Rory Spence

BURGESS ENTRANCES

112 'ENTRANCE TRANSITION'
'Buildings, and especially houses, with a graceful transition between the street and the inside, are more tranquil than those which open directly off the street. . . .
Therefore:
Make a transition space between the street and the front door. Bring the path which connects street and entrance through this transition space, and mark it with a change of light, a change of sound, a change of direction, a change of surface, a change of level, perhaps by gateways which make a change of enclosure, and above all with a change of view.'

From: Christopher Alexander *et al, A Pattern Language,* 1977, pp548-552

Greg Burgess' additions to the Davis house in Melbourne's eastern suburbs are a beautiful evocation of several patterns from Christopher Alexander's *Pattern Language,* but in particular they are a remarkably rich, subtle and satisfying expression of Pattern No 112— 'Entrance Transition'. It comes as no surprise to find that Burgess has great respect for Alexander's book, although this project was designed before he came into contact with it.

The Davis house has a complex history. Before Burgess was called in, the original small house of 1961 by Lynton Bailey had already been sensitively extended for the Davis family by John Hitch (1968) and Kevin Borland (1975/76). The clients, however, while happy with the interior of their house, felt that its external appearance from the street was unwelcoming. They also wanted greater privacy, a double carport and an elevated sundeck. Burgess describes how there was 'an intense and rewarding period of discussion and debate with the Davises— reminding one of the delicate responsibility of the plastic surgeon as he discusses the reconstruction of a face with its owner'. 'To me,' he continues, 'the house, while having its own integrity, seemed to lack relationship to anything outside its walls, so I saw part of my job as introducing it to its garden, to the street and to its owner.' It is this close attention to inter-relationships, as much as the care and humanity in the design of each element that evokes

Alexander's Pattern Language. Burgess' additions are best seen as a small-scale demonstration of Alexander's brilliant concept of 'Site Repair', whereby unsatisfactory areas and relationships are 'repaired', but already beautiful parts are left intact; 'when you build a thing', Alexander writes, 'you cannot merely build that thing in isolation, but must also repair the world around it, and within it, so that the larger world at that one place becomes more coherent, and more whole; and the thing which you make takes its place in the web of nature, as you make it'.[1]

The following analysis is intended both to highlight the intense richness of the design and to show how closely it relates to some of Alexander's patterns,

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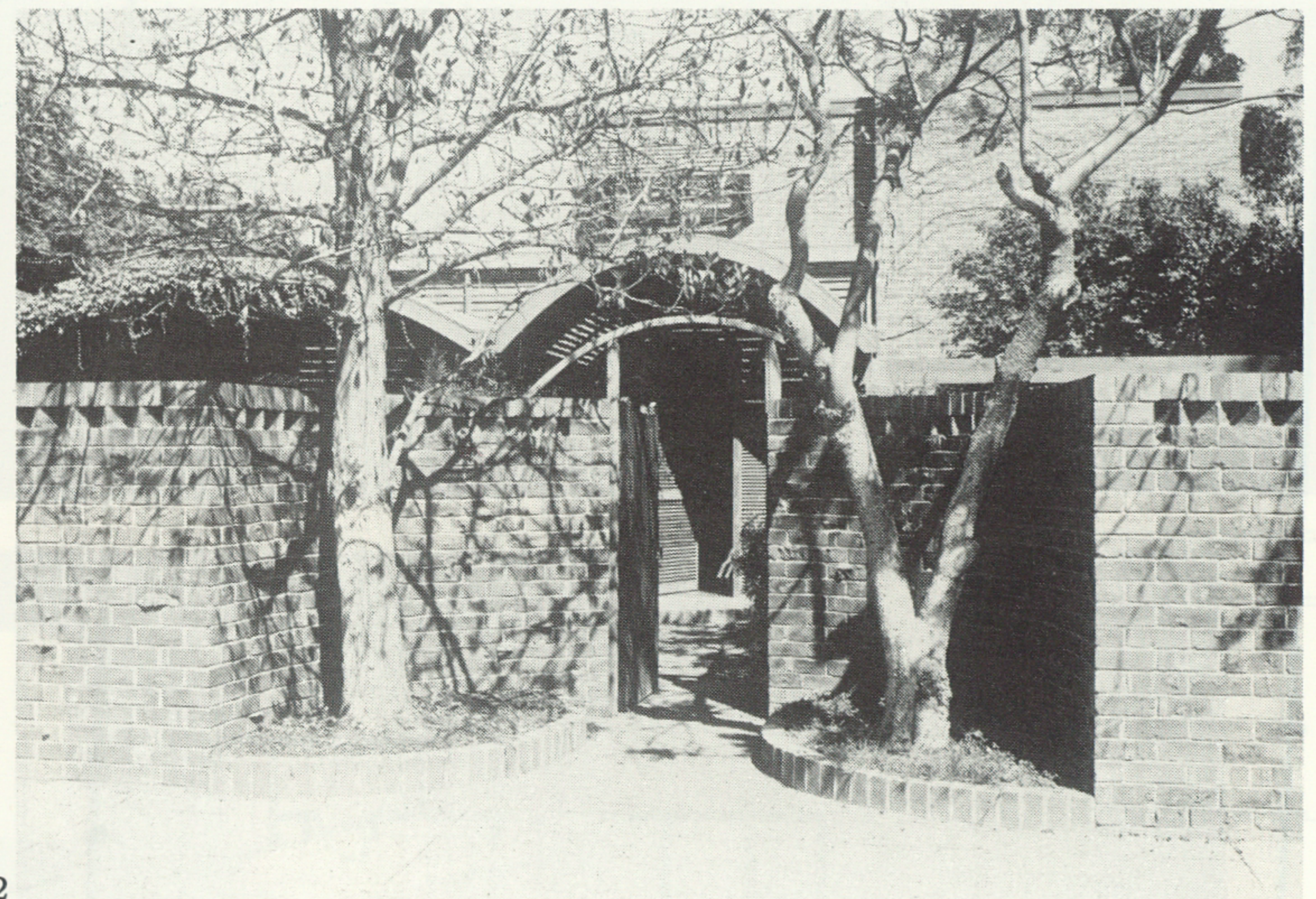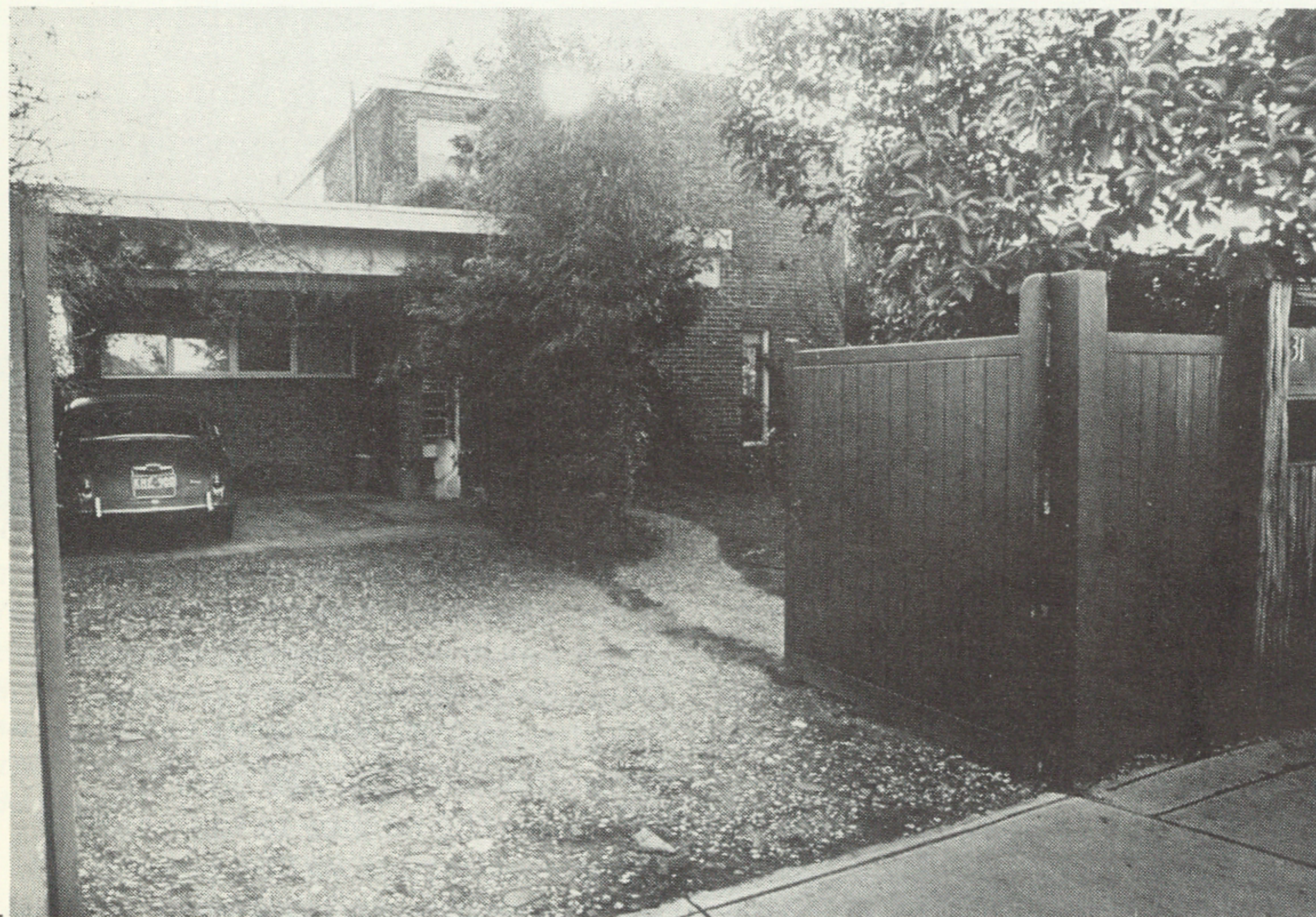
HOUSE EXTENSION, MELBOURNE, NEW SOUTH WALES

ARCHITECT: GREG BURGESS

1, view of house from street before Burgess added transitional elements to link yet separate house and street.
2, apse in new garden wall emphasises front gate and frames it with two existing trees.
3, parabolic vaults of different span give distinct form to new carport and entry porch.
4, the additions—each distinct in form yet linked to the others—and house behind, viewed from north east corner of now enclosed garden.


3

wich can be used as a source of inpiration for such work. Alexander's method can also help to clarify how there comes to be such poetic richness and depth of feling in this sequence of spaces. 'Every building, every room, eery garden,' he writes, 'is

The initial choice of parabolic tunnel vaults, covered with corrugated iron, on laminated timber arches for the carport and the porch was a bold and triumphantly successful idea. The dynamic rhythm of the parabolic curves, slightly

the front gate. (A gateway is formed with a simple bent timber arch, anticipating the vaults behind.) So the main entry is clearly announced and differentiated from the carport gates, while contribution is also made to the street by donating a
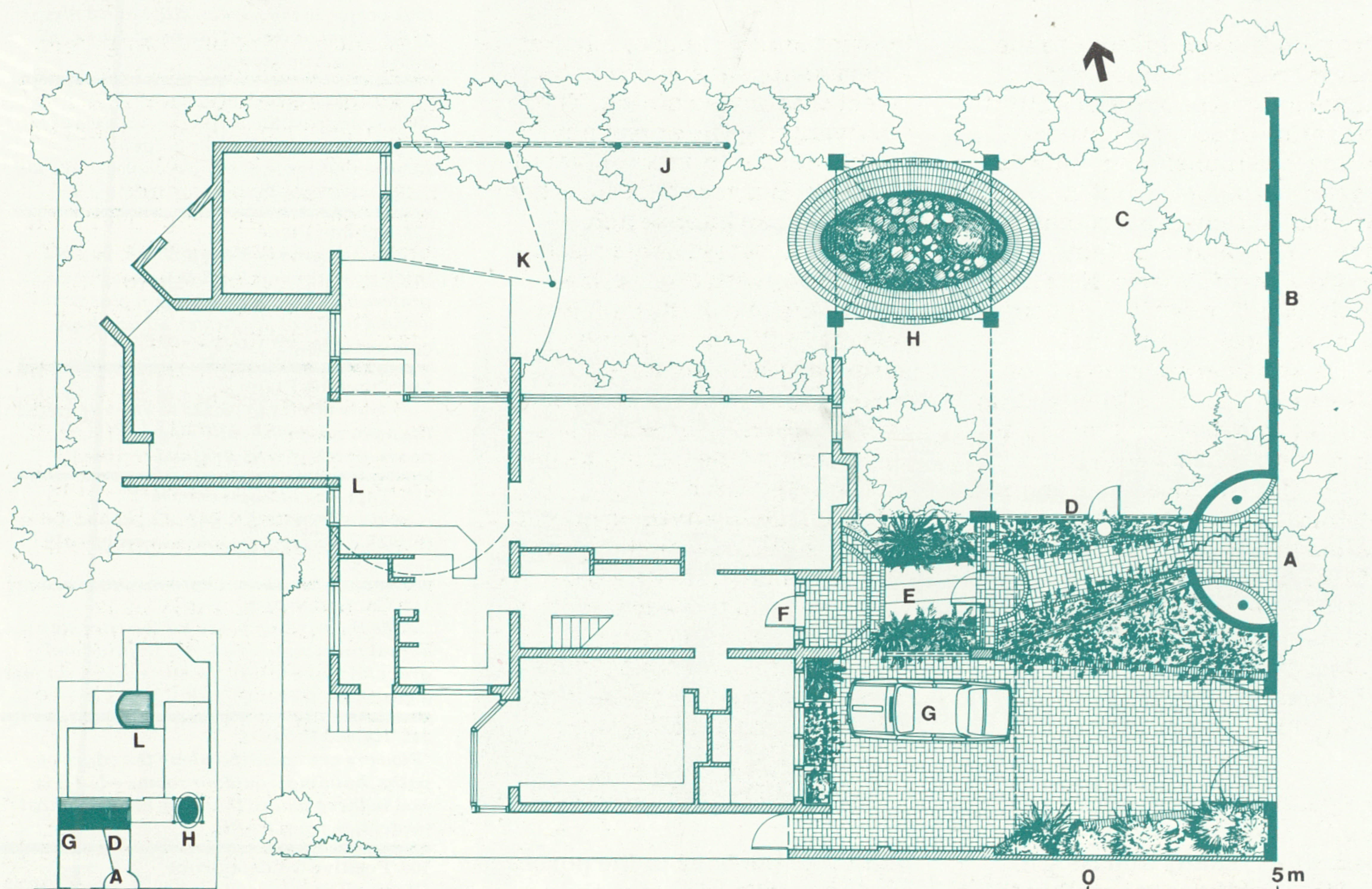
plan: key
A, front gate
B, brick wall
C, existing trees
D, enclosed entrance garden
E, entry porch/fernery
F, front door to existing house
G, carport
H, pond arbour
J, high level lattice screen
K, timber post and wire frame
L, first floor sundeck

0   5m

better when all the patterns which it needs are compressed as far as it is possible for them to be. The building will be cheaper; and the meaning in it will be denser. . . . It is, also, the only way of using a pattern language to make buildings which are poems.'[2]

The basic elements are a carport with drive, an entrance porch with front path, a garden pond, various fences and screening devices including a wall to the street, and a sundeck, over the existing dining/kitchen at the rear of the house.

reminiscent of Le Corbusier's Maison Jaoul, enliven the bland original facade while also creating a strong, protective and welcoming image of entry, visible from the street. The garden wall, built in brickwork to match the house, establishes a totally private front garden, in contrast to the ubiquitous, suburban open front; its coping is enriched with decorative brickwork related to local nineteenth-century traditions. At the entrance, the wall curves in to create an apse-like space around two existing trees which flank

portion of garden to it and creating a spatial incident on the footpath. A wonderful surprise greets the visitor on opening the sturdy timber gate. The brick-paved path passes through a kind of secret garden, a garden which no one overlooks, with billowing red Australian Grevillea on either side (in flower throughout the summer months).

The space is completely but delicately enclosed by three-layer lattice screens, although a gate on one side can be left open to allow views into the main garden. The path is set at an

Below are the Patterns—listed in the order they are alluded to—to be found in Burgess' additions

110 'Main Entrance'
'. . . give it a bold, visible shape which stands out in front of the building.'

173 'Garden Wall'
'Form some kind of enclosure to protect the interior of a quiet garden from the sights and sounds of passing traffic. . . . The smaller the garden, however, the harder and more definite the enclosure must become.'

249 'Ornament'
'. . . find those edges and transitions which need emphasis or extra binding energy . . . these are natural places which call out for ornament.'

53 'Main Gateways'
'Any part of a town—large or small—which is to be identified by its inhabitants as a precinct of some kind, will be reinforced, helped in its distinctness, marked, and made more vivid, if the paths which enter it are marked by gateways where they cross the boundary.'

171 'Tree Places'
'. . . shape the nearby buildings in response to trees, so that the trees themselves, and the trees and buildings together, form places which people can use.'

121 'Path Shape'
'Make a bulge in the middle of a public path . . . so that the path forms an enclosure which is a place to stay, not just a place to pass through.'

172 'Garden Growing Wild'
'A garden which grows true to its own laws is not a wilderness, yet not entirely artificial either . . . gardens that have to be tended obsessively, enslave a person to them; you cannot learn from them in quite the same way.'
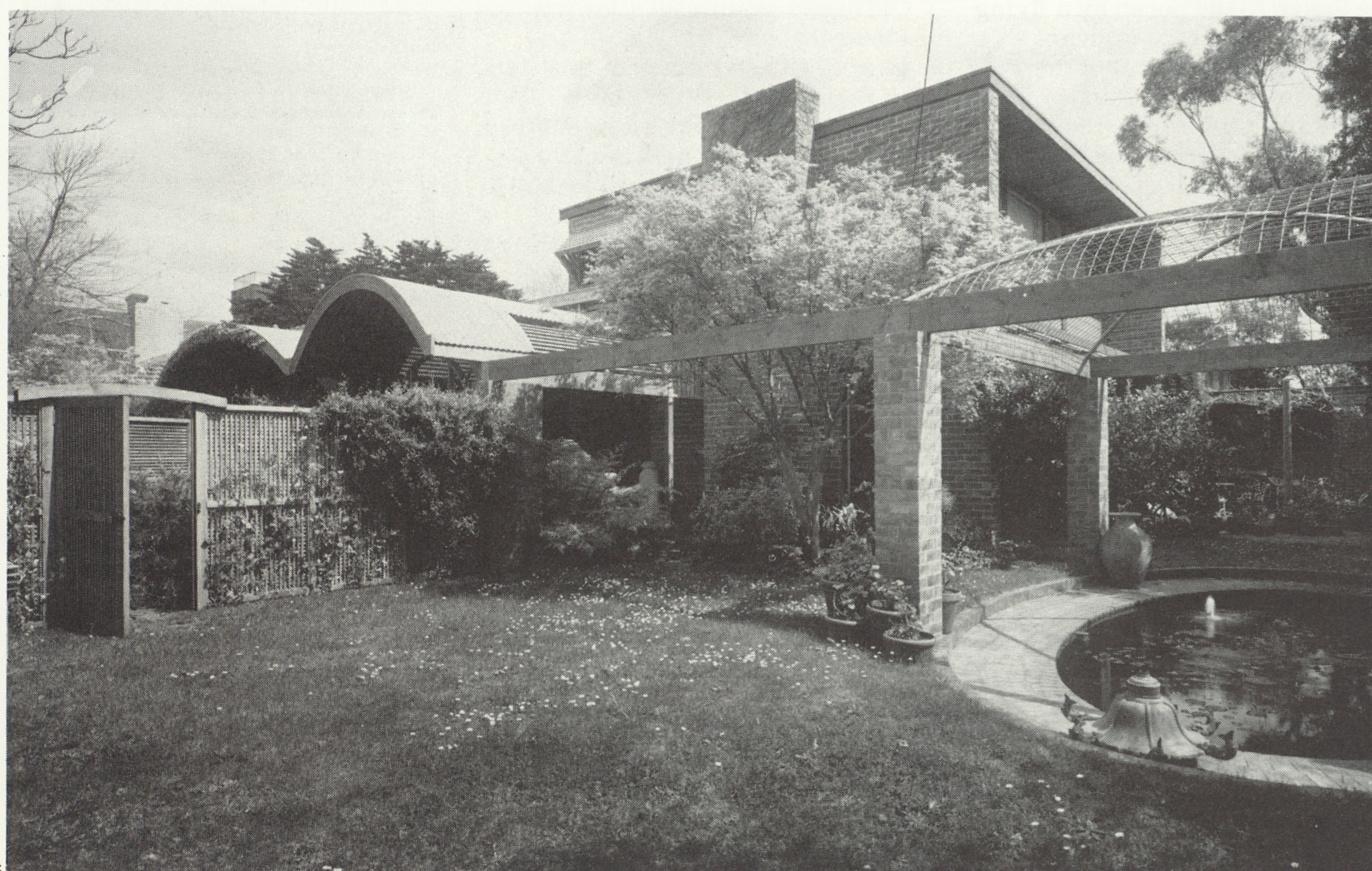
5, cool lushness and soft filtered light in entry porch encourage lingering to enjoy cross axial view to pool.
6, carport is pleasantly lit and planted.
7, enclosed entry garden with entry porch straight ahead.
8, side of entrance porch.
9, fat columns, shady arbour and elliptical pool create a still contemplative realm.

HOUSE EXTENSION, MELBOURNE

angle to the house because of two existing trees. Both path and enclosure broaden out to meet the porch, an expansive gesture of relaxation and welcome. Having passed through this idyllic, tranquil space, one reaches a second, arched gateway, preceded by a generous, semi-circular brick step which complements the arch and the welcoming hood of the vault above. The light latticework gate reveals the entry porch to be a

fern gully, shady and cool, bridged by three massively thick Red Gum planks. Louvred open portions of the roof let rain into the fernery on either side and allow narrow shafts of sunlight to break up the subdued light, as if in a miniature rainforest. A view opens up on the right to the garden and the oval pond, protected by its shallow, quadripartite vault of galvanised wire mesh with ribs of galvanised-iron piping supported on brick piers, eventually to be covered by wisteria. It becomes apparent that there is a spatial axis across the front of the house from the carport through the porch to the pond arbour, which is linked to the porch by a flying beam creating the effect of a pergola. Just in front of the entrance door to the house, the vaults terminate and the space expands upwards, enclosed by a slatted timber cage roofed with acrylic sheet, allowing filtered

light into the back of the porch and carport and easing the transition, both internally and externally, from the vaults to the rectilinear building behind.

Even the car court is an attractive, brick-paved yard, flanked by flower beds. The space at the back of the carport, usually dark and rather unpleasant, is enlivened by light from the acrylic roof above, allowing plants to grow here, partially in raised beds over recesses for wood storage, etc. The introduction of the pond arbour into the garden splits it into two smaller areas and contains the previously rather long, narrow space at the side of the house, while still allowing views through to the front garden. The intimacy of this side garden with its little sunny terrace in the corner against the house is further increased by a second, trapezoidal arbour and a lattice-work flying beam on timber posts, screening off the neighbouring house. The pond arbour further creates a calm, semi-Classical, unified space of its own, linking the two gardens, where one can sit in partial shade by the water.

The poetry and the richness of spatial experience in this small group of structures is astonishing. On my two visits to the house, the response was unequivocal—I felt an immediate sense of wellbeing as soon as I entered the front gate. It was a delightful and salutary reminder that architecture, however modest in scale, can be more than just a tasteful background, it can directly and positively enrich the lives of those who come into contact with it.

Notes
1 Alexander, op cit, pxiii.
2 Ibid, ppxliii–xliv.

130 'Entrance Room'
'At the main entrance to a building, make a light-filled room which marks the entrance and straddles the boundary between indoors and outdoors. . .'

111 'Half-hidden Garden'
'. . . protected by a wall from too great an exposure to the street; and yet open enough, through paths, gates, arcades, trellises, so that people in the garden still have a glimpse of the street, a view of the front door or the path to the front door.'

64 'Pools and Streams'
'We came from the water; our bodies are largely water; and water plays a fundamental role in our psychology. We need constant access to water, all around us. . .'

226 'Column Place'
'When a column is free standing, make it as thick as a man—at least 12 inches, preferably 16 inches; and form places around it where people can sit and lean comfortably. . .'

246 'Climbing Plants'
'. . . train climbing plants to grow up round the openings in the wall—the windows, doors, porches, arcades, and trellises.'

135 'Tapestry of Light and Dark'
'Create alternating areas of light and dark, in such a way that people naturally walk toward the light. . .'

113 'Car Connection'
'Make the parking place for the car into an actual room which makes a positive and graceful place where the car stands, not just a gap in the terrain.'

245 'Raised Flowers'
'Flowers are beautiful along the edges of paths, buildings, outdoor rooms—but it is just in these places that they need the most protection from traffic.'

106 'Positive Outdoor Space'
'Make all the outdoor spaces which surround and lie between your buildings positive. Give each one some degree of enclosure; surround each space with wings of buildings, trees, hedges, fences, arcades, and trellised walks, until it becomes an entity with a positive quality and does not spill out indefinitely around corners.'

114 'Hierarchy of Open Space'
'Whatever space you are shaping . . . make sure of two things. First, make at least one smaller space, which looks into it and forms a natural back for it. Second, place it, and its openings, so that it looks into at least one larger space.'

174 'Trellised Walk'
'Where paths need special protection or where they need some intimacy, build a trellis over the path and plant with climbing flowers. Use the trellis to help to shape the outdoor spaces on either side of it.'

176 'Garden Seat'
'Somewhere in every garden, there must be at least one spot, a quiet garden seat, in which a person—or two people—can reach into themselves and be in touch with nothing else but nature.'
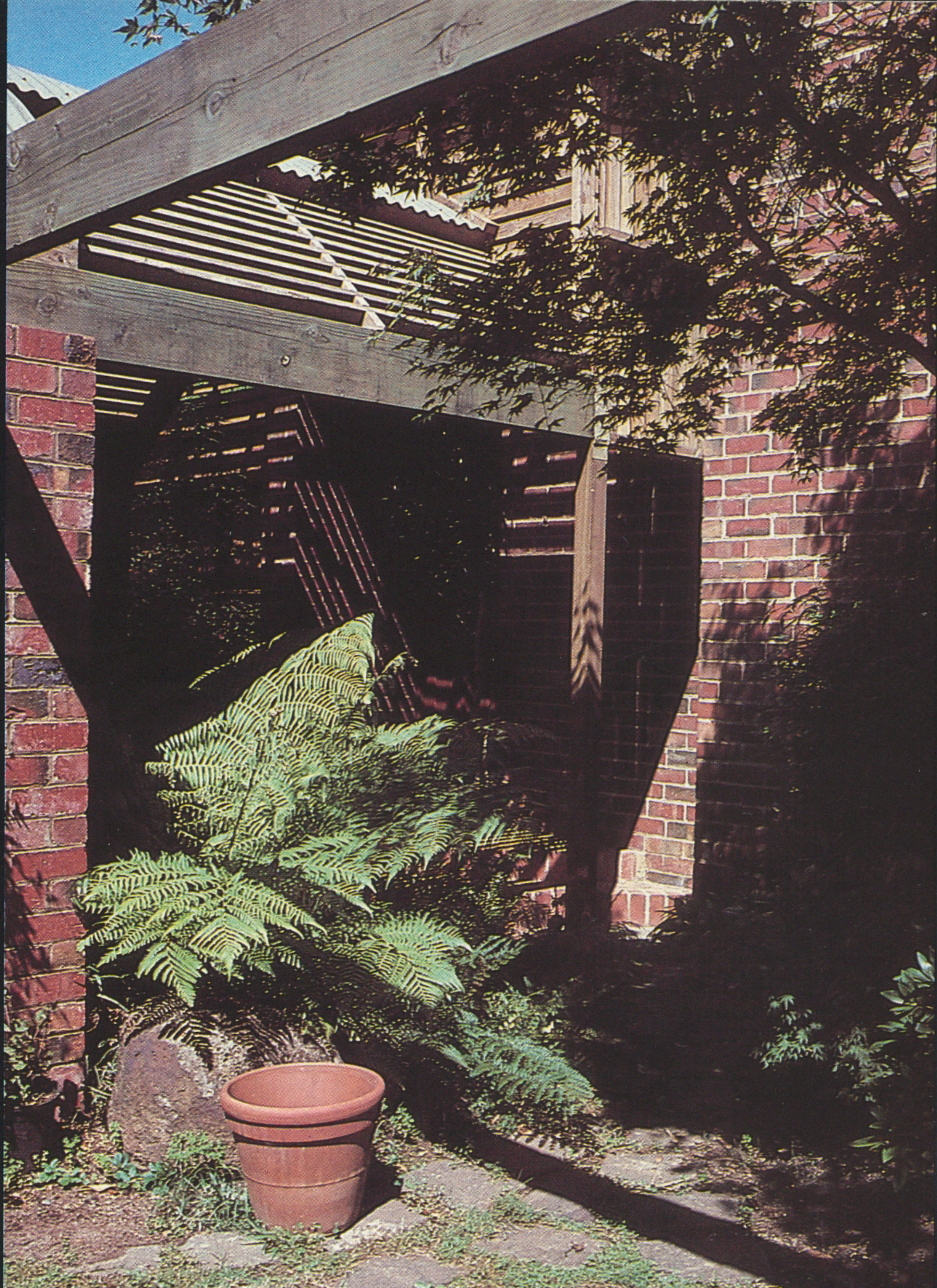
238 'Filtered Light'
'Where the edge of a window or the overhanging eave of a roof is silhouetted against the sky, make a rich, detailed tapestry of light and dark, to break up the light and soften it.'

THE ARCHITECTURAL
REVIEW

HOUSE AS HOME