

Fabric Quarterly

16 Q1 2023

f

PERSPECTIVES
ON DESIGN, CULTURE
AND BEING PERTH

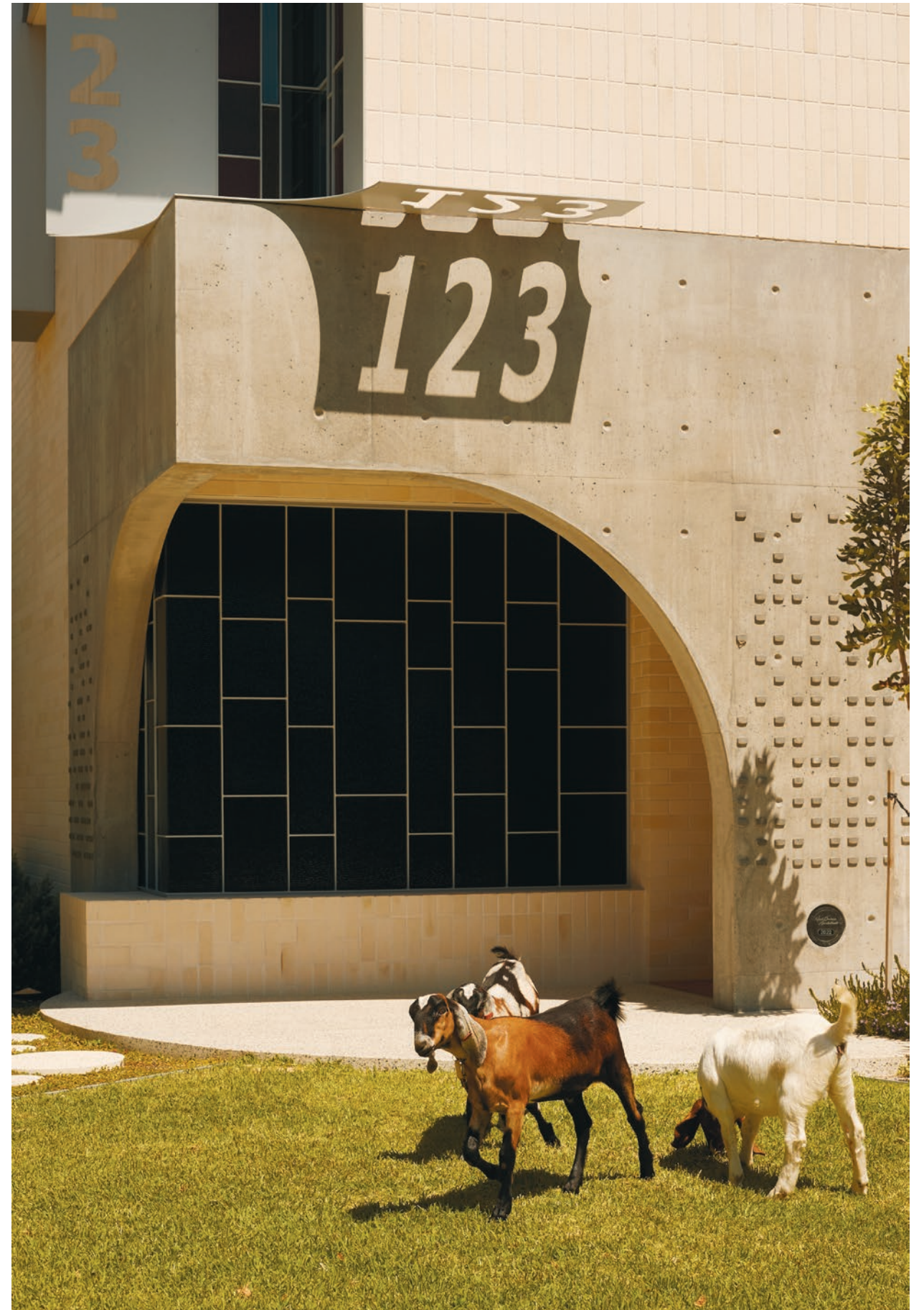
\$25.00 RRP



123 House

Words by
Claire Millett

Photographs by
Traianos Pakioulakis





An eclectic amalgamation of colour, curved forms, and texture inform the extraordinary reinterpretation of this suburban corner site, which was previously frequented by thousands of motorists over the course of its long history as a service station.

It is the nuanced sense of identity and memory that ground the imagination of architect Neil Cownie's work. Scalloped edges, domed archways, and gorgeous earthen textures allude to the couples' cultural identity whilst petrol spill chromatics and soaring concrete protrusions pay homage to the history of the site.

It is this foundation, alongside budget and accommodation needs, that allowed Neil to build a home that fit within a brief with a 'layer cake' of parameters; balancing a responsibility to the local context and the memory of the site itself with an obligation to the client to bring joy and delight to their everyday living experiences, and accommodate the racing footsteps of a brood of grandchildren.

For the retired couple who owned and ran the Ampol service station on this site for thirty years before decommissioning and subdividing, the sense of responsibility to the community was already a shared concern. The resulting home is borne by a local and built form context, an optimised orientation, passive solar design, and memory of place and client cultural identity, whilst maintaining a sense of being in conversation with the suburb in which it sits.

The 123 House, as Neil and the clients refer to it, embodies the memory of the former service station throughout the interior and exterior of the home. Laser cut openings to the cantilevered aluminium shelving in the living room represent the old Ampol logo, while the timber dining table, custom designed by Neil, features legs that represent stacked car tyres. Gorgeous light filtering through coloured glass reference the hues of petrol and engine oil, a balustrade is inspired by the spokes of a wheel, and a letterbox sits upon a whimsical vehicle suspension spring.

“On presenting the concept drawings of the proposed letterbox to the owners of the house, they loved the idea so much that they insisted on arranging for its fabrication themselves,” says Neil. “The owners and fabricator collaborated to manufacture the leg from an actual suspension spring, and the result is a letterbox that swings in suspension with the push of a finger, much to the delight of even the postie.”

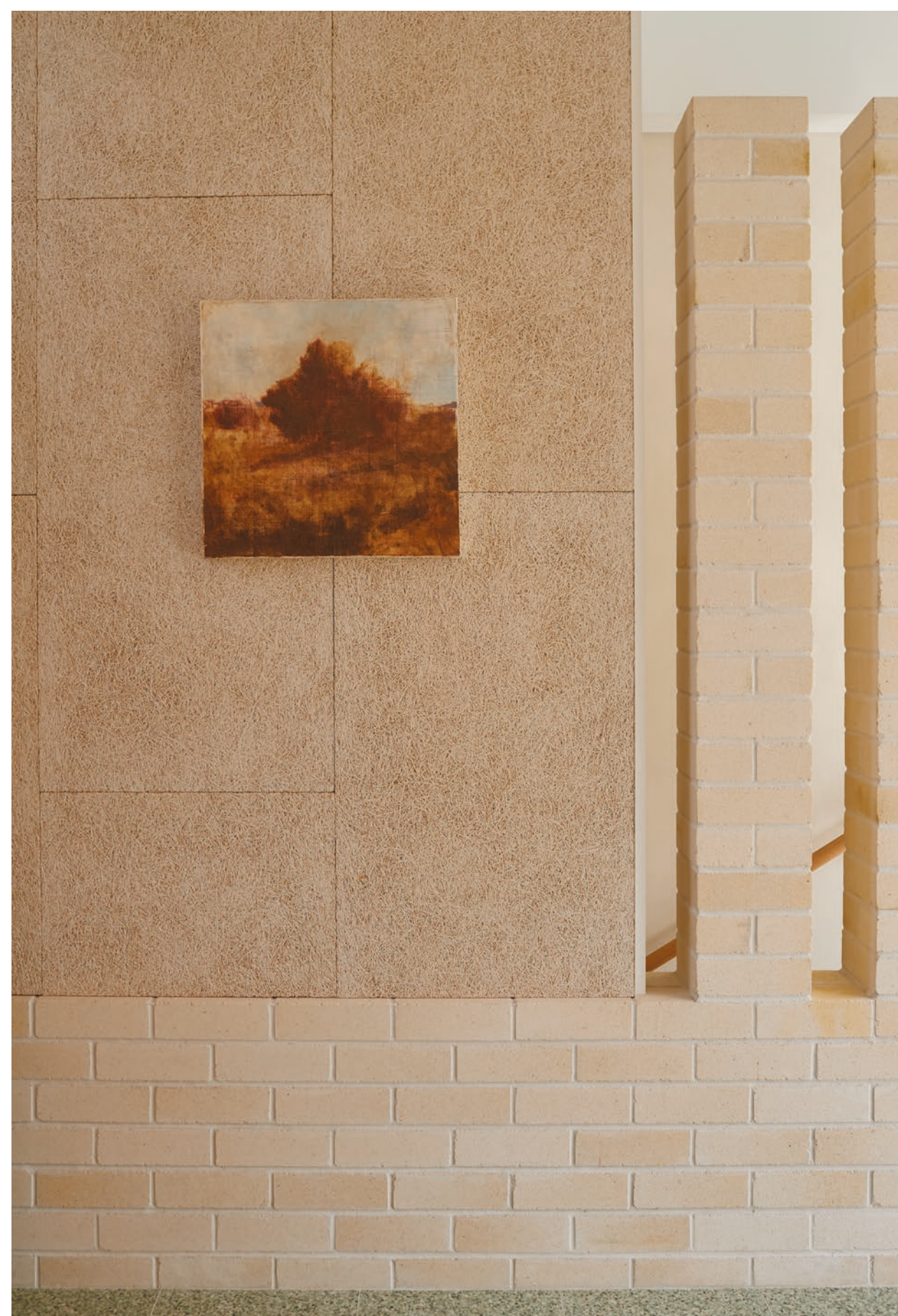
In a suburb that is currently struggling to successfully integrate new built form resulting from State Government-led mandates for increased density, Neil sought inspiration from the legacy of two-storey apartments from the 1930s buildings that still remain on prominent street corners within the suburb.

“I considered the existing architecture of the area in the early stages of the design process when I noticed that the wonderfully eclectic mix of many historic architectural styles throughout the suburb of Nedlands have a common thread . . . the arch form is a prevalent feature in the street frontages of many houses,” Neil said.

However, instead of mimicking the arched forms as seen in the porches and windows of houses local to the area, Neil used half circles and part circles as repetitive shapes throughout both the architecture and interior design in ceiling forms, cabinetwork, and even in the custom design of the curtains.

Due to the authorities’ parameters for the determination of primary and secondary street frontages, the challenge for this site was to maximise the building’s access to a northern orientation which was contrary with the clients’ desire to maintain the street address of 123 Dalkeith Road.







“This led to the design of the entry being at the corner of the building where it ambiguously addresses both street frontages. To emphasise the entry further, we incorporated the laser cut aluminium 123 street number into the frame of the corner window. The morning sun tracks across the laser cut number to cast an ever-moving shadow of the 123 address of the house. It is these moments of joy that make all the difference to both the owners and the local community,” says Neil.

The use of applied metal numbers and resulting shadow on the wall below is another nod to an element that remains common in the 1930s two-storey walk up buildings within the area.

The roof scape and building mass are articulated to provide the buildings external expression as a series of components that address both street frontages and, importantly, provides a building that addresses the street corner. This articulation also allows multiple highlight windows central to the house to provide natural light, winter sun and excellent cross-ventilation, bringing the function of passive solar and life to unexpected locations.

Never dismissing the multi-faceted sense of identity in the home, and extending from the memory of the former petrol station found in the exterior, the interior of the home harkens to the owners emotional connection to the Mediterranean and their own Greek heritage. Colourful terrazzo floor tiles are a unifying base in their expression of colour and balance the coloured glass of the windows, which was a component of the client’s brief. The material palette of the interior is limited to tonal and textural differences only between the sandy coloured face-brickwork, the natural finished straw-board acoustic panels, limewashed painted walls, and the linen curtain fabric. The deliberately textural nature of finished surfaces comes alive when crossed by the penetrating winter sun. Cabinetwork presents as sculptural blocks, with the timber wall panelling to the dining room floating between the upturned floor tiles and the hovering face brickwork.





Extending his architectural services to the interior design for 123 House, Neil curated furniture and window treatments throughout. Texture-rich curtains hang from a custom designed timber rail, its sculptural thread serving as a fluid junction between the living and dining spaces. Elevated indoor and alfresco living spaces above the ground plane not only provide better access to controlled northern light and protected cross-ventilation, but also grant panoramic views to the surrounding tree canopy.

A complete work that honours its memory of place, 123 House is a respectful expression of history fused with creative and modern architectural practice.

“My clients’ faith in what I was doing was to their ultimate benefit, as the house has a clarity that could only be achieved with their full support,” says Neil. “The fact that I had the opportunity for a holistic design approach where I covered the architecture, interior design, selection of all furnishings and curtains along with the custom design of several furniture items, resulted in a home that is ‘in conversation’ with its contents.”

This new home serves as yet another example of Neil’s design led solutions within a Western Australian sensibility.

Visit neilcowniearchitect.com.au



ORGANICALLY FARMED,
100% ESTATE GROWN AND MADE
WINES OF PLACE

VOYAGER ESTATE
MARGARET RIVER