Arthur and Yvonne Boyd Education Centre
Riversdale, New South Wales, Australia
Glenn Murcutt

Architects in association:
Glenn Murcutt
Wendy Lewin
Reg Lark
Client: Bundanon Trust
Builder: Berg Bros
Structural and civil consultant:
James Taylor & Associates
Electrical consultant:
E Shelmerdine & Partners
Hydraulic consultant:
Harris Page
Landscape architect:
Schaffer Bamsley
Quantity surveyor:
Northcroft QS Partnership
Building services consultant:
Hendry Group
Water supply/waste management:
Woodlots & Wetlands
Steelwork: Antex, Wollongong
Materials:
Walls: steel formwork of in-form concrete
Brick paving
Cladding: timber-framed accommodation wing fins: external grade W/Ply
Roof structure: recycled hardwood, steel pitched beams, hardwood purlins
Roofing: corrugated, galvanised iron
Paint: Sikkens Stains, Dulux Ferrodur, Bristol
Recycled timber for floors
Sealer: tung oil
Recycled timber for doors
Joinery: Peter Cruwell
Joinery, Gosford
C & S Joinery, Wetherill Park
Construction cost: approx A$2,360,000
Completed: Dec 1998
Photographs:
John Gollings

Arthur and Yvonne Boyd s property, Riversdale, on the Shoalhaven River is the site of a building complex housing their education foundation, completed in 1999 just months before Boyd s death. The complex consists of a large hall and accommodation for up to thirty-two students staying for several days at a time. The site is glorious, on a rise surrounded by hills and overlooking the broad river that has served famously as Boyd s muse. It is farming country interspersed with extensive tracts of bushland.

Prelude

Two schemes were done before the location and design were ultimately settled. These projects removed the new building from the existing cluster of farmhouse cottages in order to ensure that artists in residence were not bothered by the noise and activity of visiting student groups; but during the process of negotiating the brief, thinking shifted towards the idea of relocating the artists in residence programme largely to an adjoining Boyd property upriver (both properties are gifted to the nation), and allowing the new building to relate to the cottages.

You can select an architect without having design ideas already worked out. The way to design a building is through discussion and negotiation between client and architect. You work with the architect to select the site, develop the brief, sort out the budget.

The brief had to be tailored to a budget that had to fund substantial infrastructure for on-site water storage, water filtration and sewage treatment works, and landscaping.

The requirement was for simple accommodation - more like camping than a five-star hotel - and a dining hall to seat eighty, doubling as a theatre and concert hall for 100. The kitchen was to have a separate access point for students collecting their lunches.

Murcutt notoriously maintains a one-man practice. But he is also an enthusiastic believer in collaboration, and this project was undertaken in association with Wendy Lewin and Reg Lark, both of whom have been his collaborators on previous projects. We did the design together. There were lots of breakthrough discussions and everyone was involved in all the decisions - not like a committee, but having a shared idea of what we were doing.

True to a rationalist way of practice, the design doesn t just fall out automatically. Instead, it is a process of many trials and experiments before things finally come together. Murcutt and his colleagues constantly endeavour to distill the programmatic requirements and mesh them with environmental, poetic and constructional ideas that they feel strongly about.

Murcutt has a tendency to want to stick to a material; this is another of the constraints he sets himself, to explore the idiom of the material and construction technology and push them to extremes. In this project the three architects start to look at off-form concrete for the first time, and also at using composite structural members of timber and steel.

Discovery

Three modest timber and stone cottages - one Boyd s paint-spattered studio - are retained (an ugly shed was demolished). Indeed the cottages establish the setting and point of entry for the new complex, which is only discovered by degrees as one penetrates the site. After negotiating the tortuous driveway track down through the bush, cars and small buses arrive at the timber cottages. It s like arriving at Boyd s old place, virtually unchanged. Visitors are unaware from here of the new building. They filter through the domestic-scaled verandah passageway of the upper cottage (Boyd s studio), to be released out onto the large open terrace serving the new hall. This terrace - which Murcutt refers to as the silent space - announces the hall-and-dormitory complex and constitutes the performance platform for an amphitheatre (yet to be built) large enough for a full-sized orchestra, with seating for 350 terracing up into the hill; this amphitheatre acts as a hinge between the new and old buildings. From the terrace there are uninterrupted views downriver.

Between

The ample terrace is perceived as a floating plane lodged midway on the hill that rises gently behind the long building and in front rolls down towards the river. The building is poised between two landscape experiences: the native bush of banksias, cycads and turpentine looming above it, and below it the manicured and cultivated river flats. This dichotomy reflects Boyd s own oscillation between the landscapes of Australia and England, drawing his inspiration from this place and returning to complete his paintings in Suffolk.

For the architects it was important that the building frame both the native and the cultivated landscapes. The simple linear parti promotes awareness >p48

Nearly all Murcutt s buildings evolve gradually, often over months and sometimes years. Here the final design was preceded by two completely different sites and projects based around two starting points: the first was an idea that the accommodation should be more like camping than a five star hotel. Murcutt explores a series of permanent tents – and a source of this project is the little guest studio he designed for his own property at Kempsey (1992). The second idea is drawn from Murcutt s Aboriginal Alcoholic Rehabilitation Centre (1983–86, unbuilt), a series of dormitories that isolate different groups according to Aboriginal notions of kinship into campsites organised along a meandering pathway. That idea gets carried over here as a way of locating the units along the curving contours of the hillside (top scheme). As the project develops, separation from the existing cottages is less essential, and the second scheme (centre) draws the camp sites closer to the cottages and connects them with a refectory wing: the buildings form a line in the bush, colonising the site. When the artists in residence are moved to another property and the cottages become part of the complex, Murcutt makes a fundamental shift in gathering the units into a single building. The metaphor or typology shifts too, from camp site to hotel. Even this final stage entails several stages, and in an earlier scheme shown here (bottom), public spaces are connected to the cottages; the architects later abandon these and consequently clarify the space of the forecourt.

of the land, as visitors contemplate the sumptuous views over the river and then turn to find the bush.

Long

The linear form holds the landscape together and makes it legible. Yet the building as line between the two landscapes was not an immediate first premise. There was much preliminary analysis of the geometries established by the existing cottages, as well as attempts to configure the building in various ways. We could have stepped the bedroom modules down the site and we also looked at a dog leg, but there is a weakness with both ideas because the building would be too close to the site boundary, the terrain is very steep, water comes through the site, and the quality of light wasn t so good. The long building was right. We felt we wanted to keep the bedroom modules pulled apart rather than packed together. And with the thinness there is minimal impact on the site.

Comet

The building is like a comet, with the hall and kitchen as the head, and the tail containing the dormitories. It could have been designed as three linked units or pavilions, but the continuity of the mass material produces a strength. The building is like an inhabited wall, the scale heroic when seen frontally from below and in conjunction with the soaring roof form of the hall. From other vantages, it takes on an almost domestic scale of small elements, the fins and blades articulating the linear wall plane.

Blades

Murcutt used blades first in the Marika Alderton house in the Northern Territory, essentially for privacy. Here they serve a similar purpose, as well as bring extra light into the bedrooms, catch the breezes and frame views. Their effect on the exterior is to feather down the scale and texture of the building mass. The large sliding doors to divide the bedrooms are housed in the larger blades, enabling an exceptionally tight floor plan – only twp metres wide – to feel generous; the protruding bed boxes cantilever beyond the floor.

The bedrooms face east over the wide river, at dawn a luminous shimmering plane. Getting the kids up early was a design issue: the fins bounce in the morning sunlight.

Recycled

The floors, bed supports, and windows of the bedrooms are in natural timber. The brushbox floors are pink. Doors, cupboards and ceilings are yellow hoop pine ply. Sills and joinery are russet. The cotton duvets are white.

The deep window sills are bevelled – framelike – making the edges finer, which, in addition to containing the views, affects the way the timber takes the light and also discourages clutter.

Except for plywood, recycled timbers are used throughout the building. Columns are brushbox. Beams and purlins are blackbutt. The big doors of the hall are old growth oregon, twenty recycled timbers forming the 170mm x 75mm jambs. The door slats too are oregon; and the natural brass door rails are bound in leather where the hand grasps or pushes – a finish that recalls Aalto. Everything is to be received nicely by the body. You understand about materials, but things are also easy to use. Steelwork is finished in black micaceous paint: it gives the burnt bush quality we were after .

Despite the building s utilitarian character, there is finesse in the details and resolution of junctions of materials. Steel flitches lighten the framing of doorways, refining the depth of the section. Beams and purlins use a composite construction of timber and steel, exploiting the nature of steel to work in tension and timber in compression. The two elements work with each other, like muscles and bones. It is very economical. The steel cores of the beams are visible between the timber cheeks.

There is pleasure taken in such measures of economy. This is a bush building incorporating frugality and ingenuity.

Fire

Stringent fire regulations require that a two–hour fire rating apply throughout the building, despite there being a 3.7m roofed courtyard separating bedroom modules – when buildings three metres apart are not subject to such a fire rating. However, even though the 250mm hardwood purlins would not sustain any flame, the continuous roof meant that this was deemed a single building and the regulations applied. The fire rating between bedrooms called for 150mm of concrete or brickwork. It was the first time in our lives, for all of us, that we had built in concrete. There were potential problems of cracking and dirt, and it was a challenge.

The building and its site possess a monastic quality which the severity of the concrete expresses. Also, the material presents continuity in the long form and, in a painterly way, a big field, and it works too in terms of colour and light.

Breathing

The bathrooms are the classic three–way holiday design: toilet, shower and hand–basin can all be used simultaneously. Each is a little outdoor room. Eight people share a single unit. With this intensity of use, the bathrooms have to breathe. There is plenty of ventilation. The shower has no glazing but timber venetian blinds that tilt for privacy or open for views: steam easily escapes, and the effect is of taking a shower outside. A slatted roof section over the basin brings in light and reduces reliance on electricity. At night the toilet module, with its translucent glass, glows like a lantern when occupied. The bathrooms are supplied with bore water.

Framing

The building is an instrument of framing place. Just as a painter would frame a scene, so we have organised the building to look at different parts of the landscape. The framing of the landscape is created not only in the large openings and smaller window views, but also in the actual siting of the building and in its roof form. On approach, the first view of the building is end–on, looking down its length to the bush beyond; by its location on the site, visitors immediately apprehend the lie of the land. The portico roof extending over the terrace forms a commanding frame to the majestic views of the Shoalhaven, and the portico roof also funnels the eye deep into the hall; from inside, the roof captures the nearby hill and river and brings them right into the hall.

Throughout the building, glimpses of the landscape are framed by each opening and window. In the bedroom units, each bed box has its own special frame, a composite window with a fixed glass panel below an opening timber screen. This screen can be closed right down, leaving just a ribbon of view, or progressively pushed open, first as flyscreened frames and then even further for complete openness to the outside. The view opens up but only when you open the plywood sash. It s like a tent opening out. The little articulated timber panels within the screen invite use, just as an intricate box does, adding a whimsical yet practical character to these otherwise plain and spare bedrooms. Similarly, the rooms themselves can be closed up or made transparent and open.

Scale

The framing of views is a preoccupation of the building, and operates from the large scale to the very intimate views available from each bed space. The scale of the building encompasses heroic and domestic. The breaking down of the scale is important in what could have been an overly–scaled building. We kept breaking down the scale into smaller elements, and developed ways of dealing with the views, and ways of changing elements, materials and using screens to break down light levels and vistas. It is what we ve learned from Aalto as well as Japanese and Indian architecture.

Roof

There is a butterfly roof over the hall and kitchen, with the section over the kitchen continuing down the length of the building to cover the bedrooms. This skillion is tipped up along the western side towards the bush views; there is no fear of sun penetration because of the steepness of the hill and the shade of the forest. Over the bedrooms, the skillion is layered in two planes, with a small glazed gap along the eastern side over the bed boxes; this brings in light across the ceiling and defines a subtle spatial territory. The prevailing north–easterly breezes are funnelled up under the open ends of the corrugated roofing to ventilate the roof space.

The hall roof – the other wing of the butterfly – is a skillion tipping up to the east in response to the views of the river and the morning light. The trick is to turn the east–facing skillion through 90° and allow the portico to open to the north, bringing winter sunshine deep into the hall. This is an inclusive gesture that addresses the views to the hill and the long reach of the river, and connects the new building to the existing cottages.

Many designs were done for this hall roof, using models to resolve the complex geometries. The solution is an inside–out hip: a valley that folds the pitch back towards the big central gutter and channels the rainwater. (All drinking water is collected and stored in huge tanks underneath the building.) From inside the hall, the roof appears as a single plane: there is no sense of the valley cutting diagonally across the portico.

The roof is heavy–duty corrugated iron, big stuff , all the way around, silver to match the cottages. The main roof expanse aligns with the front edge of the columns, then a further eyebrow is supported by projecting steel jack rafters. It presents a light edge and releases wind pressure on the façade. Wind can flute through the gap at the base of the eyebrow flap, instead of fluttering the roof edge. The structural effect of this edge is to produce a holding–down quality.

Plane

The building floats on its platform: there is a shadowline recess step down to the ground. The columns are seen to pin the building to the ground. The floor floats out beyond the interior space to encompass the terrace. The paving establishes a single surface throughout, with strong lines in bluestone in the long direction. The paving is in purply–brown–mushroom bricks, the colour of the tree trunks .

The columns of the new building and the existing cottages, as well as the trees, set up a rhythm of verticals that is in contrast to the flat planes of the river and the sky.

Prospect

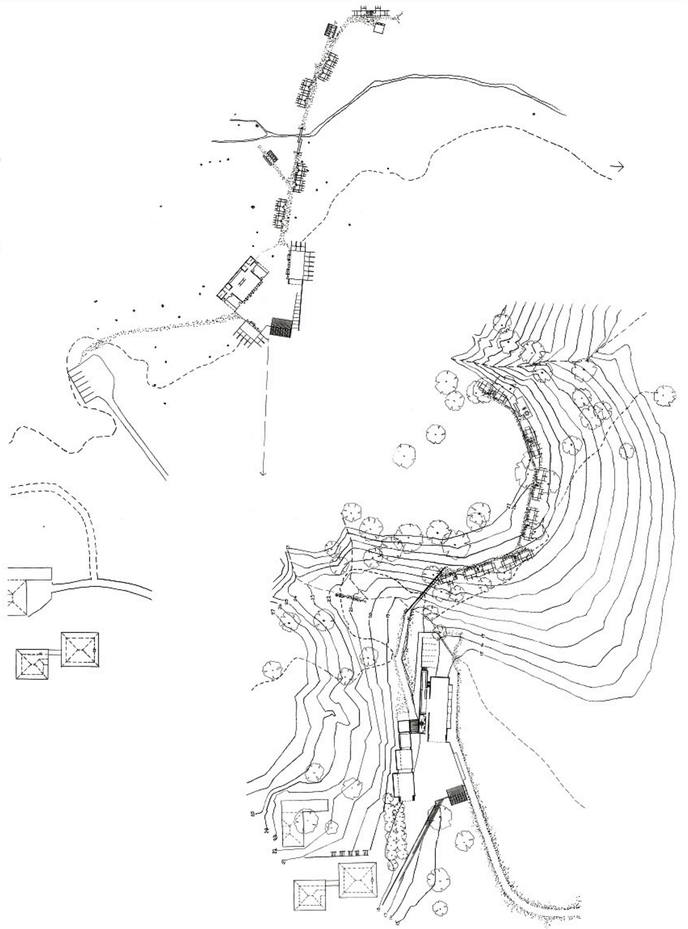
Prospect is made up of the elements that are beyond where one is or what one knows: prospect highlights one s vulnerability. Always it needs to be modulated by refuge, a place of withdrawal. A refuge can be quite flimsy: a tent on a platform in the bush. The porch, verandah or terrace is the refuge to the vast landscape, and also the transition between inside and outside; and it alters scale by breaking it down. In the hall, the availability of sweeping views is modulated and the range of spatial experiences varied as screens, doorways and then whole walls either dissolve or enclose. The hall is a verandah.

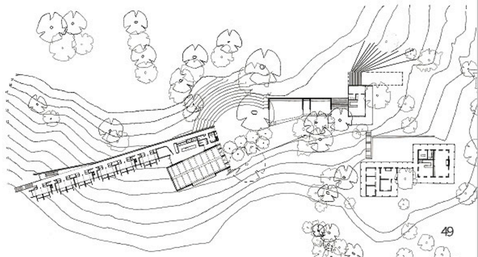
Sacred

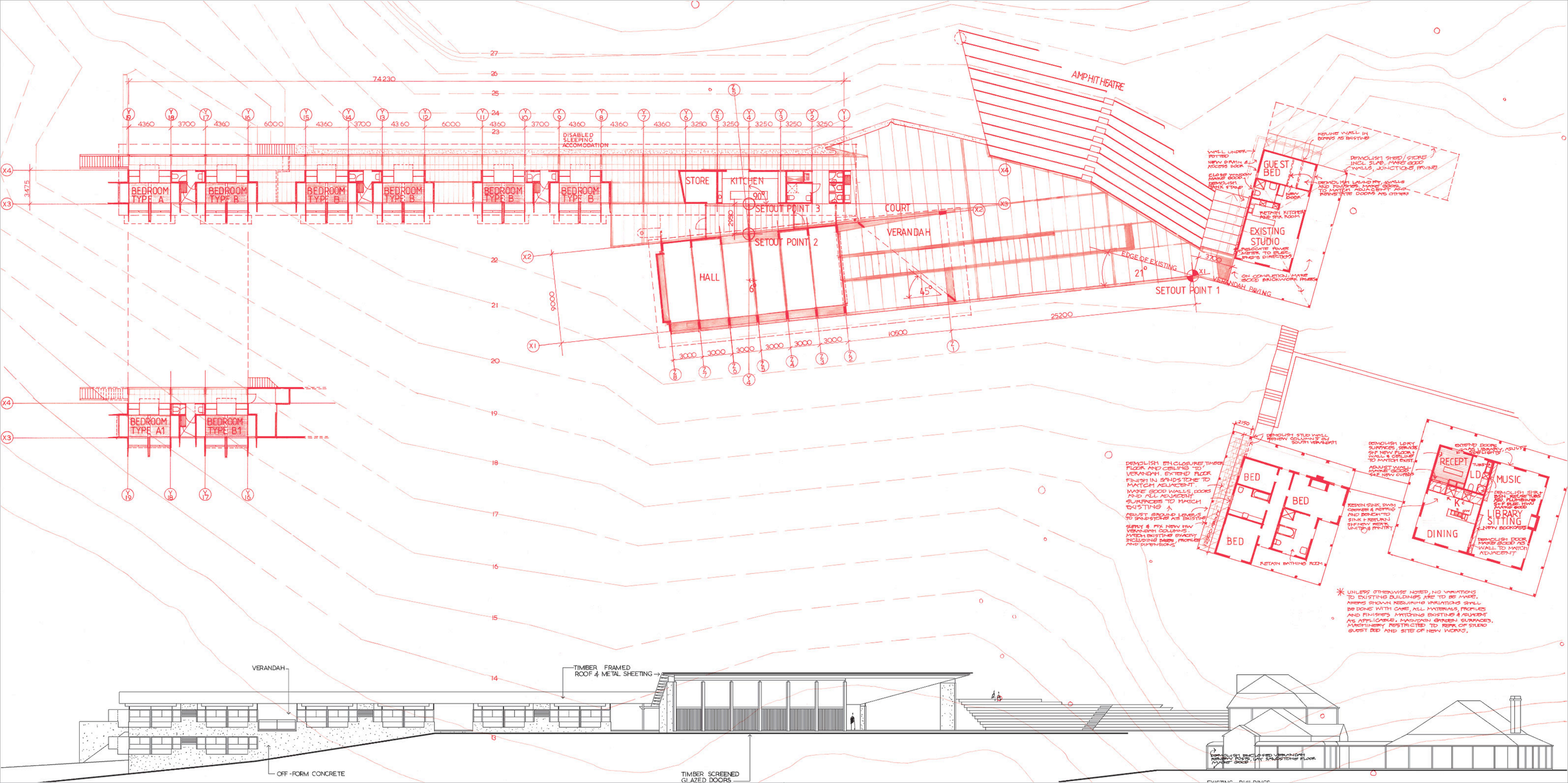
The character of this building is very powerful. Its stillness conveys the idea of monasticism. The sense of a temple is invoked both by the setting, which invites the idea of shrine, and by the monumental scale. A building of such scale and simplicity is neither domestic nor institutional.

A temple is almost emptied of programme: only quietness is critical to the act of contemplation; everything extraneous is pared down and removed, or it slides away. This quality comes naturally to Murcutt. A temple is the refuge of the gods. In the immensity of the Australian bush, he creates a temporal place of refuge. There is also an obvious – if unintended – formal connection with the Greek Acropolis in the arrival sequence. It is not something the architects set out to achieve, but results from a sensitivity to an Aboriginal idea of oblique approach. Just as you arrive at the main forecourt and are presented with the elegant peristyle form of the hall, you sense it s almost sacrilege to walk directly into it; and you are drawn down the side. Sacred and profane space.

This text is from the forthcoming monograph on Glenn Murcutt, written by Haig Beck and Jackie Cooper, published by Images Publishing Group in 2000.







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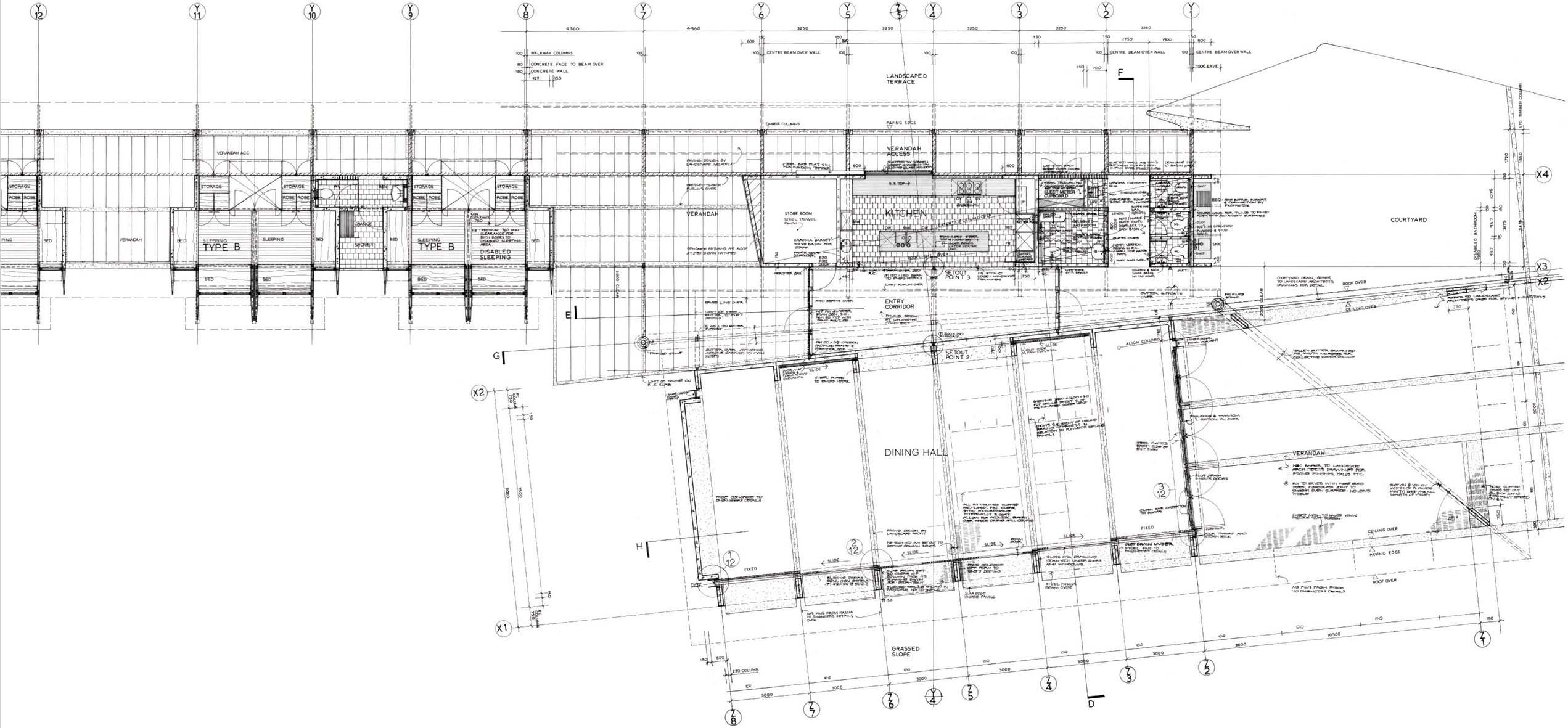
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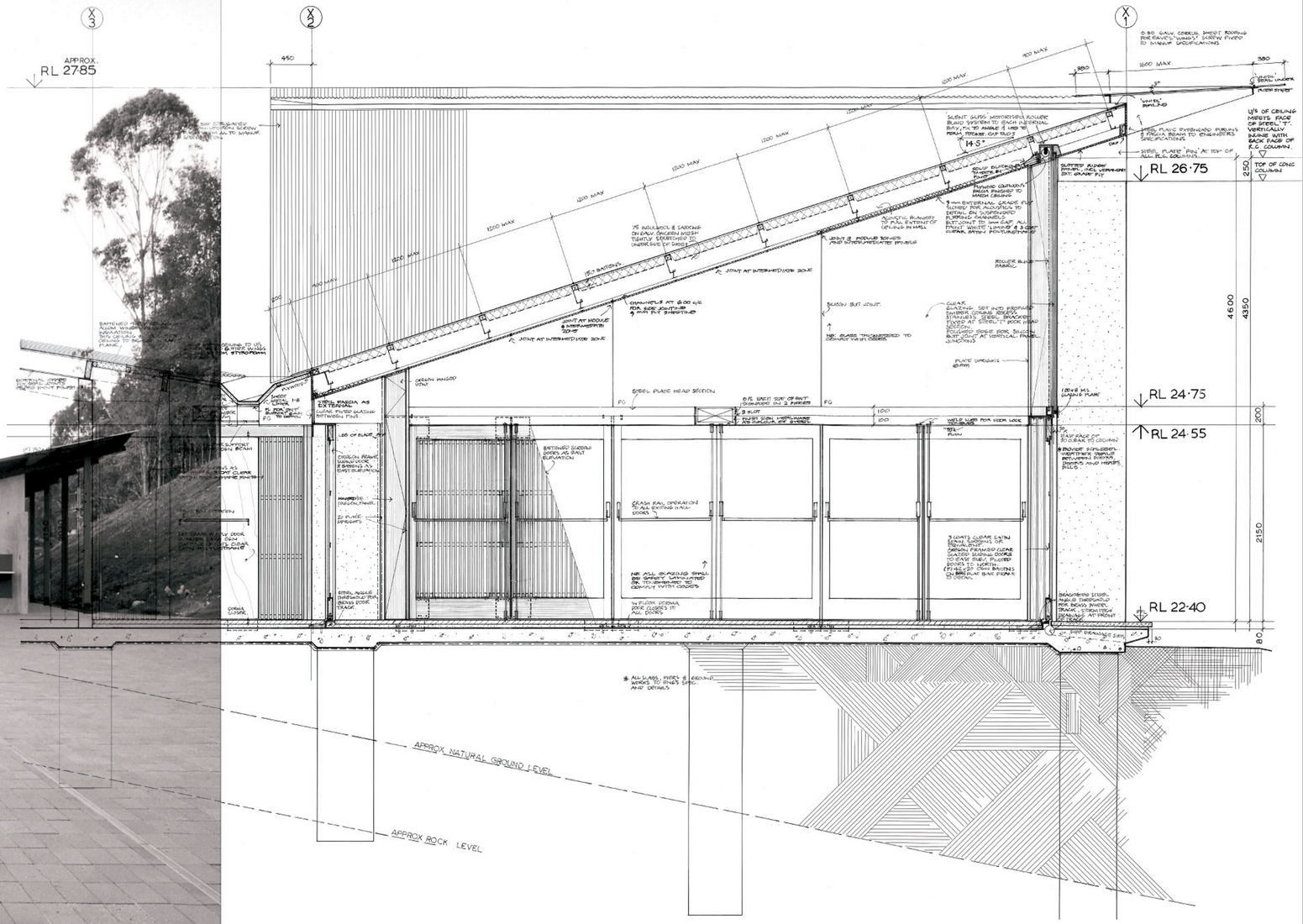
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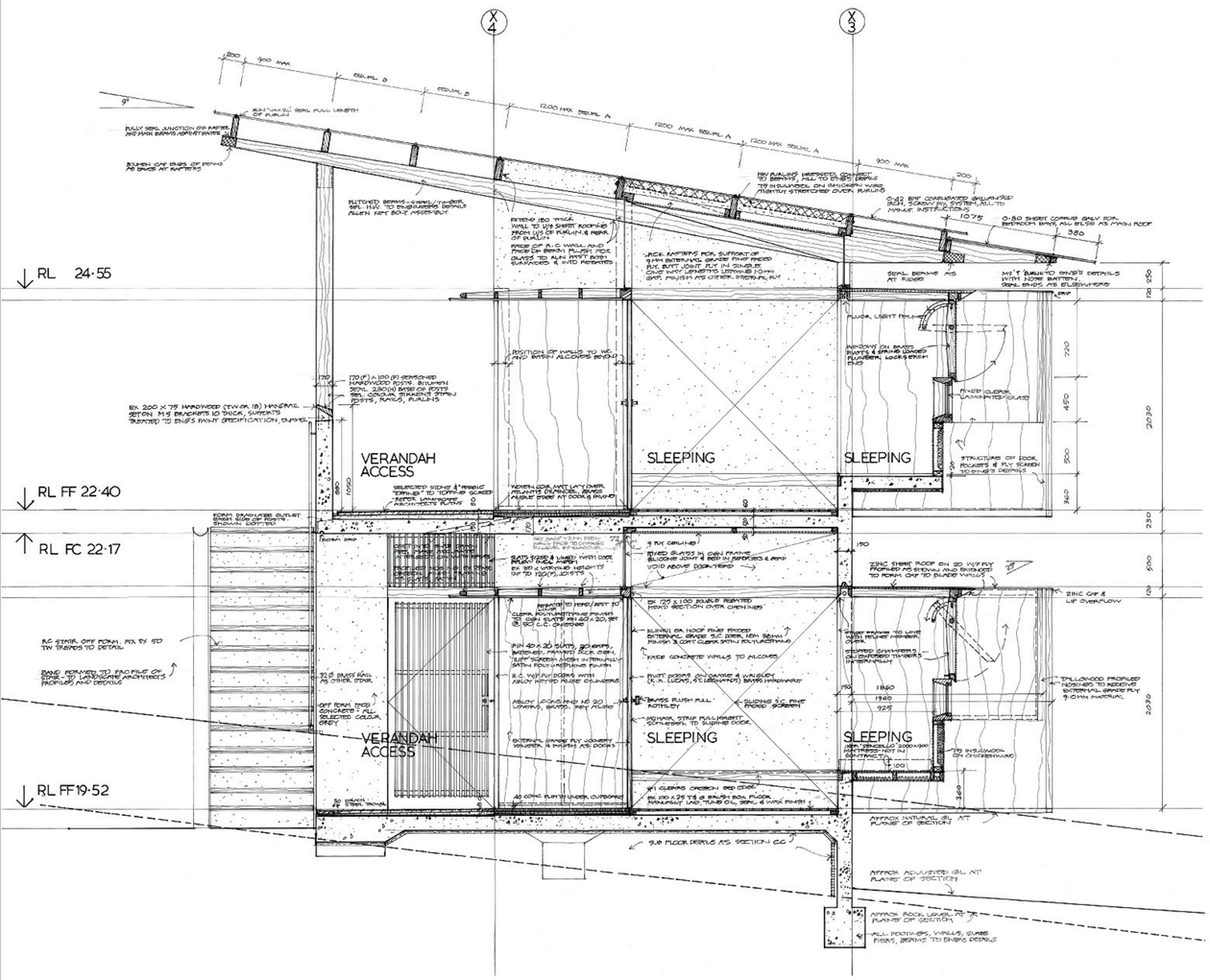
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