

**Location:** Balnarring,  
Victoria

**Owners:** Isaacson/ Davis

**Architect:** John Wardle  
Architects Pty Ltd

**Engineer:** Street Moorhouse  
Pty Ltd

**Builder:** Kane Construction  
(Vic) Pty Ltd in association  
with Mal McQueen

**Construction Date:** 1996



written by: Susan Ferguson | design: Peter Walker



# Isaacson/Davis Beach House

Balnarring, Melbourne - Victoria

In 1997, architect John Wardle received the RAIA (Victorian Chapter) Architecture Medal for the design of the best building in the state - a beach house for clients, Tony Isaacson and Megan Davis, at Balnarring, an hour's drive south of central Melbourne on the Mornington Peninsula. The site, nestled amongst coastal ti trees with a tiny camping ground across the road, is tucked behind the fore-dune, which screens any ocean view.

The house serves as a "weekender" for the clients - one an executive in the construction industry, the other in local government. Modest in size, the house is intended as a retreat, a place to relax and "run the dogs along the beach".

Wardle describes the house as a place that can be "unpacked" on arrival and "repacked" on departure, as though the house itself reflects the joy of happily unpacking the tote bag, thrown in the back of the car for the weekend away.

Wardle effects this by making a contemporary reading of Modernism, with particular reference to those houses designed by Marcel Breuer during his 28-year affiliation with Herbert Beckhard. The use of timber in Wardle's design, however, plays a key role in translating this reading.

top right:  
view along northern approach  
to the house

main image  
northern side of the house with  
courtyard  
photos - courtesy of the  
architects

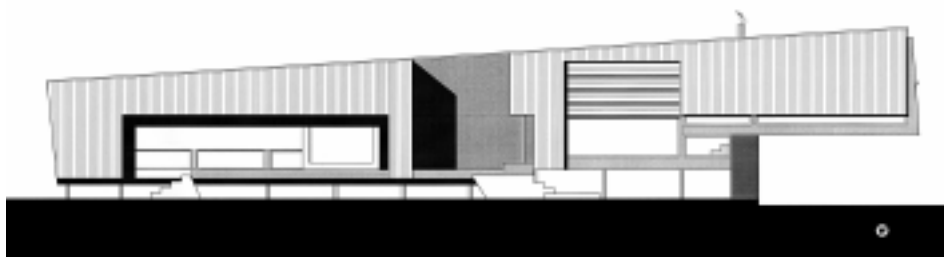
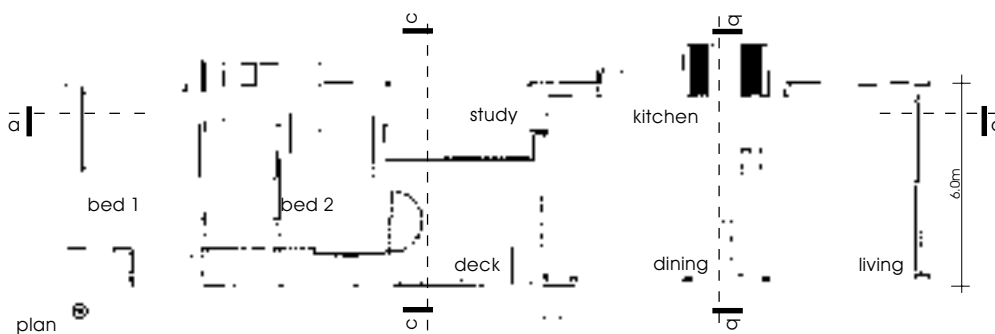


• **Description** - Wardle is faithful to the Breuer idiom. In planning terms, the house is both "long", where living areas are situated at one end, services in the middle and bedrooms at the far end, and "binuclear", where sleeping and living areas are more emphatically separated. Wardle also manipulates the section, so as a result of a rising skillion, one end becomes two storeys; the ground floor as garage.

The sequence of entry and threshold is also carefully considered. Like many Breuer houses, Wardle's design is hidden (or "unpacks") as a way to heighten discovery. Visitors are made to approach the house from the road, a distance that allows, indeed "forces them to consider the form they are about to enter" (Masello, p47). Visitors to the Balnarring house must then track along the long northern face of the building to enter into an outdoor room, carved out of the long box that is the house, which makes the (binuclear) plan that separates the living and sleeping zones.

The house also floats above the site. This gravity defying notion Breuer referred to as "atavistic instinct". Thereby the landscape remains relatively undisturbed and paving, garden walls and driveways are "free flowing forms that are foils to emphasise the otherwise linear emphasis of the house" (Masello, p13). Like Breuer, Wardle incorporates these earth defying elements with earth bound or anchoring elements, so that the house cantilevers over the site. Being elevated the house needed to be light - a quality inherent in timber building.

The building is clearly Modern. Interior spaces are spanned with a structural efficiency that allows for a maximum interplay between inside and out. Dynamic interplay between solid and void is also explored, at times extending into the landscape (protruding southern niches). The open roof of the outdoor room fosters the sense of capturing additional space. Like Breuer, the house is contextual, where local materials and vernacular traditions are embraced.



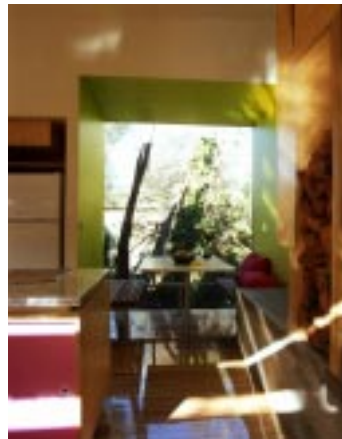
top left  
outdoor room and entry into the house

top right  
interior of living room  
photos - J. Abell

above left  
floor plan of the beach house

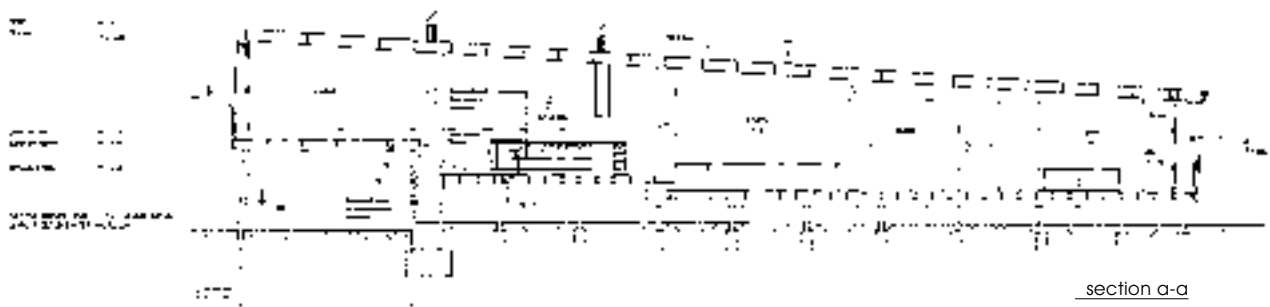
above right  
west elevation

left  
north elevation - cantilevered living area  
over garage to the right  
drawings - courtesy of the architects

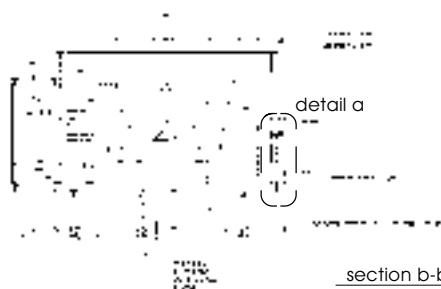


• **Structural Description** - Wardle uses timber to achieve a “sheathing” of the building. The external skin is composed as two stud framed skins - the inner “expressed as finely dressed and housed within the other, a folded sheath of undressed vertical cedar lining boards” (Goad, p43). The outer skin will weather to a grey - white whilst the inner skin is oiled to reveal its warmth and tactility. The further you move into the house, or as the house “unpacks”, the use of timber in window joinery, floorboards and furniture is scaled and finished to express the inherent qualities of the material.

Wardle’s design is a simple frame and beam system that utilises stud framing so that ‘the local builder could construct it’. In many ways the house is merely a crafted version of the Australian vernacular for building ‘fibro beach shacks’. It hovers above the site, so that the timber is free of the ground plane and therefore of contact with moisture and decay. The cedar cladding will weather to further enhance the formal nature of the building.



section a-a



section b-b



section c-c

Effectively, Wardle has designed a box. The platform rests on a network of concrete stumps that carry bearers in three lines along the length of the building, with joists that then span across at approximately 450mm centres. The perimeter walls are standard stud framed construction, typically double thickness to achieve the aesthetic and “sheathing” of the building. At the top plate to the stud walls, purlins then span in the same direction as the floor joists at 900mm spacing. Within the structure there is a series of steel square hollow sections which act as lintels for the long strip windows as well as provide a method of achieving the cantilever for the garage. All of the steel is hidden within the timber stud wall frame.

top (left to right)  
 -eastern elevation  
 -fireplace  
 photos - J. Abell  
 -dining alcove interior/  
 -exterior protruding southern dining niche  
 photos - courtesy of the architects

middle right  
 section a-a, longitudinally through building

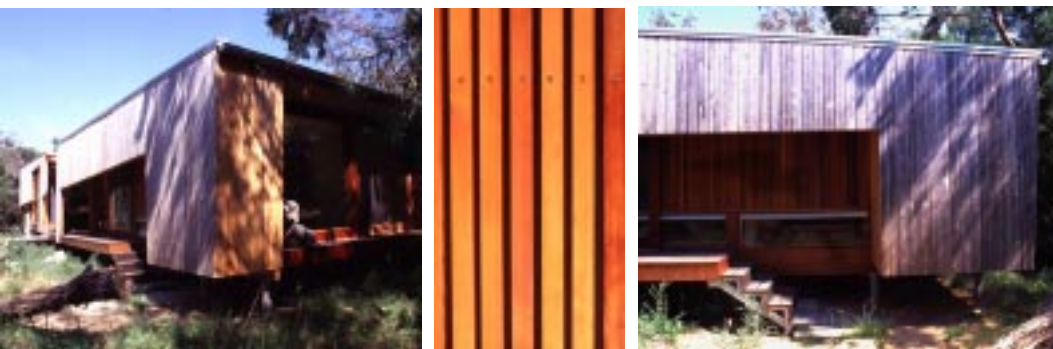
bottom right  
 section b-b + section c-c



## A strategy for design with timber

**Selection of timber species in terms of weathering, aesthetics and availability** - The appearance and performance of timber varies considerably with species, so select the right species for a task is a critical design choice. Timber left exposed internally is often selected for its colour, grain and texture, while external timber must be selected for durability and the character it develops as it weathers over time.

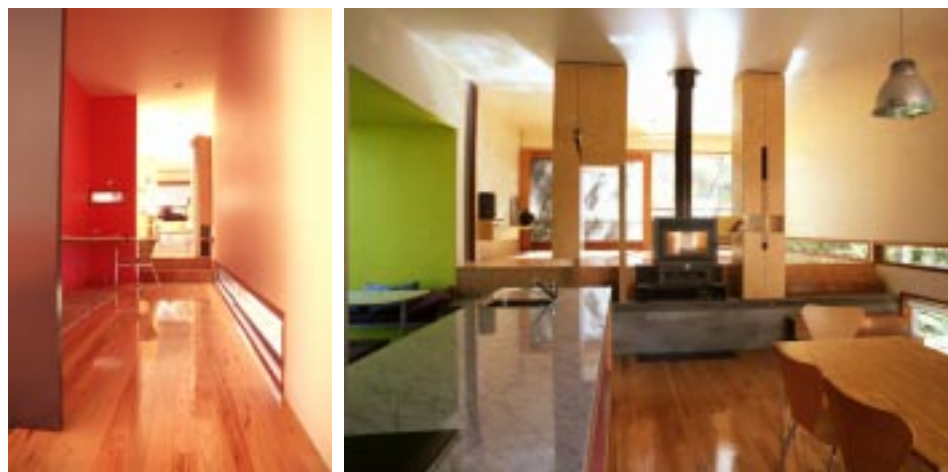
Availability is also important. Except for Cypress and a few other species of pine, most of our native timbers are **hardwoods**, predominantly eucalypts. As our skill base in commercial construction was historically based on British construction technology, centred on **softwoods**, a lively import trade for softwood developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly with the west coast of the United States and Canada. Several imported species are now accepted stock building materials in this country. One of these is Western Red Cedar (WRC). Wardle selected this for the external cladding of this building, as it is readily available in Victoria, has high durability and weathers to a light uniform silver grey. Wardle selected Jarrah for the external decking for the house. Predominantly grown in Western Australia, it has a reputation as a durable species to use externally, that weathers well and has a warm red colour. Like most hardwood, jarrah is also hard enough to use as flooring and decking. The frame for the house, which is concealed by finishes and protected from the weather, is radiata pine.



The internal flooring is "natural feature" Victorian Ash. Up until recently, only premium **grades** of Australian hardwood was seasoned and sold for flooring or other appearance products. The remainder, especially figured material, was sold unseasoned and used predominantly in domestic framing.

The Australian Standard for hardwood reinforced this pattern of use. It was structured on the assumption that material that had few apparent natural features in it was "good", and so, was called "select" grade material. Timber with more natural feature was regarded as not as desirable and was graded as "standard" or "utility". This attitude is now actively under challenge as architects demand timber with more character and as industry tries to develop a new market for a material traditionally hidden in wall frames. As a result, the Standard has been changed and grades established for high and medium feature material. Wardle has selected "natural feature" flooring because he sought figuring and therefore a more lively surface in the floor finish.

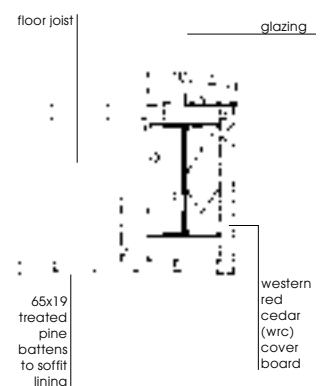
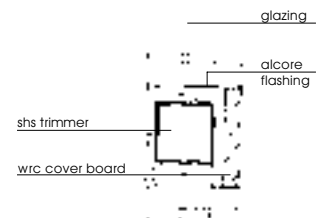
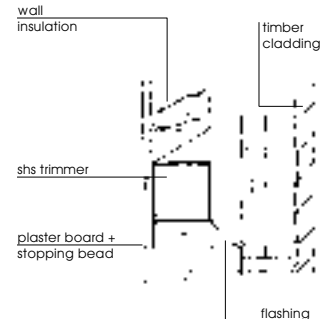
For joinery in the building, Wardle selected Hoop Pine plywood to provide an even palette and to provide contrast to colour used to paint the plasterboard walls.



middle (left to right)  
 -northern face - bedroom end  
 -detail of jarrah lining - outdoor room  
 -cedar outer skin and jarrah inner lining  
 photos - J. Abell

bottom left  
 view to end bedroom along study/  
 passage  
 photo - J. Abell

bottom right  
 the kitchen and dining room  
 looking towards the fireplace  
 (living room beyond)  
 photo - courtesy of the architects



detail a

### • references

Goad, P. 1997, 'Beach House', Architectural Review Australia, Summer, pp 40-47

Masello, D. 1998, Architecture Without Rules: The House of Marcel Breuer and Herber Beckhard, reprint edn, W.W. Norton & Company, pp 9-22

### • glossary

**grade:** the designation of the quality of a piece of timber or other manufactured wood products in accordance with standard rules

**hardwood:** a general term for timber of broad-leaved trees classified botanically as Angiosperm. The term has no reference to the relative hardness of the wood

**softwood:** a general term for timber of trees classified botanically as Gymnosperm - commercial timbers of this group are nearly all conifers

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