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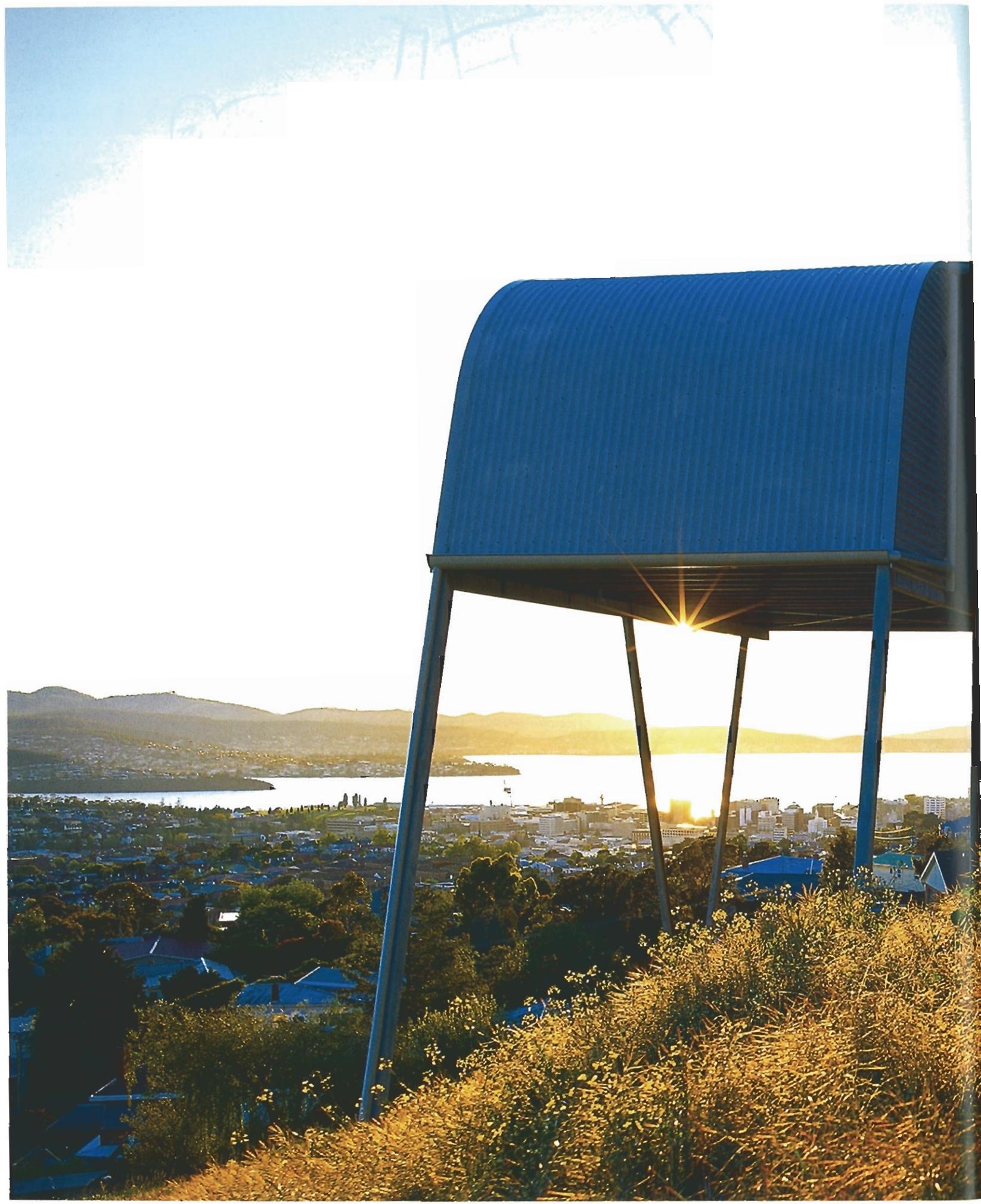
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Poised above Hobart,  
a long-legged tin shack  
threatens to leap into the  
Derwent below.

# Mantis.

**Architect's statement** ■ Shelley House, Hobart Tasmania ■ **The exterior:** Set on a steeply sloping site above West Hobart, the house is a floating platform supported by long-angled steel legs which traverse the landscape toward the city and river. Part insect, part caravan, part UFO, part tin can, part shack. Ambiguity teases the spectator. The singular roof plane transforms into a wall, presenting a protective shield to the west and creating a cocoon for the occupant. The north and south walls angle and extend to embrace the wide city and river view from Tranmere to the Tasman Bridge. A peeled back skylight allows penetration of afternoon sun. The entry sequence across a gangway bridge and passage between apparent sliding walls amplifies the transition from external to internal environments. ■ **The interior:** Simple, compact planning defines the living and sleeping spaces and allows control of thermal zones. In the living cell the raking ceiling and splayed end wall contain a wall of windows. The increased perspective assists in creating a greater sensation of space and compels engagement with the big view. The kitchen/cooking area is the pivot for activities in the space. The living space and main bedroom open onto a triangular deck allowing a flow between these spaces. Throughout the house, windows and skylights are positioned to take advantage of sun and light, views and vignettes as well as maintaining degrees of privacy. Warm-toned Tasmanian timber floors and joinery, and use of colour, enhance the internal cocooning sensation. Some movement during heavy weather (and dancing feet) heightens the adventure of habitation. ■ **Construction:** A tight project budget afforded little scope for extravagance. The steel structure connects with the ground in minimal locations to reduce the expense of concrete footings and retaining walls. Cantilevers are used to exploit the maximum effectiveness of structural elements. The design utilises standard materials, conventional detailing and regular industry tolerances in an unconventional shape. External and internal materials are low cost and low maintenance. However, quality was not compromised and money was set aside for quality fixtures, fittings and joinery. This allowed construction cost of the completed house of 110 square metres, plus 22 square metres of deck, with all joinery, fittings, fixtures and white goods, to be less than \$150,000. An excellent working relationship with the builder – Roy Swan of Vikon Constructions – was crucial in the achievement of the quality and successful completion of the project. ■ Gaetano Palmese.

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Shelley House. Hobart TAS  
Gaetano Palmese. Architect  
Scott Balmforth. Review  
Richard Eastwood. Photography

01 The under-carriage of the house relates the building to the reflective plane of the River Derwent below.

In *Making Nature*, Peter Timms described the enjoyment of a commanding view from an elevated platform as "...the same sense of power that children get from playing with models. To enjoy a view is to turn the world into a model".

The steep hillside of West Hobart is one such location. The considerable distance and elevation from the city and river below establishes a detachment that turns Hobart into a model of itself and has seen the once natural ridge line scarred by increasing development. Thus, century-old workers' cottages now have imposing neighbours on higher ground. One such worker's cottage is my residence, from where I am afforded a view of the most dramatic of the recent additions high up on the hill and on axis with my street. Gaetano Palmese's Shelley House is a spindly-legged object that suggests a dexterity that would enable it to reorientate to the view or continue on to an alternative site if its legs came into their own.

Like a number of architectural 'gems' dotted along the hillside sprawl, including a pair of Peter Wilmott's Ned Kelly-like box houses from whom Palmese credits an influence in the procurement of economical structures, this house invited closer inspection during construction. Was it fate that the first 'in-progress' drive-by was in conditions conducive to the building's canted form? The westerly wind blew unexpectedly along the hillside embracing the slanting profile and the 'for sale' sign was up on the adjacent property, bearing under the presence of the new intruder ... was this crucial in determining my acceptance of this 'animated contraption'?

This largely graphic conception of the house was balanced by the key briefing requirement to provide an elevated platform to the maximum extent permissible by the regulatory authority. The architect established this datum from the outset, basing his exuberant formal response around this fixed criteria.

Crossing a short 'gangway' with single galvanised rail, one leaves the new suburb and overgrown site behind. A simple alcove services both the laundry and the entry door which opens onto a fattened girth to the middle of a 'Z' corridor between both bedrooms. It is this introduction to the twisted corridor that suggests this house is not a slave to its economy, but is rather happy in the practical opportunities presented by the arrangement of bedrooms, bathroom and laundry in adding interest to a potentially mundane hallway.

Upon entering the combined living, dining and kitchen spaces, I wonder whether the primary double-glazed east wall was not misaligned in its perpendicular outlook along the hillside -- an orientation that is not resolved until one moves onto the triangular deck nestled between the living and main bedroom 'wings'. Secure in the 'bosom' of the deck, the panoramic outlook is at its best, with the constituent parts of the Hobart city 'model' -- the Queens Domain, Tasman Bridge, Cenotaph, City and 'River basin' -- all laid out below in 'train-set' perfection. Any voyeuristic tendency of the owner over the neighbours' backyards is fully amplified (to having a watch over greater Hobart).

The extension of the internal environment across the deck is crucial in expanding the perceptual size of the house's small 110 square metre footprint. From the main bedroom, the direct transcend of the deck via sliding glazed doors to the living space may be the weekend pleasure, however the alternate, somewhat 'labyrinthine',

corridor past the bathroom and entry and into the living space is crucial to a continual re-acquaintance with the panoramic view of the 'model Hobart' below.

Slot windows provide a continual 'commentary' rather than more deliberate 'picturesque' vistas, which require the provision of particular viewpoints and window locations. Rather, an ever-changing view unfolds -- the adjacent residential hillside while standing, the long distant hilltops of Hobart's eastern shore from the lounge chairs, or the combination of both when seated at the dining table.

The library and guest bedroom nestle under rolled plasterboard ceilings. These reclusive, cave-like spaces are a surprising insertion to an otherwise elevated environment, where often the owner has trouble coercing visitors to the outer-most extremity, an unnerving five metres above the steeply sloping ground line. However it is here where the owner is most at home, lounging in her elevated lookout and enjoying the views of suburbia, the unadorned rear yards of the neighbours who busily mow lawns and tend clotheslines.

A \$1000 per square metre budget did not permit indulgence in the ubiquitous 'shadowline' detailing, finessed steelwork or a luxurious materiality. Instead, Palmese's confidence in his strategic design allowed him to accept 'standard builder's details' and to invest considerable trust in the builder, Roy Swan, who tendered on the basis of a 1:100 drawing set supplemented by a concise package of 1:50 joinery elevations. The most important elements of the design -- the 'walking' stool legs -- are a clever, economical solution reached in collaboration with legendary Hobart engineer Jim Gandy, where their considered arrangement led to the use of the minimum rectangular section possible.

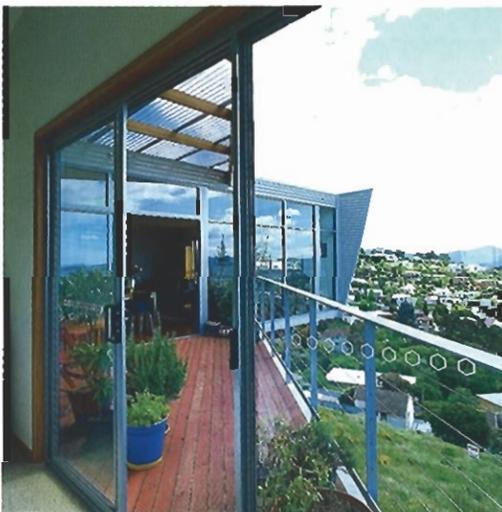
Similarly with the interior, the limited budget was not seen as a restriction but led to innovative solutions developed from standard techniques. All joinery is custom-designed to complete the interior spaces, while 'builder's-standard' Tas Oak architraves and skirlings unite the 'off the shelf' Tasmanian Oak flooring to perceptually increase the sense of space in this small dwelling. Palmese's finely tuned explorations in colour application -- the vibrant orange (master bedroom wall and dining nook), an intense lemon-yellow (master bedroom wall and skylight reveal) and the vivid red tiles which 'fire' the kitchen's splashback -- complete the dramatic interior composition.

An undercurrent of interesting Hobart practitioners has lost the company of Palmese to interstate pursuits, however his legacy remains in a scattering of equally quirky projects throughout the city. Yet it is the Shelley House that best encapsulates Palmese's simultaneously reserved yet flamboyant character, his strong graphic sensibility and a confidence borne from his significant construction knowledge to maximise limited means. Above all, his finely tuned Hobart sensibility sees an overriding simplicity in idea as the perfect response for the dramatic city setting. In the Shelley House, Palmese has provided a startling elevated platform with a commanding view of the world, situated in a manner perhaps best described by the owner: "Well...it is interesting to see birds flying below your windows."

Scott Balmforth is the Hobart-based partner of Reinmuth Blythe Balmforth TERROIR.



02



03



04

02 The graphic quality of the design provides a strong punctuation against the landscape and sky.

03 Connecting the main bedroom and living spaces, the deck offers a sheltered location from which to take in the dramatic view.

04 The metal roof is peeled back to create a skylight



05 A second bedroom and library are contained within the rolling roof form