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MATERIAL MATTERS

WE TRAIL THE RETURN TO SOLID BUILDING BLOCKS, NAMELY THE HUMBLE BRICK, IN THE ROBUST RESIDENTIAL CATEGORY OF THE UPCOMING 2024 NATIONAL ARCHITECTURE AWARDS.

By LUKE SLATTERY

The Roman empire was built of brick, the British, too. Colonial Sydney was clad in English bond brickwork; our sprawling 1970s suburbs in brick veneer. But in the '80s, under the influence, or confluence, of Japanese and vernacular Australian bush traditions, the school of light-touch, lightweight architecture took hold and timber became the mainstay of high-end residential building. This year's National Architecture Awards celebrate a return to more solid, tactile, durable materials. These homes might not touch the earth lightly, but they are built to last. The brick is back.

Architect John Wardle's own Burnt Earth Beach House at Anglesea on Victoria's west coast is a highly personal homage to terracotta (or "cooked earth"), with exterior and interior walls of artisanal terracotta brickwork made locally to the architect's specifications. The floors, bathroom surfaces, cabinetry and outdoor furniture are in terracotta tiles by storied Florentine firm Cotto Manetti, with whom Wardle collaborates regularly. Spotted gum is used for ceilings, floors, window frames and exposed joinery. A net, hand-woven in Vietnam, forms a lightweight border outside a tensile steel structure for an upstairs study poised above a large central void.

Wardle was born and raised in and around Geelong, and on this ocean-facing Anglesea block stood a family beach shack that, in his words, was "half burnt down on Ash Wednesday [1983] and patched up again".

In 2021 during lockdown he redesigned the house – "a place that I knew very well but at the time couldn't get to". For his primary source of inspiration he looked to the earth tones of an old landslip close to the house: a gash in the earth exposing horizontal bands of dirt, clay and rock. "I wanted the house to be like that cliff face," Wardle says. The result is a project earthed in two senses of the word: earthen in appearance and connected to a specific place.

To realise his ideas Wardle designed a brick, a modest accomplishment by the standards of the Australian Institute of Architects' 2020 Gold Medal Winner but one of which he is immensely proud. He called on Klynton Krause, a third-generation managing director of Stawell brick firm Krause Bricks. The artisan and the architect have collaborated on projects as varied as Monash University's Teaching and Learning Building, with its interior of pale billowing curtain-like brickwork, and Wardle's playful and modest Fitzroy House. Krause came up with a terracotta clay brick whose outward surface, as soon as it emerged from the extruding machine and before it was cut into segments, was torn roughly by hand.

Brick cladding ticks a number of sustainable boxes – thermal performance and permanence among them – but it cranks up carbon emissions with firing temperatures in excess of 1000.C. "It utilises a lot of carbon, you fire it once then glaze and fire a second time," says Wardle. "So I wondered what would happen if we applied the glaze to raw clay and fired only once. The result is a sound building material, environmentally. And it's heart-breakingly beautiful, with shades of glazed greys and greens and browns and blues, and another terrific thing is that it's varied and unpredictable. There's a touch of alchemy about it. Sometimes the glaze is pulled into the brick; at other times it sits like a lick of glass on the surface."

Terracotta tiles on the indoor and outdoor benches underscore the importance of family and shared – as opposed to screen – time at the beach house. The outdoor terracotta benches and courtyard have their origins in Wardle's admiration for



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Danish architect and Sydney Opera House designer Jørn Utzon – himself a ceramic enthusiast. "For years I've had a monograph on his Majorca beachside home at Can Lis," Wardle says. "I reglazed the remaining floor tiles and used them on the outdoor table as an ode to Utzon."

The table faces a monumental triangular outdoor fireplace, also made of terracotta. Can Lis, much like Wardle's Burnt Earth Beach House, is an interplay of earth, architecture and geology.

The one place where tradition suggests you would expect to find terracotta is the roof, in the form of interlocked tiles. But here Wardle has opted for steel. A single fall across the corrugated roof funnels rainwater to a terracotta-clad spout that empties onto a rock below. "I must be going a bit mad in my old age, but I love the sound," says the founding partner of the Wardle architectural studio.

Contemporary timber dwellings designed by leading architects such as Peter Stutchbury, Sean Godsell and Wardle himself have left a powerful imprint on coastal settings over the past four decades, and so the predominantly brick Maitland Bay House, by Studio Bright, is another sign of a shift towards more robust and >

Sense of place Studio Bright's Maitland Bay House on the NSW Central Coast employs bricks to be in dialogue with the location.



Block party Clockwise from left, blackbutt floors and joinery in harmony with brick at the Maitland Bay House; Edition Office's Naples Street House has an all-brick roof; the Melbourne home uses the universality of its material to make a statement.



“We wanted a brick that was beautiful and humble and spoke to the colouring [of the site]. This brick is all the one colour but as it’s handmade, it has a lot of natural variation.”

Emily Watson, Studio Bright

durable materials moulded into sculptural forms. In this case the choice of external material was dictated by, on the one hand, the bushfire risk, and on the other the house’s proximity to the Bouddi National Park on the NSW Central Coast.

Studio Bright’s director of architecture Emily Watson explains that as state bushfire ratings stipulate the need for “fully non-combustible materials”, brick seemed the logical option. It was at once a pragmatic and an aesthetic choice. The handmade bricks, by Spanish ceramicists Vicente Camp, are unusually slender at just 40 millimetres high and are laid in running bond that brings variation and subtlety to the severe mass of the two-storey walls.

“We wanted something to complement the site with all those beautiful eucalypts and the green palette and the angophora trees,” says Watson. “We wanted a brick that was beautiful and humble and spoke to that colouring. This brick is all the one colour but as it’s handmade it has a lot of natural variation.”

The interior features neutral, earthy coloured tiles together with blackbutt floors, walls, joinery and ceilings – veneer in the kitchen and hardwood elsewhere. A breezeway cuts through the house via two sets of glazed glass doors, one sliding and the other retractable. This transparent cube allows views from the street entrance and the approach to the house towards the ocean views at the rear, dividing the house into two wings at the same time.

The most arresting external feature of Naples Street House, by Edition Office, is its roof made entirely of brick. Where it faces an interior courtyard, the roof has a gable form; where it faces the perimeter of the house it’s a hip roof. It sits atop walls of the same dry-pressed brick, silverish with a granular patina, that seem to enfold the house in a protective, if slightly insular, envelope.

The house is for a three-generation extended family and the grandparents, who came to Australia from Vietnam, were enthusiastic about the form during early conversations between architect and client. “They loved that it had a sense of deep roots and gravity and weight and belonging,” recalls Edition Office director Kim Bridgland.

Two-storey homes press hard up against the boundaries on either side and the unique sawtooth roofline is designed, in Bridgland’s words, to “curate” and “edit”



the experience of sunlight, sky and greenery. The design was driven by the desire to have a building with a certain sort of weight or permanence about it,” adds Edition Office co-director Aaron Roberts. “Brick is traditionally the material of permanence and durability and the decision to create an up-and-over roofline in a singular material amplifies and abstracts this quality. The end result is a fairly humble house that has a real presence in a streetscape of maximalist homes.”

Aside from brick, the architects have used concrete in the floor, glazed glass sliding doors and hardwearing spotted gum plywood. The soft grey angular ceiling holds shadows that bring nuance and serenity to the interior spaces. In addition there are stainless benchtops and a custom-designed stainless-steel dining-room table on wheels. The table can be removed in a flash and the room turned into a space for dance and performance, one of the client’s great joys. “We think of it as a simple, efficient house that really works hard for the clients,” says Roberts. ■