

THE BAKER HOUSE, BACCHUS MARSH, VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

Architects: ROMBERG AND BOYD.

Our clients, Mr. and Mrs. Michael Baker, had come only recently from England with their young family to live in Australia. The whole of this project, starting with their selection of the site, was an act of faith and of commitment to their new country. The site they selected was pure primeval bushland: something straight out of a Jindyworobak bush ballad. It was a hilltop only ten miles or so beyond the inland suburbs of Melbourne, but looking as if it had not been visited since the earth was formed. Thin dwarf eucalypts with patchy green and brown trunks grew a yard or two apart. Their droppings of bark and twigs on the stony ground crackled drily underfoot. The hilltop was near the middle of a property of 200 acres, half a mile or so from the road and at least a mile from the nearest neighbour. The house was to contain, as well as the usual accommodations for the parents, a schoolroom wherein the children could be taught at home, and cubicles for five of them to sleep and swot in private. Distant blue hills could be glimpsed in gaps between the trees on all sides.

The circumstances seemed to call for an elemental, self-contained, extroverted, yet defensive form, and for something primordial in structure. Water had to be stored and, since no worthwhile shade could be expected from the thin gumtrees, outdoor cover from sun and rain was needed.

It turned out that the hill had been visited since the world began. Lower down there were the black shafts of two abortive attempts at gold mining, or investigations of slate quarrying, and slate spall spewed out of their mouths. So it was decided to build the walls of such slate - and then of course to use it to make the essential rain-water tanks. These went around the outside, where they catch the water from a pyramidal roof and partially screen and shade perimeter verandahs. The main rooms were planned in a ring opening to these verandahs. The subsidiary and service rooms occupy an inner ring. In the middle is a courtyard where an oasis of civilized garden is planned under a roof of insect-screening. The main livingroom opens to this court as well as to the external verandah, but the service rooms have only peepholes on to the court.

If anyone should say that the whole thing looks vaguely like a traditional Australian outback farmhouse built by a gold-rusher, we must confess that this idea did occur to us too at one stage when it was still early enough to change plans. But we didn't.