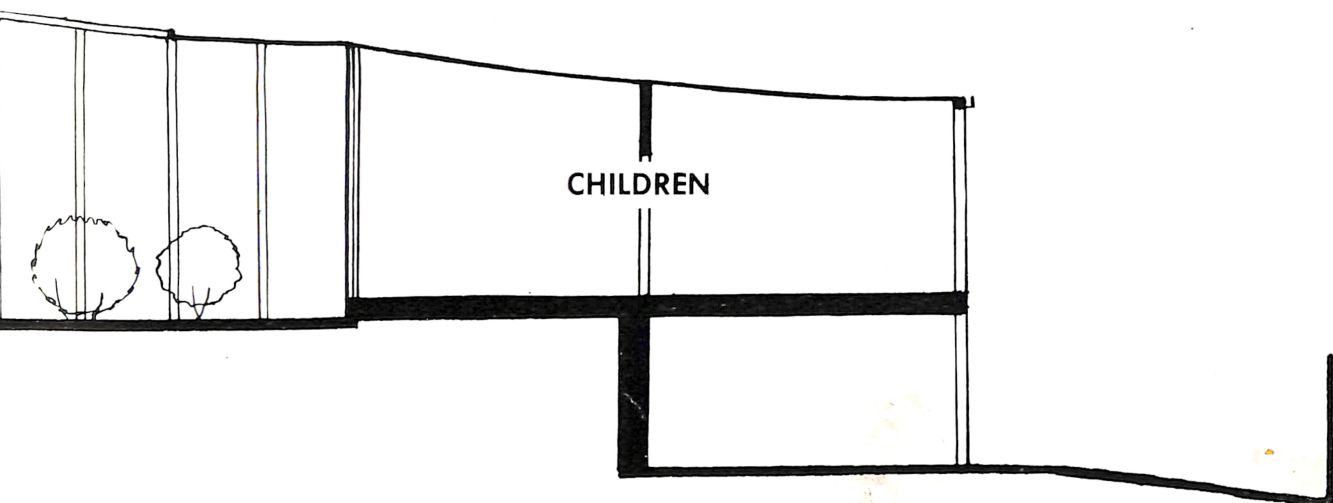


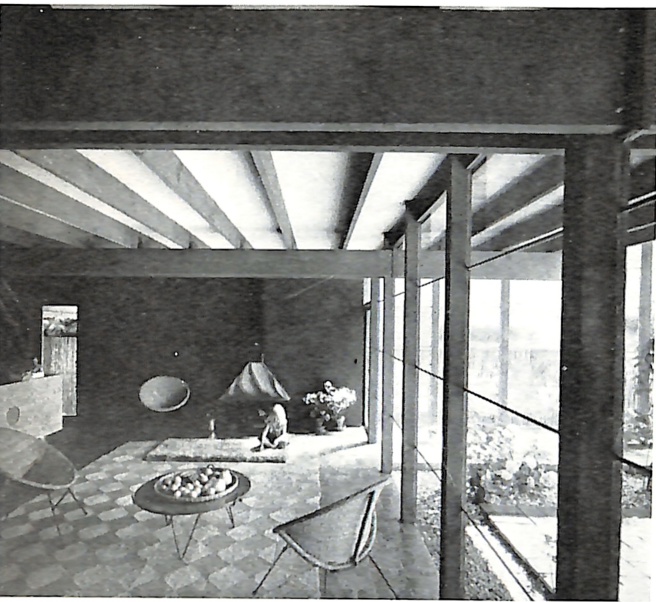
SECTION



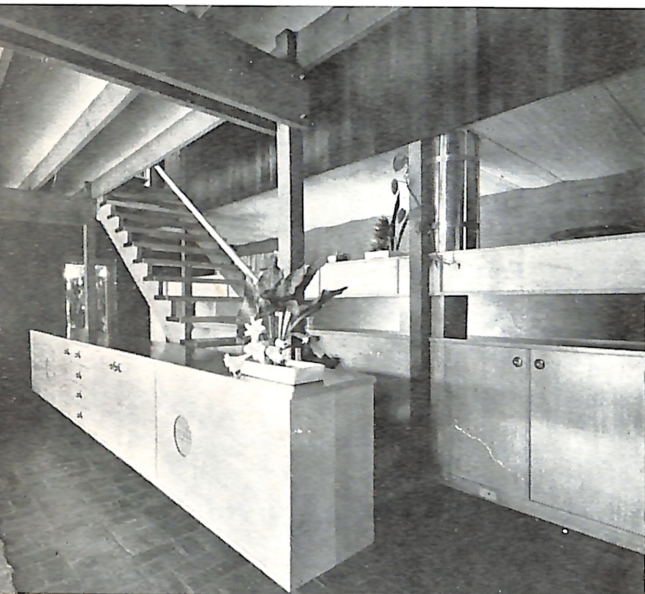
Front wing of house viewed
from the children's wing
across the courtyard.

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View Living Room



Stairway



Family Living Room

AN APPRECIATION

Neil Clerehan

"So many economic influences on modern building are false to the art. But as long as building remains an expensive operation, architects seldom can quite ignore the aesthetic demands of the man who is paying the money, or override the tastes of the people who are likely to occupy, use, or merely see the structure. On such grounds it is possible to argue in defence of any architect that the bad things in his building were his clients' desires.

However, when an architect builds his own home, it may be assumed that the false influences of economic expediency depart and leave him as free to create as a painter at his blank canvas, as a musician or a poet.

Furthermore, in his every day living in his home, he will interpret his own design in every furnishing and fitting, in the position of every ashtray, in where he leaves the evening paper, in how he sleeps, in where and how he and his family eat. In his own home all his philosophy of building must surely blossom, if ever it is to. Here he is both playwright and actor, composer and executant. What manner of architect he is will be laid bare for all the world to see, notwithstanding that some do not have time to spare from their practices, but leave it to their wife and the chief draughtsman in the office."

Those words were written by Robin Boyd in 1947 in **VICTORIAN MODERN**.

He was commenting on architects' own houses which in some cases hardly measured up to the limitless possibilities he opened to them.

It is not unfair to resurrect these words in 1960, when the writer now an internationally established critic of architecture, builds his own house.

In this house he has in all respects followed his oft stated philosophy. It advances further, as it should, along the lines investigated in his work for others. To understand it, and in fact the history of domestic design in Melbourne over the last 15 years, one could relate it to his earlier house, built in Camberwell in the same year that **VICTORIAN MODERN** appeared.

Revolutionary enough in its time (but strangely naive now) that house spread in a long thin line down a long thin block. It was subdivided into three equal areas—parents' sleeping and entertaining, general living and services, and at the rear, children's rooms and bathroom. The subdivisions were not echoed in the form nor was there any attempt to dramatise the juxtaposition.

In the present house these three subdivisions are basically reproduced and their rearrangement is the key to a new emphasis on form. The children's quarters are physically isolated, although overlooked, across the court. The two living areas are placed to the fore. The lower area is slightly below street level, the "formal" area is reached by stairs from the street boundary and by the main flight internally, giving together a magnificent pattern of space.

The restricted site influenced this form—a high box with a hole in the middle. The arbitrary catenary of the roof gives this form a dramatic, if possibly inhuman emphasis.

This emphasis is almost entirely internal as the form of the house can never be fully comprehended from the street.

The site was the small side garden of an old house in Melbourne's richest area—South Yarra. The land cost nearly £2 per square foot, which is indicative of Melbourne's sense of land values in 1960. This introverted house presents a bare brick facade to the street, relieved slightly by a huge pine. This brutal front (the other three elevations are virtually hidden) gives little hint to the warmth, richness and intimacy of the interior. The most notable feature of the interior is the control of daylight. Little direct sunlight enters the fore sections.

The walls are dark painted and natural wood and brick paving mute reflected light. Gloom is prevented by the outlook to the bright court which is lit by a huge opening in its roof. In the upper livingroom the dramatic curve of the roof-ceiling is fully visible. This room is a "formal" living-room which doubles as the master bedroom. It is in fact a platform short by some feet on three sides of its surrounding brick walls.

Any practical disadvantages of living on a free standing floor, lacking a balustrade is negated by the strategic and permanent positioning of the furniture. The openness between the two floors assists its heating (a gas fired convactor and a metal firebox for the lower level) and its air-conditioning.

Both these disparate planes overlook the distant children's area. This section can be viewed as a two-dimensional panorama. Sight without sound seems the ideal quality for a children's wing.

Mark Strick

The kitchen is spectacular, a fact which has endeared this house to citizens on two occasions of public display. It consists of a block running almost the full width of the house and built up of cupboards and standard items of equipment skilfully coordinated in a manner never visualised by their manufacturers.

In an age of introverted sun-seeking houses, this house presents a welcome and fascinating departure. It would have, because of its uniqueness in an age of architectural conformity, little appeal in the general housing market. It is in fact a "custom built" house in the purest meaning of the word. Surely this is what a conscientious and skilled architect's own house should be.

**North side of courtyard:
Brick path to children's wing**

