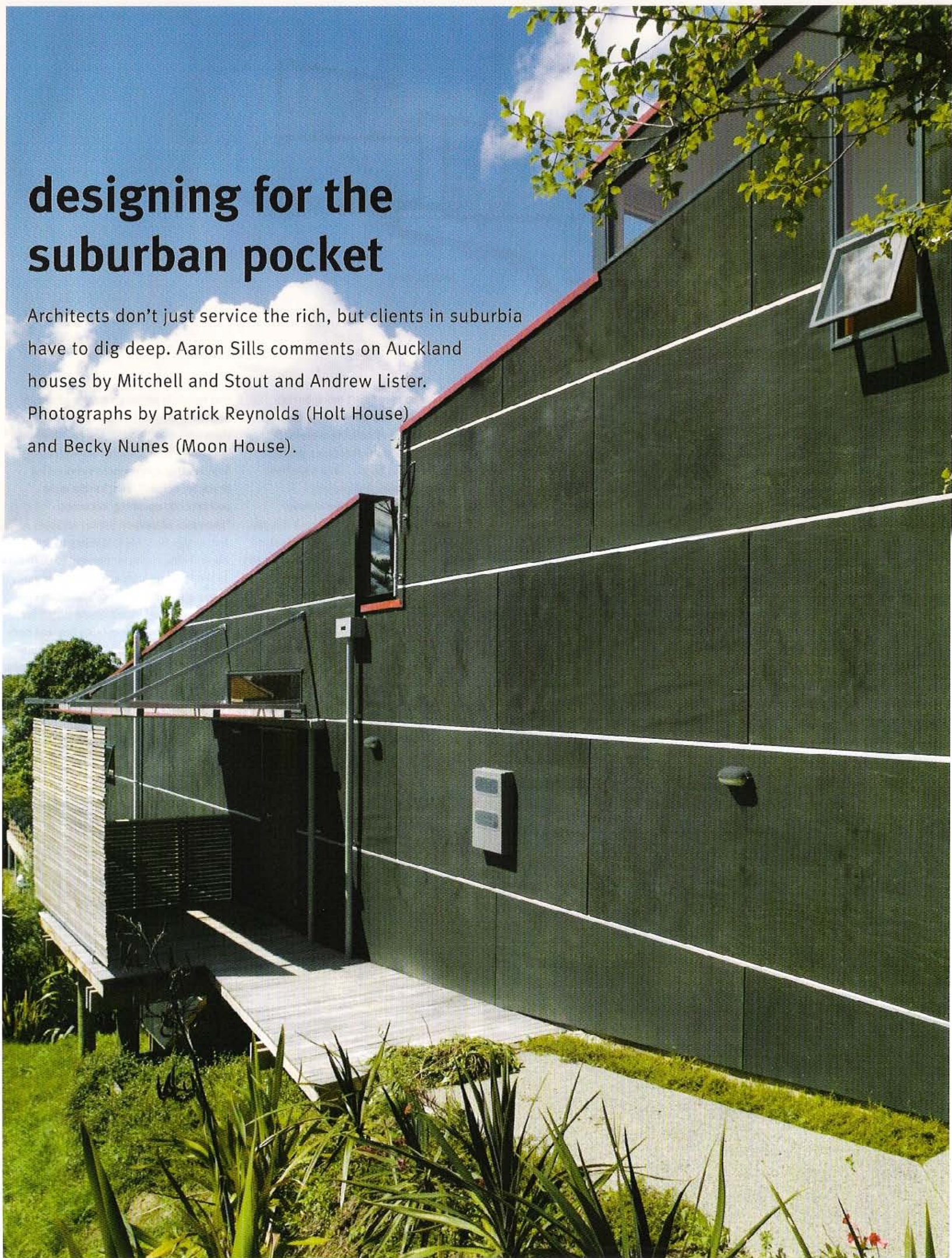


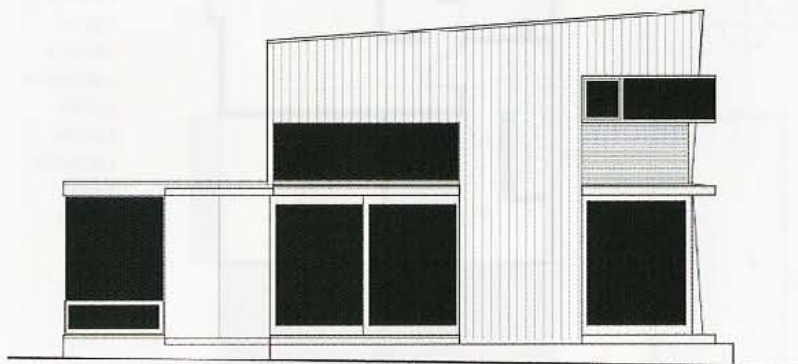
# designing for the suburban pocket

Architects don't just service the rich, but clients in suburbia have to dig deep. Aaron Sills comments on Auckland houses by Mitchell and Stout and Andrew Lister.

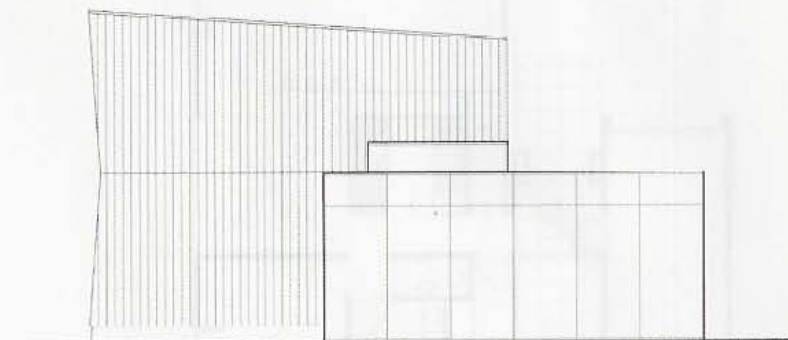
Photographs by Patrick Reynolds (Holt House) and Becky Nunes (Moon House).







EAST ELEVATION



WEST ELEVATION

## MOON HOUSE ARCHITECT'S STATEMENT

This very small site at 323m<sup>2</sup>, is a rear subdivided lot with neighbouring houses built on the boundaries. The brief was to create a new three bedroomed first home for under \$250,000 incl GST. The clients requested a piece of Japanese sculpture/architecture set into their very suburban landscape. Due to the site's size, and with no views to capture, the design brief was to be more internal looking, and to try to give the impression there were no other houses adjacent.

The house is designed in two volumes, each distinguished by its own cladding, both paying homage to the New Zealand building tradition and Kiwi aesthetic. A single storey

white volume surrounds a double storey black cube volume. The white volume is clad in painted compressed sheet cladding, the black cube in a random thickness stained timber panelling. Both are traditional New Zealand bach cladding materials revitalised with modern Japanese sculptural aesthetics. The change in levels was dictated by strict council development controls.

The themes of volumes continue within the house. Spaces are variable: sliding screens offer the potential to break rooms at will or to use a larger living/dining space. The double height dining space meant stretching the budget and squeezing the rooms, but it achieves an extraordinary feeling of lightness and space in such a small house. **Andrew Lister**

## COMMENT

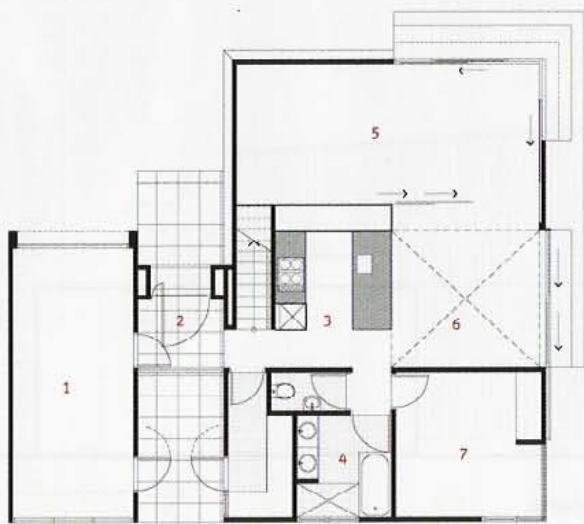
If you attended the NZIA local awards evening in Auckland late last year you may remember Graeme Moon as the client who gave the most enthusiastic acceptance speech. He and his partner Angela Sheehy are young Auckland professionals who say they got into the house building game by accident. They were simply trying to find a house to buy in a certain part of Point Chevalier when an empty section came up for sale. "How hard can it be?" they wondered, as they bought the land . . .

The freshly minted rear site that they purchased is a fairly tight fit around the 160m<sup>2</sup> house (lower level 106m<sup>2</sup>, incl. 20m<sup>2</sup> garage; upper level 56m<sup>2</sup>,

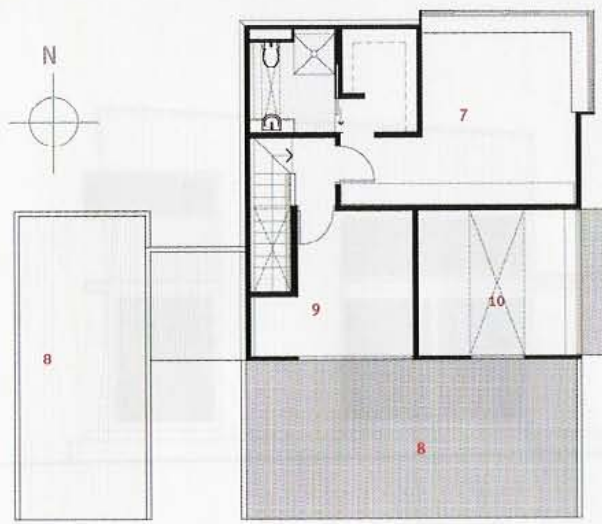
incl. 11.5m<sup>2</sup> void) that Andrew Lister has designed for them, but its dead flatness would have helped with the budget. The meticulously blank elevation that greets visitors has already proved a captivating image for an Australian publication. Exhibiting the "obsession with surface" that Mitchell and Stout were keen to avoid, Lister's design is a dark and textured piece of origami that is all the more impressive in that its brazenly windowless surfaces face northwest. The composition could have had even stronger abstraction if the white forms of garage and entry were combined into one, without stepping the entry roof.

Even more than in the Holt House, things are compact here. There's 50m<sup>2</sup>





GROUND FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR

- 1 GARAGE
- 2 ENTRY
- 3 KITCHEN
- 4 BATHROOM
- 5 LIVING
- 6 DINING
- 7 BEDROOM
- 8 ROOF
- 9 OFFICE
- 10 VOID

less to work with, but the impression is that the architect has skilfully planned and detailed to get the most out of the compressed area and budget. Skylights above the stair, ensuite and dining room, the sunken bath and open shower in the guest bathroom, mirrored wall of the kitchen, pushed-out window in the main bedroom and full-height corner openings in the downstairs rooms all work hard to make individual spaces roomier and more light-filled.

The danger of top-lighting rooms in the Auckland climate is heat gain and this contributed to a sense of closeness when visiting at the end of a sunny summer afternoon. Another contributing factor was that, as yet, no landscaping has been completed and no decks built; therefore movement out into the garden is interrupted.

The material palette is limited in

most rooms to white-painted Gib, but the ground floor pivots around the kitchen in such a way that the warm dark plywood of the kitchen cabinetry contributes its influence to the entry hall, dining and living rooms.

**CONCLUSIONS**

So what can people expect when they decide to work with an architect? At the most prosaic level, the owners of the Moon House owners received 150m<sup>2</sup> for \$330,000 plus GST, including all fees, appliances and fittings, while the Holt House's 200 m<sup>2</sup> came in at around \$360,000 plus GST for the building contract without fees or kitchen or overlay flooring. A construction cost of more than \$2,000 per square metre may well be shocking for potential home builders, but it illustrates the effect of the busy industry over the last few years.

On a more individual level, patrons of architects receive a home as a built response to personalities and aspirations (the clients' personalities and aspirations, that is). Interestingly, on both the Holt and Moon projects the architects have chosen to build black boxes with their backs turned to neighbours and the street. Is this an expression of particular circumstances? Or is it more an articulation of the times and a desire to create private environments separate from the public domain? Do wearers of large dark sunglasses do it to stimulate feelings of privacy or superiority? (Okay, or to stop squinting?)

The Holt House sits on a narrow and steep site which was subsequently revealed to be mostly insubstantial fill. This compelled the design to step down the hill towards the north, on deep piles, making the house more expensive but also providing it with a generous outlook over the back gardens of Grey Lynn. The Moon House, by contrast, is its own little world on its flat rear site encircled by close neighbours. The sensation is currently quite interior but this should change as landscaping is completed and movement between inside and out becomes easier.

A week after visiting both houses the casualness of the main floor of the Holt House grows on you while the initial buzz of the Moon House wanes. The ordinariness that was the stated objective of the Mitchells may have been a red herring, but there is certainly a sense of relaxation and ease of movement that would make this my pick to live in (if I didn't need to go downstairs). The suspicion is that this has more to do with the extra space available, the more unstructured plan shape and the relationship between interior and the deck than any material or detailing moves.

There is no doubt, however, which is

the more beautiful house for the passer-by. The Holt House presents a tough face while over at the Moons' there are many gorgeous bits and Lister has given his understandably enthusiastic clients a deftly precise composition of space and detail. And so would anyone be game to guess which house would sell for the higher price? Both are the product of very skilful architects beginning with subtly different sets of parameters and quickly diverging down different paths of inquiry.

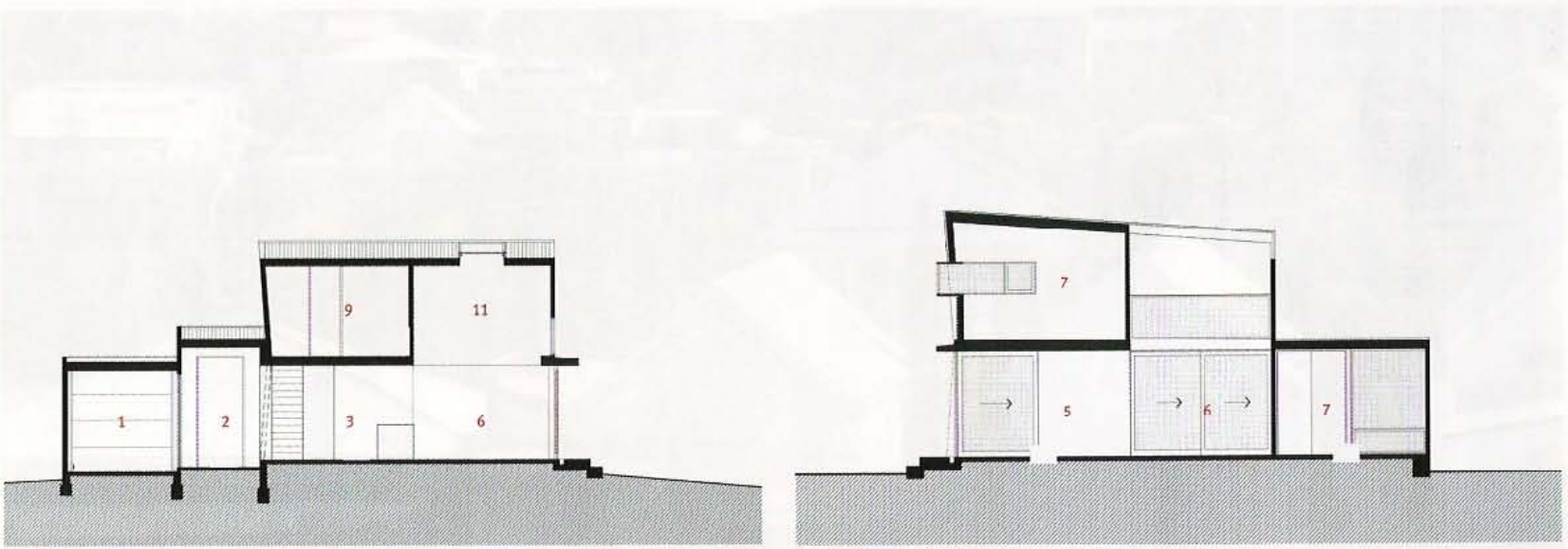
And what of Douglas Lloyd Jenkins' claim that residential architects are just trick-providers for rich people? Most architects just want to do decent designs and feed their kids, and if doing small houses will pay the bills then great. We gag over the builder brick 'n tiles springing up in the suburbs but we haven't yet worked out the means of production that would allow better designs to put them out of business. Who knows if more architects here will follow their Australian cousins into prefab work, but the market is a great decider of what works (in a larger sense) for people, and frankly architects working as consultant professionals don't have what it takes to compete at the affordable end of the residential market. So (in Auckland, at least) there is a natural drift of architects up the residential food chain because, if would-be home owners can only afford a couple of hundred thou for a new home (after buying a site), then they won't be engaging an architect. □

*Page 50: East elevation of the Moon House. Page 51: Garage and entry, and west facade. Left: Dining / kitchen. Facing page: Entry.*

**MOON HOUSE**

- CLIENT GRAEME MOON AND ANGELA SHEEHY
- ARCHITECT ANDREW LISTER
- CONTRACTOR DAMIEN ROSS-MURPHY
- CABINETMAKER COLIN ROTHERHAM
- PROJECT COST \$330,000 + GST





SECTIONS



