

THE BARN IDENTITY

This contemporary rural retreat takes inspiration from its site, its rolling bucolic setting and the traditional livestock enclosures that punctuate it.

PHOTOGRAPHS BRETT BOARDMAN WORDS BECKY BARKER



THIS PAGE "The flat expanse of grass, undulating hills, and river to the north called for a gesture of opening to that special view," says Richard Cole, the property's architect. Consequently, the home's corrugated iron roof tilts upwards, and its north, east and west walls feature sliding glass doors and clerestory-style windows. OPPOSITE PAGE An overall sense of light and space is maximised in the vast open-plan living area with its carefully positioned kitchen, dining and sitting zones.



Startled kangaroos and skittish thoroughbreds scatter into the distance as cars pass the breeding studs that mark the way to this rural property in the Upper Hunter Valley. It's amid New South Wales horse country, an area of outstanding natural beauty resting beside the wilderness of the Barrington Tops National Park, a three-and-a-half-hour drive north of Sydney.

When Sydney-based architect Richard Cole was asked to design a holiday home here for an outdoorsy family of five, the rolling landscape naturally became his muse. "The owners really like modernist American houses of the 60s and wanted something pretty robust and simple. They didn't want it to be too clever or complicated – just something they could walk in and out of, while spending most of their time outside," he says. The northern beaches architect, who worked with such lauded Australian contemporaries as Peter Stutchbury and Paul Berkemeier before setting up his own practice, was particularly influenced on this project by Swiss modernist architect Peter Zumthor, who regards a home's prospective site as a source of inspiration. "His work in rural areas is quite intriguing," says Richard. "He made beautifully contained spaces which were not obviously responding to the landscape," he says.

With these ideas in mind and a stunning backdrop for his work, Richard set about crafting a house that would suit his clients' frequent entertaining needs, as well as their vision of a contemporary rustic retreat. "I call it rural shed-building technology," says Richard. While the Sydney-based owners laugh at the concept, they admit friends compared the building to a service station just after the concrete was poured and the factory-made steel frame was trucked in and bolted together. A year later, however, the description is defunct. Neither barn nor service station, the abode is more a chic and comfortable shelter – a shed for the 21st century. "It's not totally cutting edge," says one of the owners, who particularly likes the clean-lined openness of Austrian-American architect Rudolf Schindler's houses. "But we definitely achieved what we set out to do, which was to create something reasonably different from the mainstream," he says.

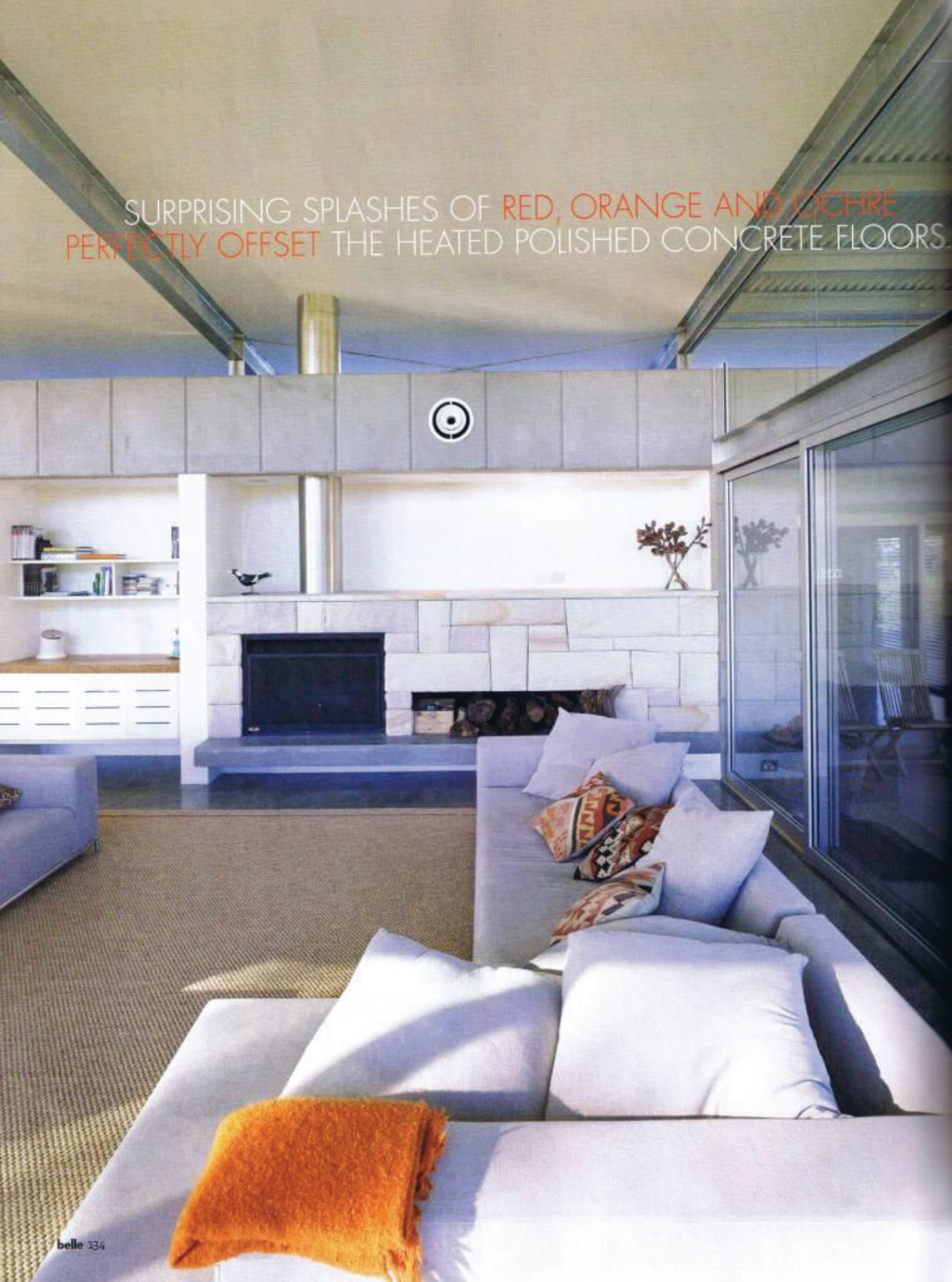


"THE OWNERS WANTED SOMETHING PRETTY ROBUST AND SIMPLE ... SOMETHING THEY COULD JUST WALK IN AND OUT OF, WHILE SPENDING MOST OF THEIR TIME OUTSIDE."



THESE PAGES A large 10-seater table from Spence & Lyda dominates the heart of the home. Here, an abstract painting by Dick Watkins and red touches provide warmth. Light and air flow seamlessly throughout.

SURPRISING SPLASHES OF RED, ORANGE AND OCHRE
PERFECTLY OFFSET THE HEATED POLISHED CONCRETE FLOORS.



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A painting by Anne France Fulgence and a Bernabeifreeman lampshade from Living Edge add character to the entry hall. Spice-tinged hues warm up the clean-lined kitchen, featuring industrial-style pendant lights and a CaesarStone island bench. A cut-out window in the hallway pantry wall admits natural light into the space and enables views of arriving guests and playing children. OPPOSITE PAGE A soft-grey B&B Italia sofa beckons guests in the lounge room, where rough-hewn Gosford sandstone blocks make a feature of the fireplace. A sisal rug from International Floor Coverings, an orange throw, and scatter cushions covered with old kilim rugs complement the relaxation area's natural look.



SPEED READ The owners of this property were after a bright, spacious, low-maintenance rural retreat. • They chose Sydney architect Richard Cole to bring their vision to life. • Richard realised the brief while pushing the boundaries of contemporary country style. • The resulting home combines the robust and simple practicalities of concrete and steel with warm-hued, textured interiors.



THIS PAGE, TOP Despite its low-slung profile, the home boasts a strong presence on the landscape. BOTTOM LEFT Enormous sliding doors separate living and sleeping zones. BOTTOM RIGHT A frameless glass shower screen and a sequence of mirrored panels bring a feeling of cleanliness and simplicity to the main bedroom ensuite. OPPOSITE PAGE Freestanding joinery makes the most of the space in the main bedroom, acting as a bedhead on one side and a walk-through robe on the other.



As the house cannot be seen from neighbouring properties or roads, council approval was swift and privacy ensured. A tilted, corrugated iron roof and a 4.5-metre-high glass frontage provides a perfectly framed panorama across a ravine of heaving nut-brown hills that reach up towards the sky. On an aesthetic level, the strong metal form mimics the traditional livestock enclosures that have dotted this landscape for generations. "There is definitely an agricultural feel to it, thanks to the raw materials, exposed steel and concrete used," says Richard.

This functional tone dominates the four bedrooms, which are lined up like protective stalls in a luxurious barn in the low-lying southern part of the home. A long, louvred central corridor, with screen doors at either end, separates the main bedroom and north-facing living zones. These rooms are dramatically revealed by enormous sliding tallowwood panels, hung from the ceiling on metal castors.

The easy open design supports an overall intention for the home to be solar passive. "When the louvres and sliding doors are opened in the living room, air accelerates through the house to the smaller southern openings," says Richard, who also installed rooftop solar panels, and a 130,000-litre

water tank and sewerage-treatment system, which are used to irrigate the garden and orchards.

While the bold design and construction were driven by the male owner – a self-confessed minimalist – his wife, who grew up in the area, wanted the house to have instant warmth. "It was a matter of compromising and adding touches to warm it up, as it is a vast concrete space," she says. A soft-charcoal modular sofa wraps around the honey-hued sandstone fireplace, while surprising splashes of red, orange and ochre perfectly offset the heated polished concrete floors. "I grew up in a house that was full of colour. I couldn't imagine a home without it," she says. Layers of rugs and cushions invite guests to linger fireside. But in terms of practicality, perhaps the most successful element in the open-plan living area is the central kitchen pod, with its long CaesarStone bench and hidden, orange-hued pantry. "When we have a lot of people to feed and don't want to wash up that night, we can just throw things in there to keep them out of sight until the next morning," she says. This leaves precious time to relax and soak up the spectacular view. "We didn't want a lot of furniture inside, because we wanted to draw the eye to the landscape, creating the feeling of sitting in it," she adds. 15