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BRUCE RICKARD  
IN PROFILE

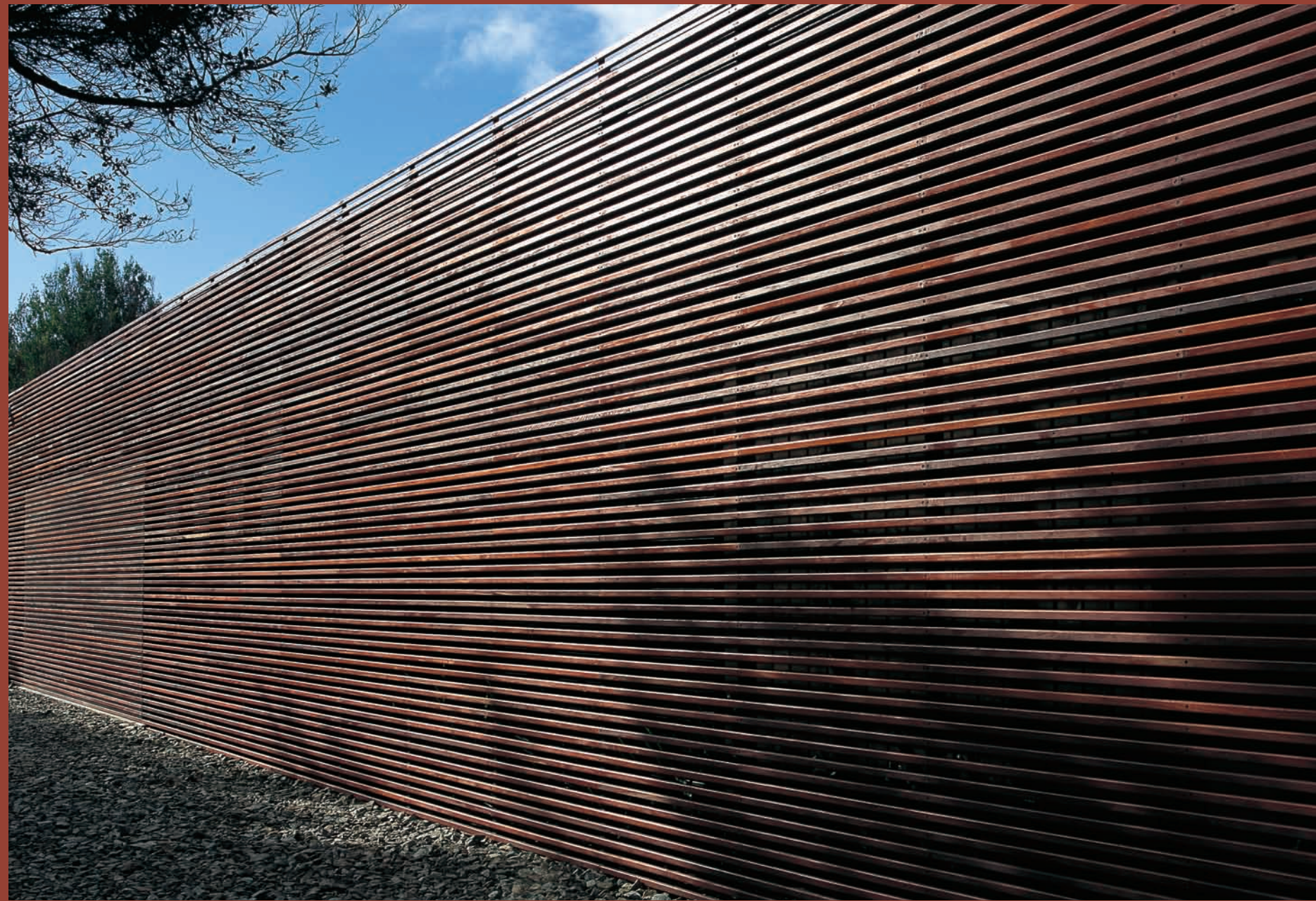
FRESH FURNITURE

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## CULTURAL FUSION

Labour-intensive detailing gives this Japanese-inspired house, located on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, its distinctive and refined character. The project's designer, builder and client Robert Rolls, of First Impressions Projects, drew on experience gained while working on construction projects in Japan.





**THE AUTHENTIC JAPANESE GENKAN** (entrance foyer) to the Urushi House on the Mornington Peninsula owes its inclusion as much to owner, designer and builder Robert Rolls's affection for Japan as his own upbringing in rural Australia. In both cases you're expected to leave your boots at the front door.

Urushi means lacquerware in Japanese, and it describes the colour scheme that unites this unobtrusive house hidden along a back road in St Andrews Beach. The deep red hues used in traditional lacquerware are everywhere, from the generous wide eaves on the slanting roof to the lacquer-topped bench in the *genkan*. The rich colour is an ideal adjunct to the textures and temperaments of timber, stone, paper and water employed throughout.

A fringe of ti-trees encloses the house on its long, narrow block amid the dunes. The deliberately tight fit amongst the scrub necessarily involves the natural setting in the overall design. There are trees outside almost every window, even upstairs, and beds of succulents and other hardy coastal varieties flourish unseen from a distance. "There are sections of the garden inside and sections of the house outside," says Robert, indicating the way a desk in the study continues beyond the interior onto the balcony outside. The overall effect is completely embracing, as though the house is being hugged by nature.

Robert wore the hats of owner, designer and builder for entirely artistic reasons. "Architecture is meant to be an art form but sometimes it goes the other way, towards the mundane, due to client restrictions," he says. "Wearing all three hats on a project like this means I can

consult with others and ultimately maintain open lines of communication and creativity."

The property entrance is more robust than might be expected from a Japanese-inspired house. Discreet gates of ti-tree brush open onto a rough-tumbled Dromana stone driveway. At 50 mm a piece it's very effective in its aesthetic simulation of a dry river bed (although not so great for bare feet). Like many aspects of this house, the drive is a Japanese-Australian hybrid that evolved from the designer's original idea of Japanese-style pebbles.

A registered builder, Robert's interest in and aptitude for house design inspired him to study architecture. But how did an Aussie tradesman develop such a penchant for Japanese houses? By helping build the Australian Consul General residence in Kobe, and going back every year since. He gleaned what he needed for the Urushi House, right down to its authentic Japanese sit-on-a-stool shower in the upstairs bathroom.

Not that everything in the Urushi House has a cultural derivation. One of the most oriental-looking features is the front door, a huge metal-banded affair with a sliding bolt across its middle. It looks like a samurai movie prop and was included solely for its aesthetic clout.

To reach the front door you pass an almost invisible double garage, cleverly concealed behind a long wall of timber slats which also shades the downstairs bedrooms. It's an elegant reconciliation of the always awkward garage issue and a boon for anyone, child or adult, who loves secret entrances. Nor is it the only one in this house. The door to the

main bedroom on the upper level is hidden in a line of cupboards and is so well camouflaged (not even a latch is visible) that when it's closed you'd never know there was a third level.

The whole house is playful, yet practical, like this. The downstairs bedroom wing is a case in point. Here, a system of recessed sliding doors across the access passage and traditional *shoji* screens to the bedrooms enable various space permutations, including enlarging the rooms to incorporate the extra area of the passage. Another *shoji* screen presides over the entrance. The geometries of interwoven timber latticework in these intricate screens is so ingeniously jointed that individual sections shift against their counterparts to negate any movement of the house and keep the screens perfectly intact.

The downstairs bedrooms mirror one another with their minimal furnishings and matching futons. A bathroom divides them, with a glossy floor of hand-laid black pebbles (a lovely massaging surface for feet) and a vanity of contrasting white pebbles embedded in clear resin. A waist-level window frames a rectangular pond into which water flows via slumped glass splashbacks. The level of the pond water is exactly the same as the bench inside, giving the illusion of a solid dissolving into liquid as it passes through the window. Such abundance of water has auspicious connotations in Japanese architectural lore.

Guests kick off their shoes and head upstairs to the living room, past an efficiently-designed study off the landing. The open-plan second level has abundant light and space beneath its slanted ceiling and enjoys tree-curtained views from a large curved balcony. The space

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** A palette of jarrah, Castlemaine slate, and pebbles creates a warm and earthy mood at the front entrance. **THIS PAGE:** Inside, a system of traditional Japanese shoji screens operates in the downstairs bedrooms, making various space permutations possible – including opening the bedrooms up to borrow space from the passageway. **PREVIOUS PAGES, LEFT:** The slate-clad chimney makes an elegant and sculptural contribution to the entry sequence and reads against a background of pine cladding. **RIGHT:** Jarrah screening provides a discreet entrance facade.





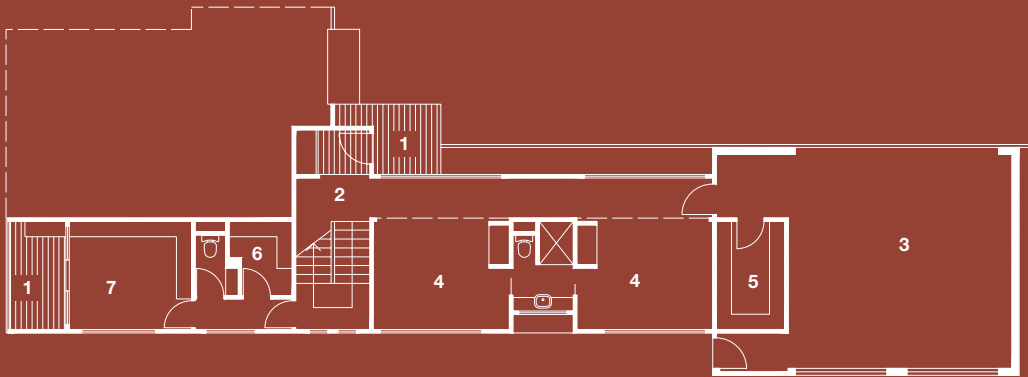
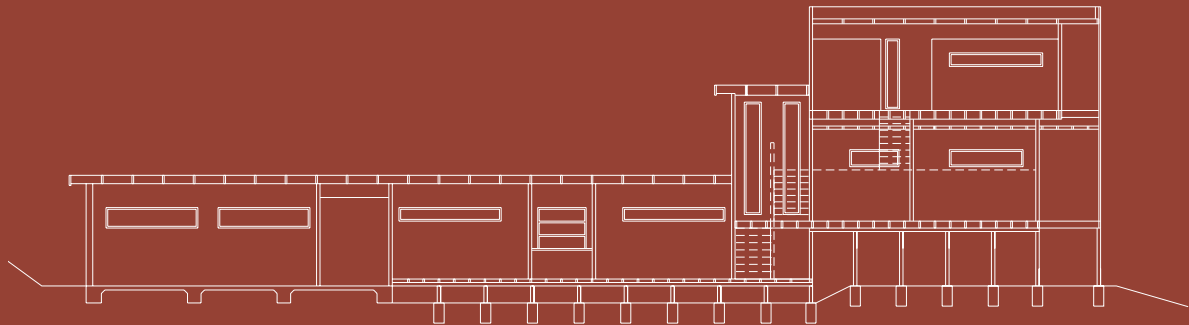
THIS PAGE, ABOVE: The door to the stairs that lead up to the main bedroom integrates perfectly with the American cherry veneer kitchen joinery when closed. BELOW: The custom wall light in the main living room is made from textured paper infused with fibres, for a soft, sculptural effect.

also boasts an elegant economy of fittings and features. Streamlined timber cupboards hide living room and kitchen elements such as the fridge and that mischievous door to the third level. The really eye-catching asset is the floor – a splendid expanse of blackbutt strips selected to celebrate a knotted and gnarled individuality. Robert points at a detail few but the smallest of us might notice: the knot holes are all filled with clear resin. “It took us ages, but the effort was worth it because every kid who visits loves staring into these holes,” he says.

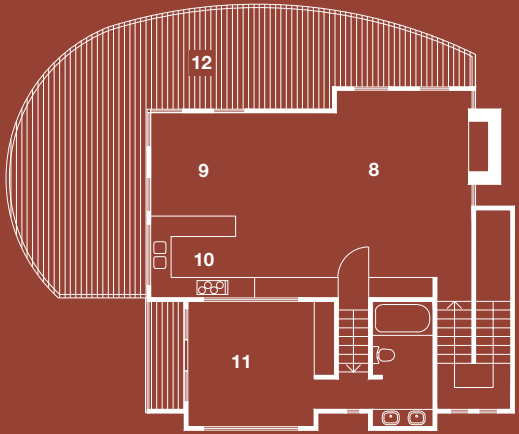
The overall feeling of this large space is calming, quite likely due to its subtle details – such as the chimney that slants inwards five degrees to complement a ceiling that slopes five degrees. Or the slate on the fireplace and chimney, cut with a defined edge and assuming soft pastel colours when wet.

Up more stairs, finally, is the main bedroom, where the crowns of the trees scrape the balcony. “Being at this level is no accident,” Robert says, describing his antics up trees and on stepladders while surveying the site. “I wanted to get the height just right, and be in amongst the trees. Any higher and I would have felt exposed in my own bedroom. Privacy was a major consideration in this project.”

When traditional architecture is reinterpreted for contemporary conditions, sometimes the result can be an uncomfortable pastiche in which design integrity is diluted or lost. The Urushi House avoids all this. Robert Rolls knew enough about Japanese architecture to be able to interpret it for modern coastal Australian life. The *shoji* and the *genkan* are design elements that make sense to him and his family, as well as recalling fond memories of a rich cultural experience. **AB**



Ground level



First level



- 1 Deck
- 2 Entry
- 3 Garage
- 4 Bedroom
- 5 Cellar
- 6 Laundry
- 7 Study
- 8 Living
- 9 Dining
- 10 Kitchen
- 11 Main bedroom
- 12 Main deck

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**PRACTICE PROFILE**  
Small practice designing and building one-off custom homes, specialising in boutique building. Also a contract builder.

**BUILDER**  
first impressions projects

**CONSULTANTS**  
**Engineer** Chadwick Grimmono Engineers  
**Landscaping** Terra Australis  
**Interiors** The Japanese Shoji and Tatami Company  
**Lighting** Beacon Lighting

**PRODUCTS**  
**Roofing** Colorbond ‘Heritage Red’, ‘Ebony’ downpipes; Unitex ‘Heritage Red’ eaves, rendered **External walls** Pine shiplap, rough sawn; jarrah timber screen, Castlemaine slate to chimney **Internal walls** Plaster, painted Dulux ‘Chalk USA’ low sheen; Dulux ‘Chalk USA’ semi-gloss to skirtings; jarrah feature wall **Windows** Trend windows, hardwood timber; block-out roll blind, colour no. 91; Sikkens Ebony Cetol stain on frames **Doors** Solid mdf, painted Dulux ‘Chalk USA’ high gloss; Oriental Express front door **Flooring** Everest Timber jarrah; sisal carpet; blackbutt, natural grade; Tuscan Path pebble floors **Lighting** Iv downlights generally **Kitchen** Smeg appliances; American cherry veneer to surfaces and cabinets; joinery by Gilron Services; Porcher tapware; slumped glass splashbacks **Bathroom** Porcher basin, toilet suite; Tuscan Path pebbled surfaces; Abet Laminati SEI 435 surfaces; Hansgrohe and Sussex tapware; Regency mirrors, shower screens **Climate control** Bravis heating system; jarrah timber screen shading **External elements** Dromana stone driveway; Everest Timber jarrah deck **Other** Japanese Shoji and Tatami Company shoji screens; Cellar Creations cellar

**TIME SCHEDULE**  
**Design, documentation** 5 months  
**Construction** 7 months

**PHOTOGRAPHY**  
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