

SOMERS HOUSE

KENNEDY NOLAN

Words by Millie Thwaites • Photography by Derek Swalwell • Architecture by Kennedy Nolan • Build by Bartlett Architectural Construction
Landscape by Amanda Oliver Gardens • Engineering by WebbConsult • Joinery by Abcraft Cabinets



Somers House by Kennedy Nolan is a large coastal home for a family of five along the eastern edge of Victoria's Mornington Peninsula. Encompassing two forms running perpendicular to one another, the striking dichotomy of the front façade is immediately intriguing. Yet, despite this bold identity, Somers House is – at its very core – a place of reprieve, with opportunities to embrace or retract from the elements as desired.

First impressions of Somers House reveal a double-height, hermetic-looking elevation with a sweeping convex opening at its base. This form stretches the length of the far boundary before dovetailing a more familiar two-storey structure. The former is clad almost entirely in shou sugi ban charred timber punctuated only by a small circular opening – a telling Kennedy Nolan motif. The latter two-storey volume, however, features floor-to-ceiling windows spanning both elevations, simultaneously capturing south-facing oceans views and afternoon sun. As Kennedy Nolan Director Rachel Nolan explains, “in certain months there is tension between the pull of the northern sun and the southern sea views. The fully glazed elevations allow access to both, and when the doors are back you almost feel like you're on a bridge.”

The main entrance is tucked into the corner of the L-shaped form at the end of an undercover walkway. Stepping inside, a staircase located within the “sculptural knuckle” of the building leads to the children's wing above, whilst the primary part of the home unfurls to the right. Rachel describes this space as “an apartment”; its shared areas are where the whole family

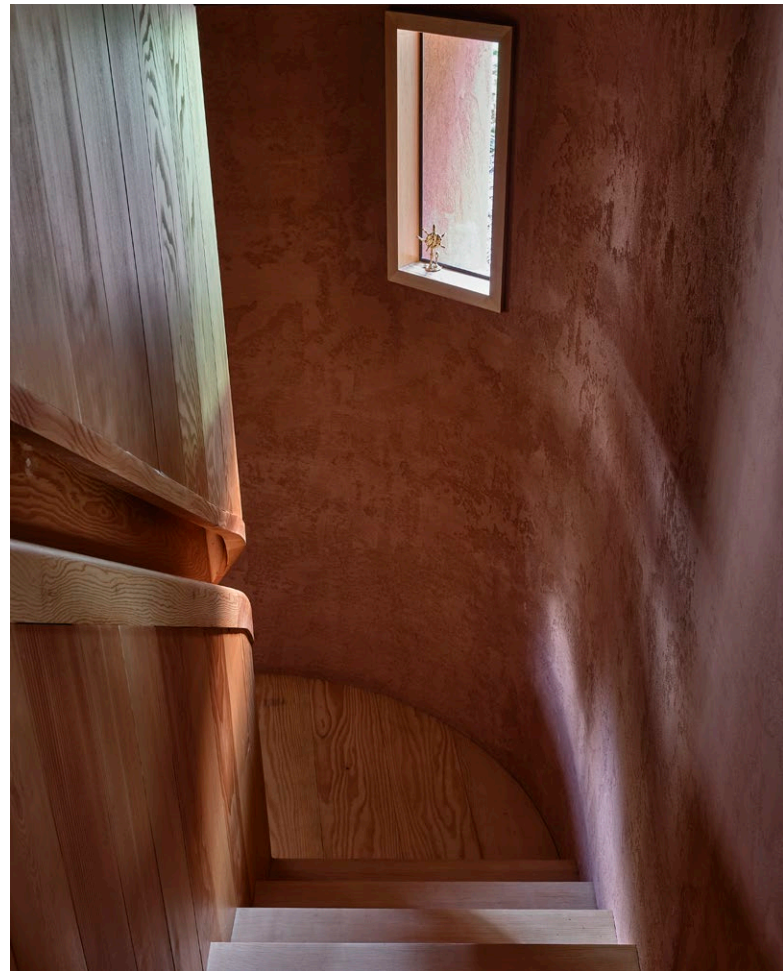
convenes when the house is full. Conversely, the clients can use it in isolation when visiting alone. There is a main bedroom with ocean views, a walk-in-robe and an ensuite with garden views; further into the plan there is a dining and living area separated by a kitchen with a butler's pantry. The floor-to-ceiling windows with balustrades on both elevations retract completely, easily transforming the space from an enclosed indoor room to a breezy, undercover balcony.

Of this primary living area, Rachel says “it is the most beautifully crafted interior of the house – the natural materials which are rich in both colour and texture are real favourites of our practice.” The layered palette features solid Oregon timber – which will become more honey-toned over time – as well as red Persian travertine, cork, brass and slate, and natural light is tempered by linen curtains. “The beauty inherent in the interior linings makes the space feel almost complete with minimal furniture and decoration,” Rachel notes, adding, “there's no plasterboard, nothing is white, the acoustics are gentle; the space is soft, earthy and tactile.”





Aesthetically and texturally rich, Oregon timber and brass detailing embellish the kitchen with a sense of warm, natural connection.



The children's wing above, which runs back towards the north, can also be used in isolation; however, the central knuckle and void space allows for a degree of connection. "It's a really lovely part of the entry sequence and if the kids are upstairs, you can easily give them a 'hoy!'," Rachel says. A long hallway stretches the length of this form connecting two bedrooms, a bathroom, a small kitchen and a north-facing living room. "It doesn't always have to be about the view; in winter – like a cat – you can find the sun," Rachel says. There is also a separate entrance so the children can come and go, and a large outdoor terrace with glimpses to the ocean.

This three-storey home neatly addresses the site's sloping conditions and dual orientation, as well as the clients' requirement for complete accessibility. "We focused on making sure our client could move with ease through every part of the home," Rachel says, adding, "it was important that the house felt 'easy' and that essential equipment – which is typically clinical – was made beautiful." As such, accessible design principles have been integrated into the architecture purposefully and elegantly; proportions are generous throughout, and there is a lift tucked into the building's central knuckle alongside the staircase. Also, the ground floor – which

houses a guest bedroom, bathroom, laundry, second living area and an outdoor undercover terrace – can "provide accommodation for carers when required," and every part of the home is accessible by wheelchair, including the rooftop of the renovated boat shed.

Inherently site and client specific, this project also expresses a confident use of colour. Alongside the charcoal timber cladding, shades of earthy red emerge frequently, most notably in the exterior render. As Rachel notes, the clients were inspired by travels to Mexico and the "joyful colours of [Luis] Barragan's work"; however, the Mexican architect's affinity for vivid pinks and oranges "felt a little foreign here". Thus, Kennedy Nolan looked to the palette of Queenie Mackenzie – a Gija artist from the East Kimberley – whose predominant use of ochre developed a language that resonated more deeply with the clients' travels in Australia. "We wanted to find a way to work with intense natural colours and Queenie's ochre paintings of her Country gave us a common language – one where colour feels as though it's come from the earth." She adds that "this is a house for an adult family to share and they were all very engaged with the colour selections – it really did bring everyone together."





The exterior shell is formed from shou sugi ban charred timber and is interrupted by a small circular opening characteristic of Kennedy Nolan's work.



Expertly following the slope of the terrain, the home fulfils the need for total accessibility and flowing movement between inside and out.



Dressed in the decadent hues of deep brown and red, the building enjoys both ocean and garden views.



The gardens, conceived by landscape designer and regular Kennedy Nolan collaborator Amanda Oliver, were also informed by the clients' "brave" approach to colour. A cleverly conceived "deciduous gully" runs across the front of the site from east to west, featuring a mix of European, North American and native Australian plants including a magnificent existing forest pansy, which changes throughout the year from deep burgundy to soft pink. The colours of this hard-wearing, seasonal garden complement the red render, and the matte charcoal cladding works to enhance this richness. As Rachel points out, this landscaped element is not only aesthetic; it serves an important functional purpose, too. "When it's in full leaf it protects the house from the summer sun and in winter, it allows the warmth to be enjoyed inside." She reflects, "our clients have spoken about how much pleasure they take from the seasonal garden – from inside these changes can be quietly observed and enjoyed, and in time, the forest pansy will be such a pleasure."

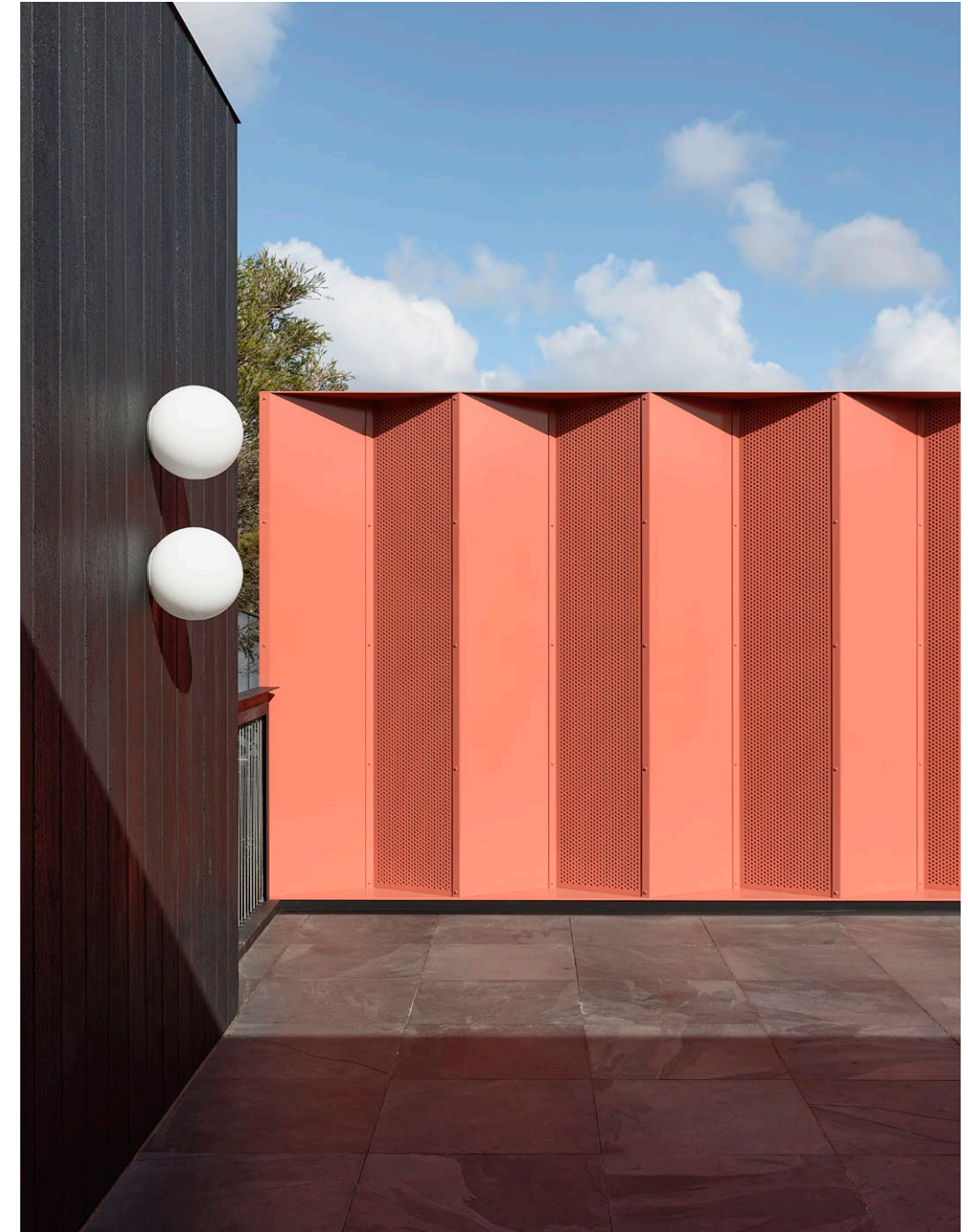
Though this is a generously sized, three-storey home, it expresses intimacy in its various volumes. This is due, in part, to Kennedy Nolan's ability to

embed technical detail and functionality into the design, resulting in spaces that express an effortless precision. As Rachel says, this is also due to the project's builder "who was highly skilled in delivering the required level of craftsmanship." She adds, "he is both a talented and caring builder – a very special combination of qualities which we think are so evident in the build. We're very grateful to him and his team." The resulting quietude can be felt in myriad ways; large windows create deep shadows that slowly shift over the course of the day; block colours throw distinctive hues that change with varying depths of natural light; and, most importantly, the surrounding environment can be experienced across the seasons.

The nuanced brief for Somers House demanded an involved and intuitive architectural response and pleasingly, the experience denotes very few of these complexities. As Rachel offers, "there are many things to feast your eyes on in this house, but we feel like the success is that the house itself is gentle – it simply holds you." She adds, "when the landscape takes over, the balance will reset and occupation will be about the place, the sun on your back and that view at your fingertips."



Somers House expresses a bold use of colour, using tones of red inspired by the clients' travels through Mexico and the ochre paintings of Queenie Mackenzie.



Contrasting with the dark charcoal timber on the exterior, earthy red tones provide the home with a confident presence among the surrounding vegetation.