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URBAN VERNACULAR

– HOUSE NAJMEH, JOHANNESBURG

ARCHITECT: **MIRA FASSLER KAMSTRA**

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THE PRACTICE OF architecture, much as the human mind itself, would seem to occupy two domains, that of the rational and that of the romantic. The fact of the matter is not that there is a dualism or dichotomy, but rather that these are, in reality, elided worlds. What we usually see in the expressed aesthetic of a design is the predominance of the realm that guides the thinking of the designer, and then not appreciate the subsumed or disguised influence of its counterpart.

Seasoned designers bring a depth of experience, empathy and humanity to their designs, ever more so when designing a home for the private client. Johannesburg has had its traditions: the rationalism of the Moderns, with Rex Martienssen as their prophet, then the longer tradition of the romantics – often of the Baker School, following the Arts and Crafts tradition. The Modern legacy persists into the present through the neo-modern expressions – chic, shiny, precise and minimalist. But the Arts and

Crafts tradition also has its legacy, finding inspiration in what the common folk do for themselves. It is probably also fair to say that while for the functionalism of the machine aesthetic, the plan is the generator, for the experiential qualities of the romantic tradition, the section guides the design exploration.

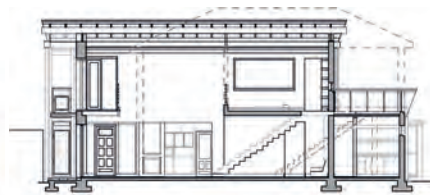
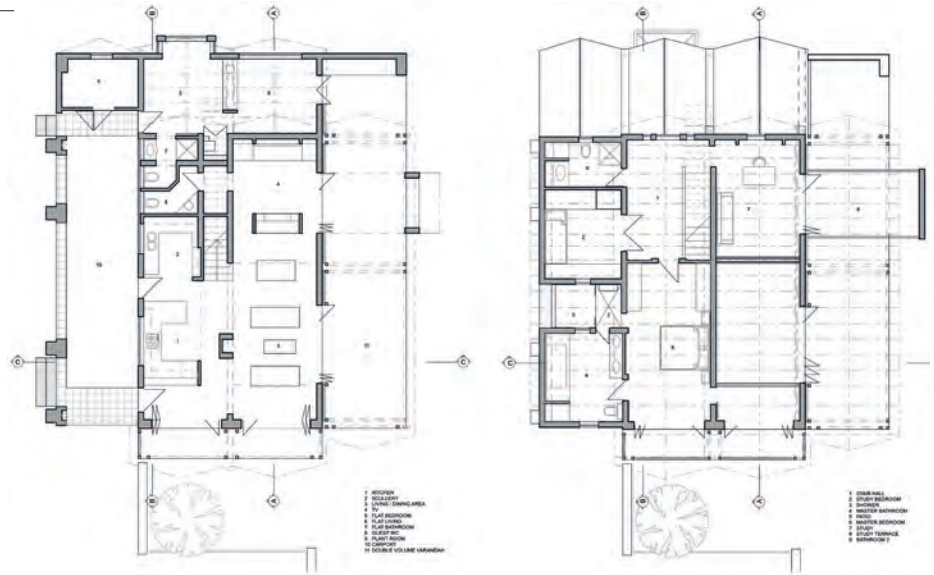
We can explore these tenets in House Najmeh.

The client had started a project on a sub-divided property, the new building being located tightly in the corner



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- 1 View of SE from Ridge Rd
- 2 View of SW from Ridge Rd



proximate to the road and cheek-by-jowl to the adjacent neighbouring Cape Revival Coach House. As the building was being realised, the client became ever more uncomfortable with the layout and the scale, and so took the design to Mira Fassler Kamstra. While the originally-built rejected structure determined some of the layout and structural rhythm, much of it was demolished to make way for the redesign.

The client had as inspiration the new regionalist variants of Australasian house architecture as published in a 2004 book edited by Geoffrey London, *Houses for the 21st Century* (Tuttle Publishing). Besides having an intelligent introductory essay by himself, it features homes inspired by cultures, styles and technologies away from the western traditions, although one cannot always say without that influence. What it does often show are

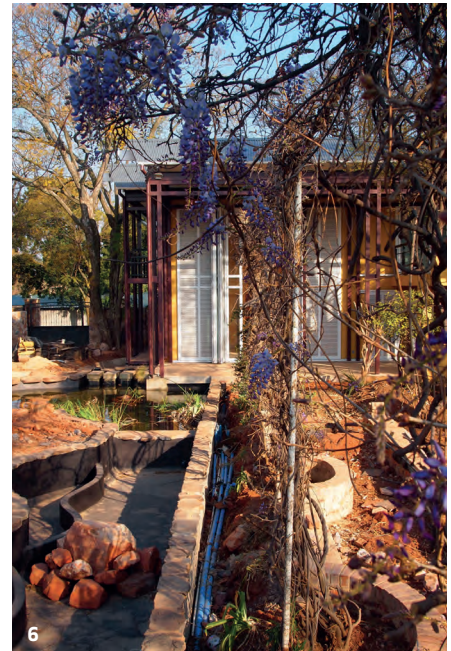
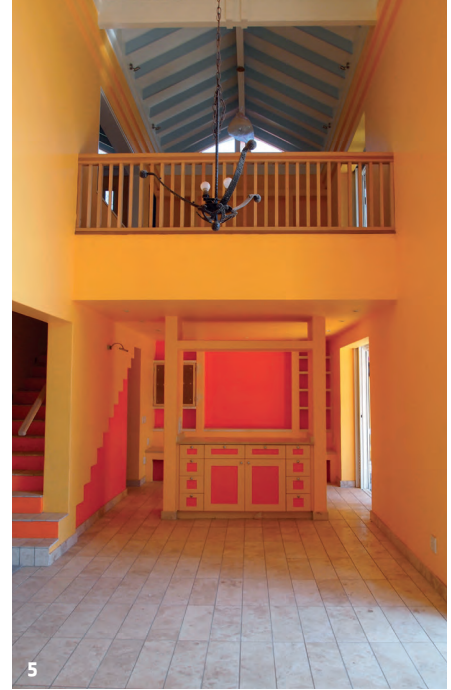
other attitudes to spaces and lifestyle – perhaps more relaxed, less programmatic and even unpredictable. Those influences prevail here.

I take as further pointers for evaluation London's concluding remarks in the book's introductory essay: '... the houses [featured] demonstrate a response to what is known and tangible. There is a strong interest in the tactile – the presence of materiality rather than immateriality. There is a preference for substance, rather than the absence that characterised so much of the late 20th-century minimalist architecture.'

This seems to be the essence of the character of this house. The designer shows concern about how things are made and where they meet, and how this making and meeting of materials gives the house substance and defines where material starts and space emerges. It is not

the space-box of hi-tech, but a concern with the crafted object, an artefact for living in. However, in its space-making it borrows from the Modern – the spaces interlock three-dimensionally in a series of crafted vertical boxes, but rather than space-flow, here it is of clearly delineated and defined spacial zones, although there is still three-dimensional space-connectedness.

The client has an affinity for Mediterranean and Portuguese use of colour, particularly their ceramics – clearly exploited to give the house a warm and vibrant glow, with ceramics chosen to create a premeditated ad-hocism in placing, pattern and colour. How materiality expresses texture and pattern and where these are applied is also part of the design exploration and resolution. As London explains: 'They [the houses featured] are deeply rooted



with their sites and with their location and respond directly to the local climate and social conventions. They are not abstract objects that could be found in any city in the world. In the face of growing globalisation, it is to their specificity that they lay claim.'

The designer has claimed the entire site and even brings adjacent buildings and extant features into play. So it is a site within a site. Although the garden is not yet complete, many of the structural features are in place and extend and tie the house to its landscape, both the extant features of the previous property, like the old tennis court pergola, and new or revived features, such as the fountain stream and pond. This has also informed the three-dimensional arrangement of the surrounds, with a high-raised terraced

vegetable garden to the rear, something still in progress.

The series of parallel low-pitched roofs with their deep box gutters and tapered captured-gable verges (the last being a free space, double-volume verandah to the court of the garden) are both practical and functional. They all create a horizontal visual intrigue, a device which ties the edges of the 'fifth' elevation – one that is often not perceived from below, particularly in the Modern aesthetic – to the filigree of surrounding trees and adjacent buildings.

Water is collected in tanks, an old domestic necessity here fashionably resurrected, as is the corrugated iron roof.

The suburb, one of the older and more established ones in Johannesburg, with its large jacarandas, has a leafy, long-

lived feel. The eclecticism of House Najmeh thus fits comfortably, in look and feel, with its surrounds, genuflecting to the aesthetics of the past, with timber-trellised railings and exposed eaves, while accepting what contemporary materials and technologies have to offer, such as double-storeyed slide-away aluminium doors. While the house finds inspirations in 'borrowed' precedents, these are digested and expressed as giving identity to the client as having her own 'vernacular' – not imposed but understood by the designer, who interpreted and helped augment the client's identity by living, not in, but through the design.

To paraphrase London, in the face of growing globalisation, it is to its specificity that it lays claim.



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- 3 Roofs from Ridge Rd
- 4 North elevation from garden
- 5 View of TV area and study
- 6 Along tennis court fence and stream
- 7 View from NE across the pond
- 8 View across verandah of study balcony
- 9 View across LR of gallery