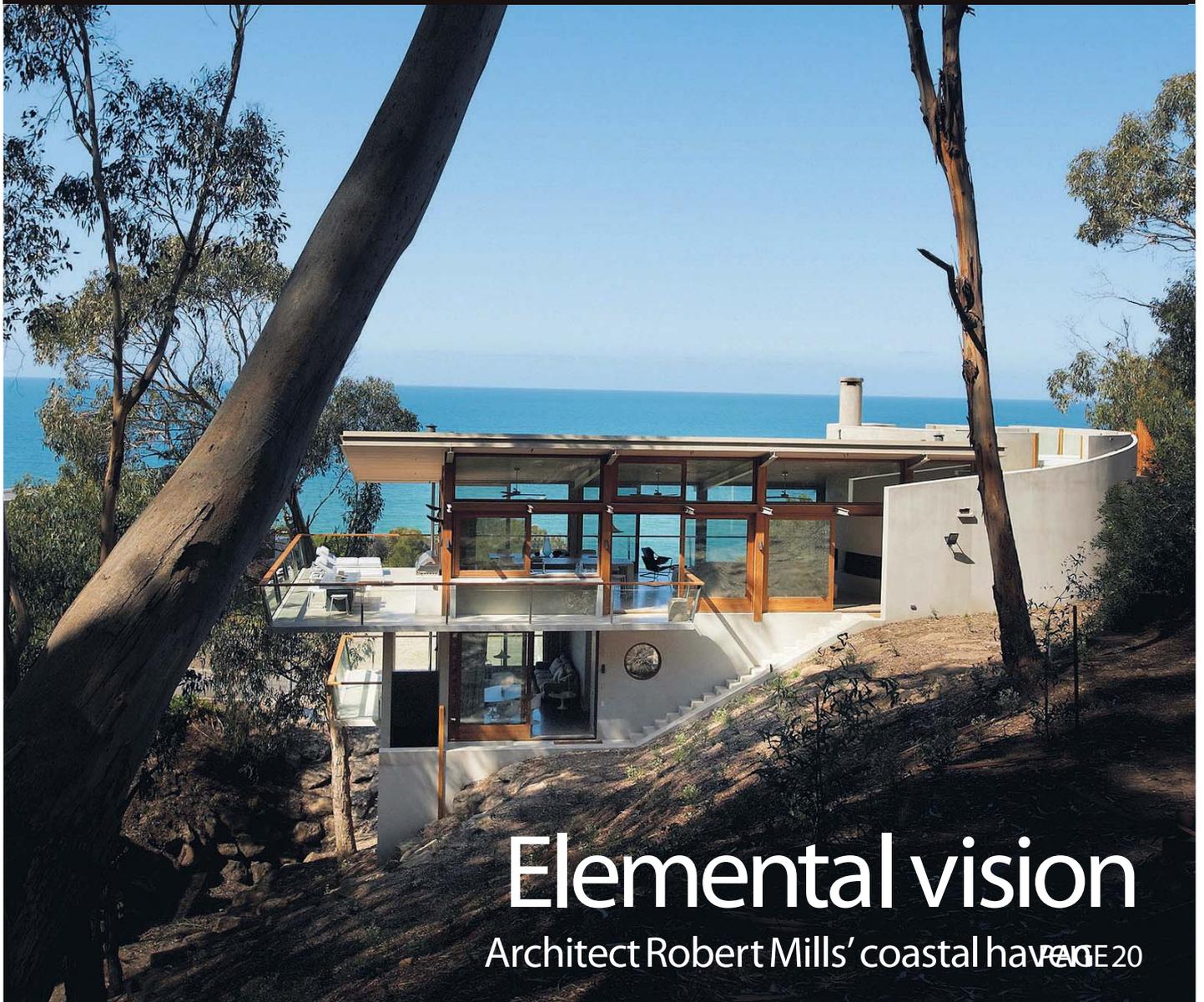


Homes by Design



Elemental vision

Architect Robert Mills' coastal haven **PAGE 20**



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Natural selection

The wilderness inspired this ambitious structure, writes Lou Sweeney

CONSIDER a darkening sky, clouds scudding down to meet an ocean. Ghost gums, grey-backed and bending, enclose a ridge line behind you. As far as the eye can see, nature is having one of those gloriously dramatic days.

Now consider yourself being inside the eye of that storm.

That is pretty much the experience architect Rob Mills has created with his stunning Ocean House on the outskirts of Lorne. Of course, the place looks pretty spectacular when the sun is out, too.

Mills knew he had the block he was looking for after performing a classic Australian male feat — climbing, falling and injuring himself. "There was an old Hills hoist there and I got up it to see the view, fell off and gouged my upper lip," he says. "It wasn't fun but the place ticked all the boxes for me; I'd get a wilderness experience, I could hear the water crashing on the rocks and I could walk to the beach."

With pure blue water views across Loutit Bay to Lorne and coastal bushland behind, the house sits as a pavilion in the landscape, where views can be gained through the building from the exterior as well as from the inside.

"Our feeling is, and our intention was, to make the house belong to both the ocean and the bush and hopefully to make a contribution to both," Mills says.

The complexity of the site — the fact that the building could occupy only 35 per cent of the land area and the need to maximise internal space on that smallish footprint — presented the team (Mills and his craftsmen, Rob Maggs and Ben Beamish) with multi-faceted challenges.

At times, builders had to be suspended from scaffolding to work on and around the incline. Giving the structure a "tall, proud" look both improved the amount of usable space and gave the home its own presence on the landscape.

Another crucial part of the design is the way in which those elemental materials are at once durable for coastal longevity and have an organic, sculptural quality that allows them, like the rocks and the trees and the rolls of the topography, to be in the landscape.

Inside, the house has its own drama. Divided into separate zones, the lower level provides a living area and garage that can be opened to each other to create a

large communal space. Going up, there is a living and bar area as well as brilliant bedrooms where the narrowness of the spaces is overcome by arcs of glass at the end of each room to create the sense of light, air and freedom.

That sublime top level, where the glass frames a postcard of blue water, accommodates kitchen, dining and living spaces and also boasts a gorgeous deck that seems to hang from the side of the home, as if you were on a raft adrift among the bluegums and the briny.

The main bedroom suite is circular and articulates another of the Mills design philosophies — to create different experiences as one passes through a house.

"We really don't want a homogenised feel," Mills says. "We really seek to create interest from moving into different, unexpected spaces."

Ocean House is available for rent because, as Mills says, "it's a creation that has a financial premise for me, too, in that it's a way to have a house by the sea without having too much of a burden."

It's hard to see this place ever becoming something like that.

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Ocean House is a celebration of the surrounding environment.

PICTURES: SHANNON McGRATH, EARL CARTER

Set high against a sloping treeline, this incredibly beautiful, stripped-back and slightly wild coastal home lets the environment do all the work. "I wanted the two, being the house and the environment, to act as one, so that there was no disconnect between them," Mills says. "The eye travels across the space and the colour palettes

from interior to exterior are not completely different. The colours and textures in the forest behind the house are present in the building."

The materials here have been kept to a glorious elemental few. Concrete, timber, glass and stainless steel combine to create spaces that are at once complementary to

the natural world and sharp, clean and urbane. While there is a raw aesthetic at work here, this is not cold-climate clinical; it is a thoroughly sophisticated and engaging piece of work.

The three levels manage a kind of architectural alchemy where the structure stands tall but somehow dissolves into its surrounds.

