

VISION



Masterclass

Catholic Ladies College,
Eltham, Melbourne

Through the Looking Glass

Piermont House, Victoria

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New World Glass



Masterclass

A new chapel and recital centre at the Catholic Ladies College in Melbourne's Eltham makes a remarkable engagement with its Green wedge setting. Designed by Williams Ross Architects, keen spatial qualities balance nature and nurture.



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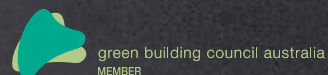
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Through the Looking Glass

Two giants of 20th century architecture, Alfred-Russell Hitchcock and Walter Gropius, would surely be fascinated with the Piermont House designed by Rachcoff Vella.



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MASTER

CLASS

ELTHAM'S EARLY ARTISTIC COMMUNITY HOUSED AT MONSALVAT REPRESENTED A SECOND WAVE AFTER THE FAMED HEIDELBERG ARTISTS' SCHOOL. ITS LEGACY CONTINUES TO RESONATE. AS SPIRITUAL HOME FOR A DIVERSE ARTS COMMUNITY, MONSALVAT'S FAUX MEDIEVAL CASTLE CHAPEL AND ASSORTED HAND-BUILT HOUSING ON FOUR HECTARE GROUNDS ARE AN ARTISAN TIME-CAPSULE.

The Sister Una MacAllister Centre, Catholic Ladies College's Chapel and Music School building, Eltham

Principal glazing resource:
Viridian ThermoTech™ Double Glazed Units incorporating EVantage™ Grey and EnergyTech™ Clear ComfortPlus™ Clear

Architect:
William Ross Architects

Images & Text:
Peter Hyatt





“IT TOOK 18 MONTHS OF REFINEMENT FOR AN ABSOLUTELY DISTILLED, SHARPLY FOCUSED RESULT THAT NEEDED TO MEET SOME PRETTY DEMANDING DESIGN REGULATIONS AND REACT WELL TO A BRILLIANT SITE.”

Chris Hose,
Design Director

Established in 1971, the Catholic Ladies College (CLC) owes a greater debt to suburban bricks and mortar than mud brick cottages, or French provincial chateaux. CLC’s new Performing Arts and Religious Centre steps confidently from these two shadows.

First impressions are vital and the new centre heralds students and visitors with a contemporary wave rather than tired pastiche. Until the centre’s completion, a dour ’70s brick gymnasium block provided a blank greeting and poor first impression.

Design director Chris Hose and his team have shaped a vibrant, defining ‘entrance’ building. Its presence sets a whole new standard gateway to the school. The project’s dual need as chapel and musical performance centre could have easily led to a design muddle. The project needed to express dignity and calm while promising a high-performance recital space. Chapel and sacristy, seating for 220, a wish list of tutorial rooms and other assorted support spaces convincingly absorbed under one roof. No easy task.

The environmentally sensitive site occupies a steep landscaped embankment that separates the school buildings from the lower sports ovals.

The solution is subordinate and supportive of function. The soft grey metal clad box has key openings to the east-facing projection across the playing fields and south-facing visitor approach. Steel cladding and glass combine a real modernity that fully connects with landscape and sky.

Above

Main performance and religious space on a north / south elevation allows main feature glazing to open fully to setting.

Right

Staggered glazing across two levels breaks convention of standard grid with added flexibility to open and permit cross ventilation.





“It took 18 months of refinement for an absolutely distilled, sharply focused result that needed to meet some pretty demanding design regulations and react well to a brilliant site.”

Hose says transparency is especially relevant to education. “It is,” he says, “not only about structural honesty and integrity but revealing of the openness and inclusiveness of school.”

In this regard the centre’s fully transparent portico allows visitors to easily observe activity yet provide full acoustic separation from outside as well as the musical tuition rooms in the level immediately below.

Much of the project’s appeal according to Chris Hose is a result of the simple palette of materials, careful handling and stripped back performance.

He describes glass as providing design dimension. “It provided clarity to draw the eye in and connect with the outside. We sought the clearest glass that would achieve code requirements.”

“With such large window sections we knew structural systems were needed and so Viridian was our first port of call. We discussed our plan to incorporate this extent of glazing, weighed up our options and their technical advice informed our planning and preliminary design work.”

Hose describes the main glazing feature as “‘like a vertical fishbowl’. We explored how we could break the glazing up in a vertical sense yet avoid the traditional grid. We thought that staggering those mullions would allow those windows to appear more vertical than conventional framing. It also allowed us to install frameless, sashless sliding double-hung units to open that space up on a nice day for cross ventilation and air flow along with improved connection to the whole environment.”

Two cinematic spreads of glass are only part of the design legacy. Slot windows to the more demanding heat-loads north and west are partly concealed yet effectively wash the walls. Downstairs is a more pragmatic use of glass where a combination of screening and vegetation allow ample light to fall.

Located on the lower level, the music school provides purpose built facilities including two large music classrooms, a smaller music classroom for teaching, rehearsals and tuition, a series of private tuition rooms, a recording studio, a staff room and

dedicated storage for instruments. The music school is cut into the slope and provides efficient acoustic and thermal efficiencies.

Part of the acoustic integrity is achieved with the reception space discretely separated from the main volume by full-height glazing and frameless glass doors. The area performs as a function and gathering space.

The main east elevation features an offset structural glass façade that frames views and admits direct early morning light that quickly softens to an appreciable ambience.

The hall’s linear form is accentuated by a layered ceiling specifically free of the clutter that denotes design additions and afterthoughts. The best buildings are streamlined with good ideas that anticipate and visualize the result. And they treat daylight as a powerful element that at certain times of day create moments of jeweled delicacy.

One such space is clearly created in a small, travertine-lined void with a “Tree of Life” sculpture by Pauline Clayton. Located off the main chapel this space links to a small outdoor garden also designed for contemplation and prayer.

The chapel includes a series of sculptural glass windows by renowned glass artists, Janusz and Magdalena Kuzbicki. This was a critical part of the college’s brief with a separate selection process undertaken during design, followed by careful detailing and coordination required between architecture and artwork.

Hose says the separation between foyer and chapel spaces with folding and stacking doors and feature glass artistry draws the visitor through the building while the stained glass signifies entry to the space.

“WITH SUCH LARGE WINDOW SECTIONS WE KNEW STRUCTURAL SYSTEMS WERE NEEDED AND SO VIRIDIAN WAS OUR FIRST PORT OF CALL.”

Chris Hose,
Architect



He admits that the site was a huge bonus rather than one more centrally located within the school fabric. “Had we occupied the middle rather than the edge, such fabulous transparency would have demanded a high level of separation for acoustic isolation.”

And what was the big learning curve on this project that will follow the practice? “Simplicity,” says Hose, “reminded us of its value. Everywhere we look the result appears stripped back and effortless. The best buildings are so refined that the details look like there are no details. There’s complexity of course but it had to be refined to appear simple. And that is the real skill we’ve worked extremely hard at here.”

In an age when starchitects find themselves brand building for commercial imperatives, Eltham CLC can afford to take a step back and take the longer-term view. Here the educational ‘brand’ defers to place and in the process achieves simplicity and serenity. As first impression of the school, the new spiritual and performance centre also leaves a positive, lasting impression.



Above and right
Framless glazing delivers the desired purity of connection between meditative Tree of life void and outdoor garden.

Credits

Project

The Sister Una MacAllister Centre, Catholic Ladies College's Chapel and Music School building, Eltham.

Architect

Williams Ross Architects

Design Team

Chris Hose
Virginia Ross
Michelle Jepp
Kasia Potoczny
Amanda Meiklejohn

Builder

SJ Higgins

Structural Engineer

Burns Hamilton and Partners

Glazier

SJ Higgins

Principal Glass Provider

Viridian

Principal Glazing

Viridian ThermoTech™
Double Glazed Units
incorporating

EVantage™ Grey and
EnergyTech™ Clear
ComfortPlus™ Clear

Budget

\$4 Million



THROUGH THE LOOKING

THE HOUSE, JUST OUTSIDE OF BALLARAT AND ABOUT 100 KMS WEST OF MELBOURNE, NODS APPRECIATIVELY TOWARDS THE INTERNATIONAL STYLE THAT HAS ENDURED SO CONVINCINGLY.

Piermont House

Principal glazing resource:
Viridian ThermoTech Double Glazed Units
incorporating EnergyTech™

Architect:
Rachcoff Vella Architecture

Images:
Shannon McGrath

Text:
Peter Hyatt

GLASS





Through the Looking Glass

With double-glazing as a high performance 'skin', the Piermont house performs well beyond the technical reach available to those grand master Modernists.

Weekenders are rapidly morphing into full-timers. This trend to exit the big smoke in search of country congeniality is catching on. In the process, the quaint country shack is expanding to accommodate life beyond the city hubbub.

With more than half of the planet's population now urban dwellers, rural types are the shrinking yet enthusiastic minority and plenty of those wouldn't have it any other way. While many crave the great outdoors, some make it a way of life and prove that the tree-change is the perfect fit for young active families.

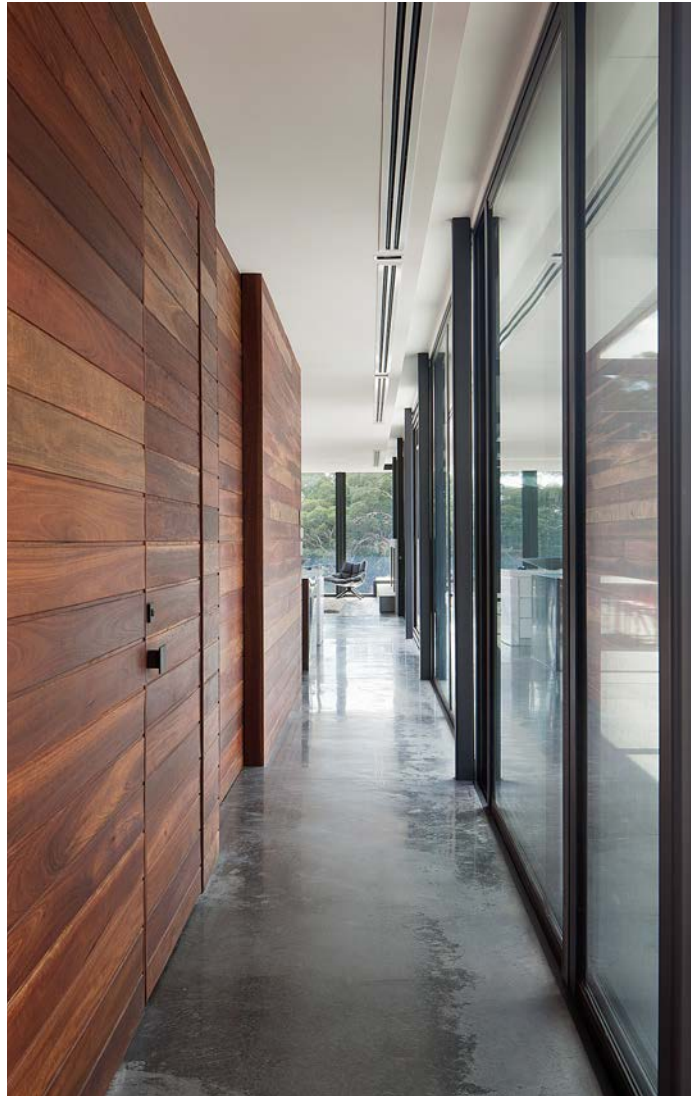
Mies van der Rohe's famed, yet problematic, Farnsworth House by the Fox River, Illinois inspired generations of followers in the International Style. Mies' single room steel and glass wonder won admirers for its capacity to make a grand single volume link quite magically as a continuum with nature.

One Ballarat couple was so inspired by their visit to the Farnsworth House, that upon their return the couple rejected their original plans to build in the rustic tradition. Their engagement of Rachoff Vella Architects led to a wholly revised idea of how to build on their rolling 10 acre property.

Having lived in a modest weatherboard cottage on the site, the clients were familiar with their context and yet the existing house turned its back on most of the site and prohibited a more fluid relationship.

Designed for a family of six with four children under the age of 12, the architect's response is a series of wings spread out into the landscape.

The house is carefully sited on a prominent and higher location taking advantage of 360° views. The bedroom wings respond to the contours of the land allowing it to bunker itself down, reducing its dominance and becoming a more integral part of the site. The main living wing is the more flamboyant object proudly projecting out over the site allowing the natural landscape to merge through the glass façade.



Left
Glass provides the heroic link
as landscape connector

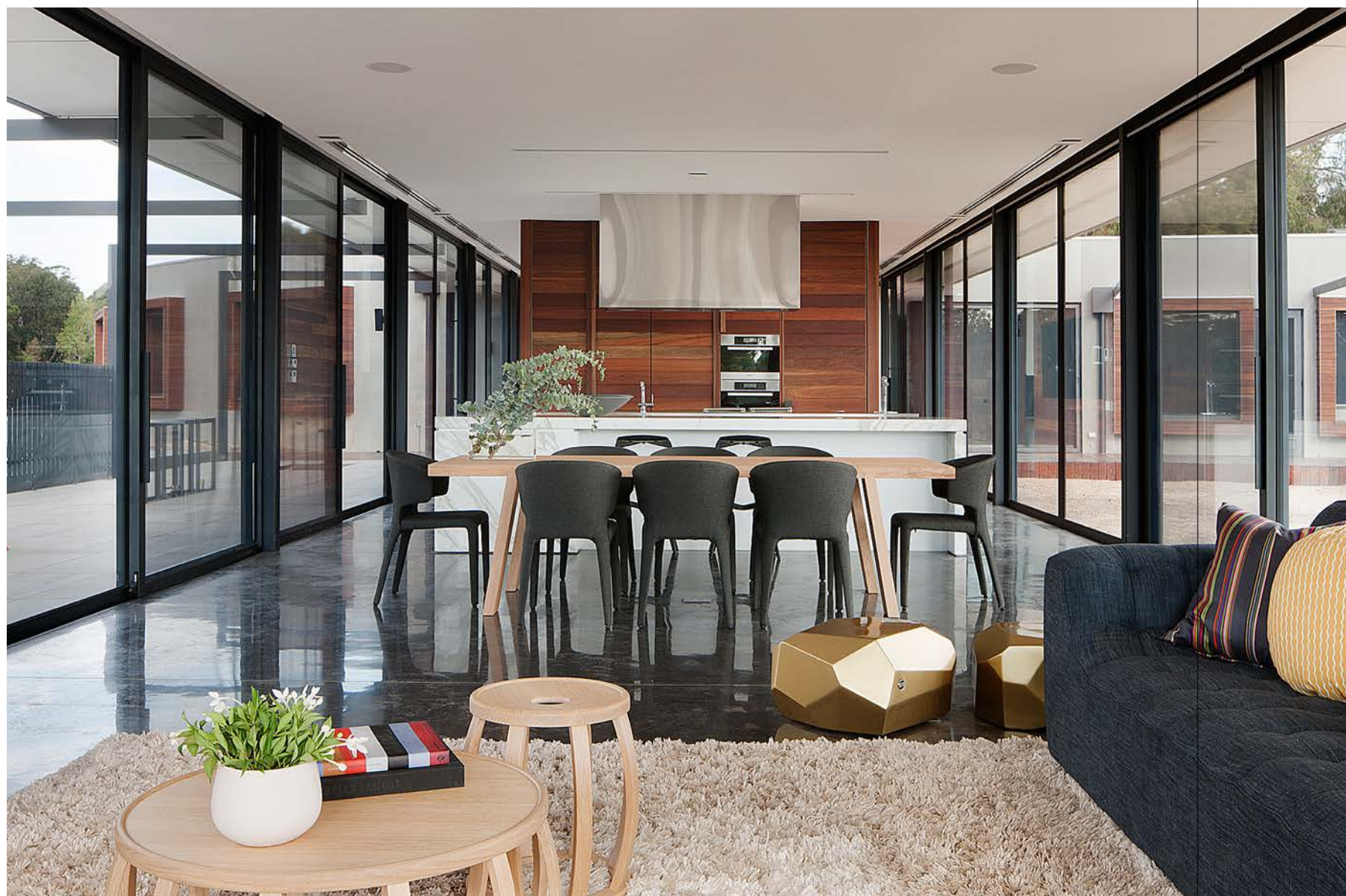
Below
Bathroom benefits from spare material
palette and soft wash of daylight.

Right
Family room uses full height glazing to
create a sense of luxury rarely achieved
with masonry or plaster board.



Through the Looking Glass



**Above**

The artfully composed main volume benefits from the wide eaves to modify summer sunlight. Double glazing and thermal mass of concrete flooring help to stabilize ambient temperature.

Right

Frameless IGU's are integral to structural clarity and project vocabulary.



Project architect Tony Vella spoke with Peter Hyatt of Vision about his client's switch from rustic cabin to sleek villa and glassy pavilion.

What qualities best define your design?

The project reveals itself quite slowly. On approach it probably appears quite guarded and austere but beyond that it opens itself to the setting. While that's probably expected, it does introduce a whole new layer that continues to surprise most first time visitors. In design terms it has an honesty of design and construction. And it sits there comfortably. It isn't intended to be outlandish, or scream out for attention.

IN DESIGN TERMS IT HAS AN HONESTY OF DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION. AND IT SITS THERE COMFORTABLY. IT ISN'T INTENDED TO BE OUTLANDISH, OR SCREAM OUT FOR ATTENTION.

Tony Vella,
Project Architect

It really maintains that lineage reminiscent of mid-century modern. Palm Springs for instance.

That's an interesting observation because not long after our initial briefing the clients visited Mies' Farnsworth House and they returned with a huge change of heart about the type of house they wanted.

The large site you have to work with introduces opportunity but it also begs the question: Where do you start and, just as importantly, where do you stop?

I think you're right. There is a danger of overdoing it. It's very easy to become lost when there are seemingly no real limits. Site selection wasn't so difficult. The glass pavilion sits on a ridge which runs roughly east west along the site, the curved bedroom wings and the straight, bigger wing heading for the front dam follow the natural site contours. The forecourt was already there topographically and the entry of the front plateau really set parameters.

Right
Duality of purpose.
"Window bays double as cool places to hang-out," Tony Vella



The Farnsworth House is that reminder of innovation and daring, yet it's also a reminder that even though the architect had a very wealthy client, the emphasis was on invention and quality before quantity.

There are no direct parallels between the Farnsworth and Piermont House but there are certain principles we've adopted. Technology gives us a huge advantage with regard to new and better materials. The glass that we have to work with now is vastly superior to what belonged to that era. It allows us to be bolder and more confident in dealing with climate, fully sealing the house and absorbing the landscape.

Glazing is very important because your design is such a very active part of this envelope.

The family wanted to feel part of the landscape. And they can do that without question because glass is integral to the design. That is especially true of the pavilion and even in the bedrooms where the views are smaller but still very important.

What influences your work?

Those famous international modern masters and locals such as Glenn Murcutt. Early on I worked for Daryl Pelchen and he certainly alerted me to the importance of design clarity.

Is there any significance in using local builders, trade skills and materials such as glazing?

It was just very reassuring to be able to call on and deal with local people throughout this process. We needed people on the spot who could attend to the inevitable issues and questions that arise. Similarly we sourced local materials wherever possible and that really fitted with a more sustainable view of design that considered the life-cycle of embodied energy costs involved in bringing materials from the other side of the planet.

What was the advantage in working with a supplier such as Viridian?

We had close consultation with the local glazier who works with Viridian to establish the ideal balance of glass type, clarity and shading coefficients of our double glazing. There is a certain peace of mind without question of buying locally and it's certainly true of glass that in the event difficulties occur you want to know there is full back-up.

Have you had the alternative experience?

We've specified one thing and then discovered something else has been substituted and that is a real danger. A cheap imported alternative often doesn't work out to be very cheap and so we're very aware of the product and what is used as the finished product. Thankfully our accommodating local builder was also aware of this.

What other qualities does glass provide beyond views?

Knowing that the fabric of the building can literally unveil very simply and elegantly is a key in this context. The pavilion could be almost entirely glass because it's all so fully transparent. The whole structure is fully revealed and those qualities go beyond just providing terrific views.

Did the clients have concerns about privacy or thermal/solar integrity?

The site is private from the main road so privacy wasn't an issue. Our ESD consultant thoroughly tested and confirmed the design to ensure we met ratings. The large eave overhang was calculated to avoid overheating and heat gain and hence the idea of opening the building. Was it a concern? A calculated concern perhaps but the client was adamant about a transparent box. It needed to be well heated and insulated and the family has already experienced a winter and summer to prove that it works very well.

What are some of your primary sustainability strategies?

Heavy insulation throughout including slab insulation, solar hot water, photovoltaic panels pre-wired throughout, 80,000 litre rainwater tanks with a 10,000 litre fire fighting tank, integrated landscaping and pergola for sun shading, hydronic slab heating throughout, large eaves and fixed shading devices to glass roofs and of course double glazed units with EnergyTech.

Has there been a project high point?

We visited the client about a month after moving in and to finally see the house really utilized, appreciated and enjoyed is very gratifying and such a huge reward.

Credits

Project
Piermont House
Architect
Rachcoff Vella Architecture
Builder
G&S Morris Constructions
Structural Engineer
Keith Patrick and Associates
ESD Consultant/Energy Rater
Wayne Floyd

Glazier
European Window Company
Principal Glass Provider
Viridian
Principal Glazing
Viridian ThermoTech Double Glazed Units incorporating EnergyTech™
Budget
N/A



Through the Looking Glass

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