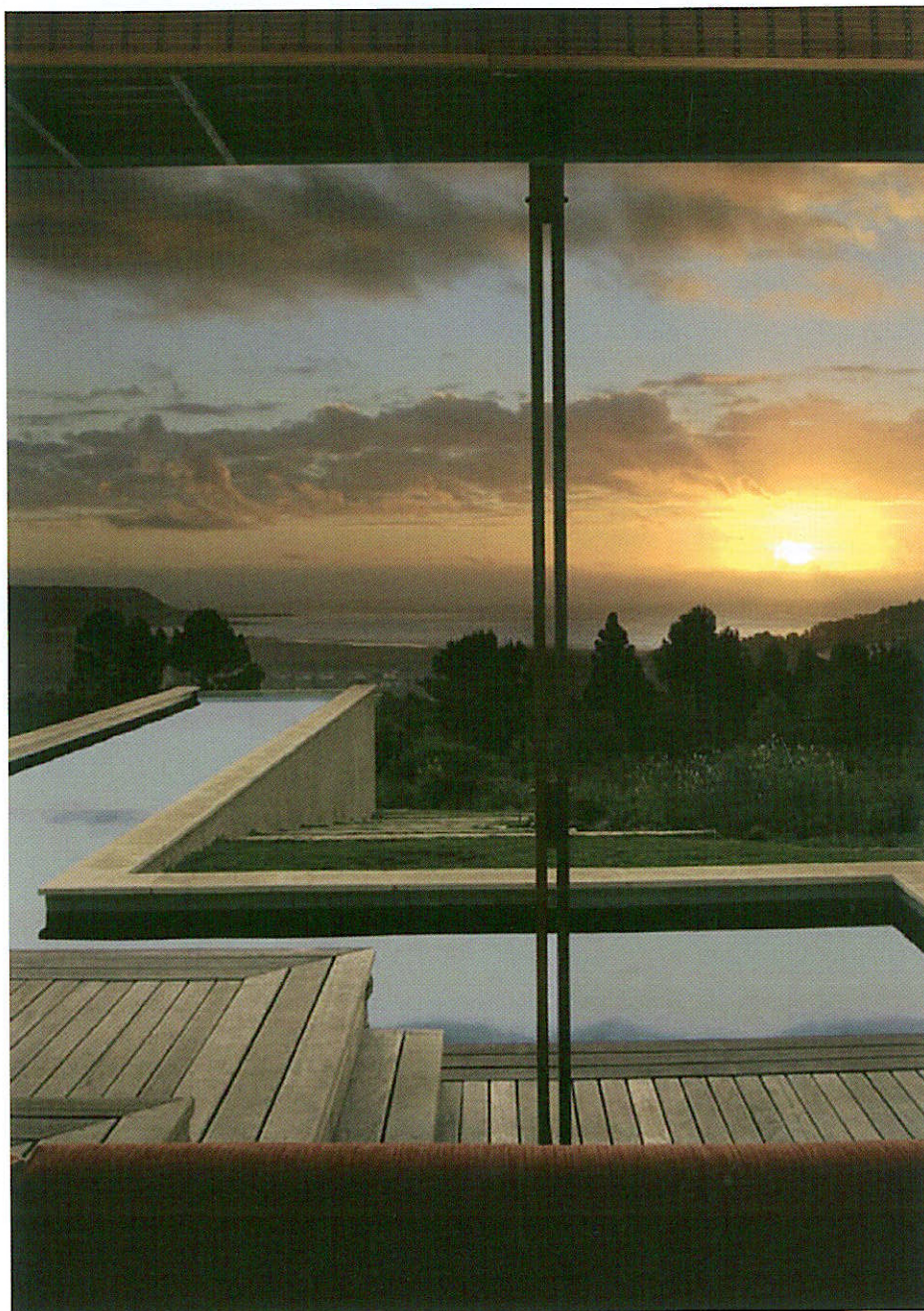


# FARMHOUSE TRIO

AWARD OF MERIT

Nic Coetzer forgets where he is in the Mountain & Sea House.



**It's hard not to enjoy being duped. It's** 10h00 and I know where I am. Or at least I think I do. The smell is earthy, fecund fynbos. I nearly get run over by a horse, its rider can't help but smirk at my city-folk startlement. I expect farmyard animals and tick-bite fever, hikes up mountains ending in serious thirst-quenching and a jump in the farm pool. I squint up at the mountain to the north-east, silhouetted by the sun, its hazy presence hiding its scraggy character. It's a bit foreboding in the morning, more *A Passage to India* than 'the dingo's got my baby'.\* All around is the open veld except for a forest in the distance. Even the local birds get involved, chirping with conviction for this country retreat.

The farmhouse is three barns joined, staggered together in plan, staggered in section. They are simple and efficient in their width separated as they are by broad concrete box gutters. The walls are ragged and painted, showing the passage of labour and giving the house a down-to-earth character.

The farmhouse is slasto. The floor claims everything, demands bare feet and a party. It's an invitation to dance. Good parties are held here I hear. The oasis in the centre of the house gets flooded for drama, and the lights in the floor add to the magic.

My hosts are relaxed, under the generous veranda looking out over the pool to the sea. And all the while I'm thinking how weird it is to be here, stolen away such a short distance from Cape Town. Not suburban: rural, but without the farm animals.

And then I'm back. I remember where I really am, that I'm meant to be a critic. So I start analysing this comfortable little big house – how it's a house to be lived in, to be lived from the inside out. This is most powerfully felt in the kitchen where the architects have worked so hard to ensure the house looks up to the mountain and the sea simultaneously. The space swoops down the hill, pausing through the house, before continuing out the pool to the ocean beyond. This trio – mountain, house and sea – is structured again in the three-barn



# MOUNTAIN & SEA HOUSE



The farmhouse is three barns joined, staggered together in plan, staggered in section.

part of the house with the kitchen being the mediating space between the other two barns. Sometimes the landscape needs a device such as this to bring it into our perception, to help bring the mountain or the sea into itself through something manmade.

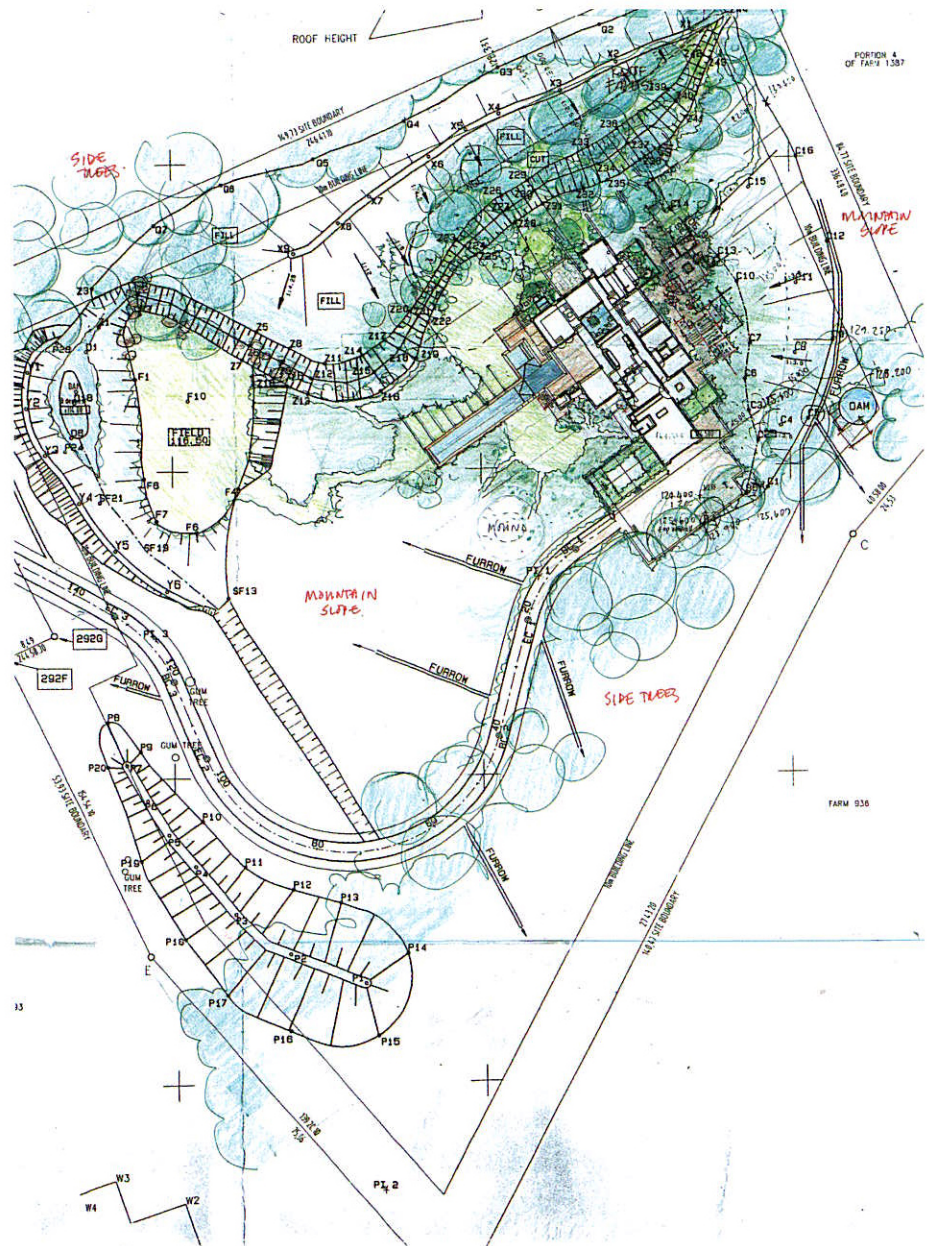
The estate's pitched-roof development requirements have been dealt with in

a matter-of-fact way, embracing the farmhouse possibilities inspired by the cultural context of Noordhoek. Even the front door being hidden behind parking and garages and utility areas somehow makes sense in the farmhouse idiom. I enjoy the use of the simple materials here – like the rough-hewn poplar rafters – and little moments where views are carefully framed. There are other modest moves, where space is eked out in mezzanines and attics to allow the house to sleep many more than its official room tally.

And yet there are also moments where more expense and fastidiousness has

been employed, such as in the upstairs entertainment room with its leather cushioned floor, or the big window wall adjacent to it that carefully crisps the line between roof and wall. And then it strikes me on my walkabout through the beautiful fynbos garden how the seemingly random collection of windows across the north-east wall has been carefully considered, capturing the casual character of a farmhouse.

Suddenly I'm on a roll. I remember that I'm not just a critic but also a cynic. I noticed when driving through the estate that the road names were of indigenous trees but the old



Site plan.

oaks seemed to be the only trees around, like the presence of the colonial past trying to be outdone by new ecological ideologies just finding their voice through the wistful surface of signage. Is this a new politics of place-making in *developperdom*; saving the planet sells more than a Disneyfied Cape Dutch past? And it makes me wonder if the estate's development guidelines militated against the architects producing a more 'sustainably' oriented building that the quasi-rural nature of Noordhoek seems to welcome. If 'farmhouse' was the design inspiration as it seems to have been, then the house might

have done well with the flash of a galvanised corrugated-iron water tank at the end of the concrete box gutters, or similar ecologically oriented devices that could have been used to exaggerate this concept.

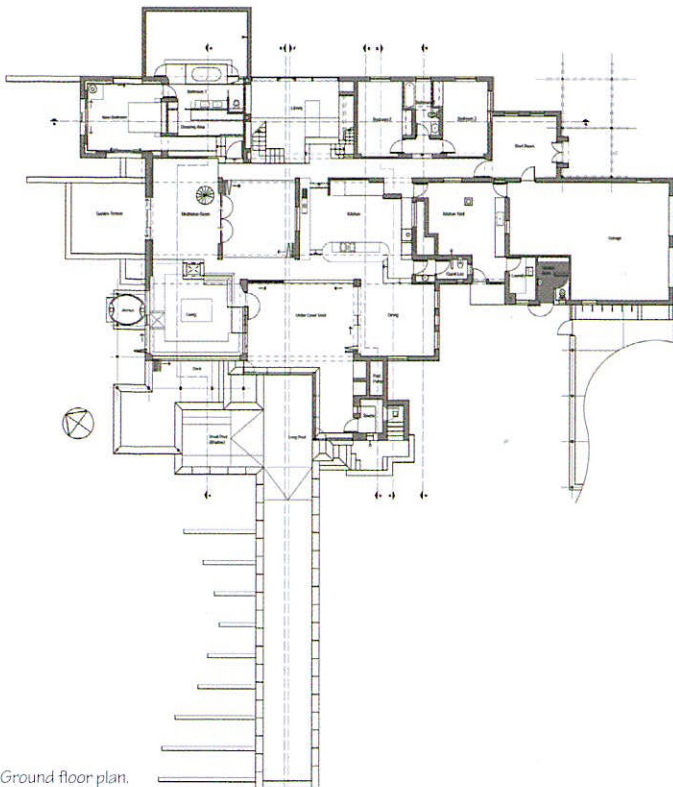
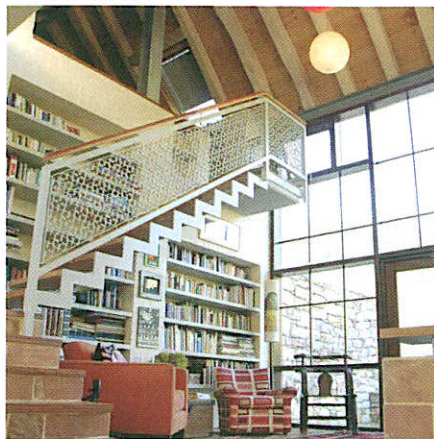
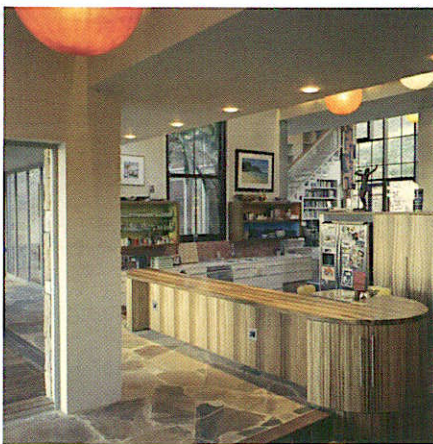
I become suspicious of the estate is a dreamland that casts spells and dissolves critical sensibilities. That it has to work hard to achieve this; that if you wanted to you would have to listen really carefully to hear the hum of the electric fence surrounding the estate.

As I leave the house, my critical sensibilities regained, I glance back up the hill through

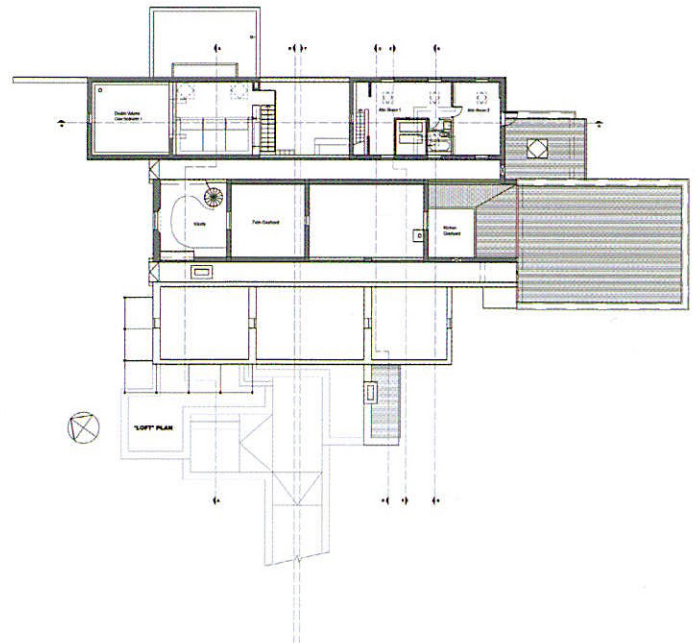
a grove of bluegums at the barely perceptible rooftops of the three barns, and it does a trick on me again. I feel as though I am heading back to Cape Town after a stay at a mountain retreat, a fantastically easy and enjoyable farmhouse on a hill.

I'd better get on that highway and break the spell quick.

*\*In EM Forster's classic novel, the Malabar Hills was the site of a (panic) attack on Adele, while Ayers Rock was the site of a tragedy causing Lindy Chamberlain to be wrongfully convicted of the murder of her child. ■*



Ground floor plan.



First floor plan.