

COAST GUARD

David Dennis' Portsea Holiday House defends its playground lifestyle with a muscular veil.

Review Freya Lombardo Photography Shannon McGrath



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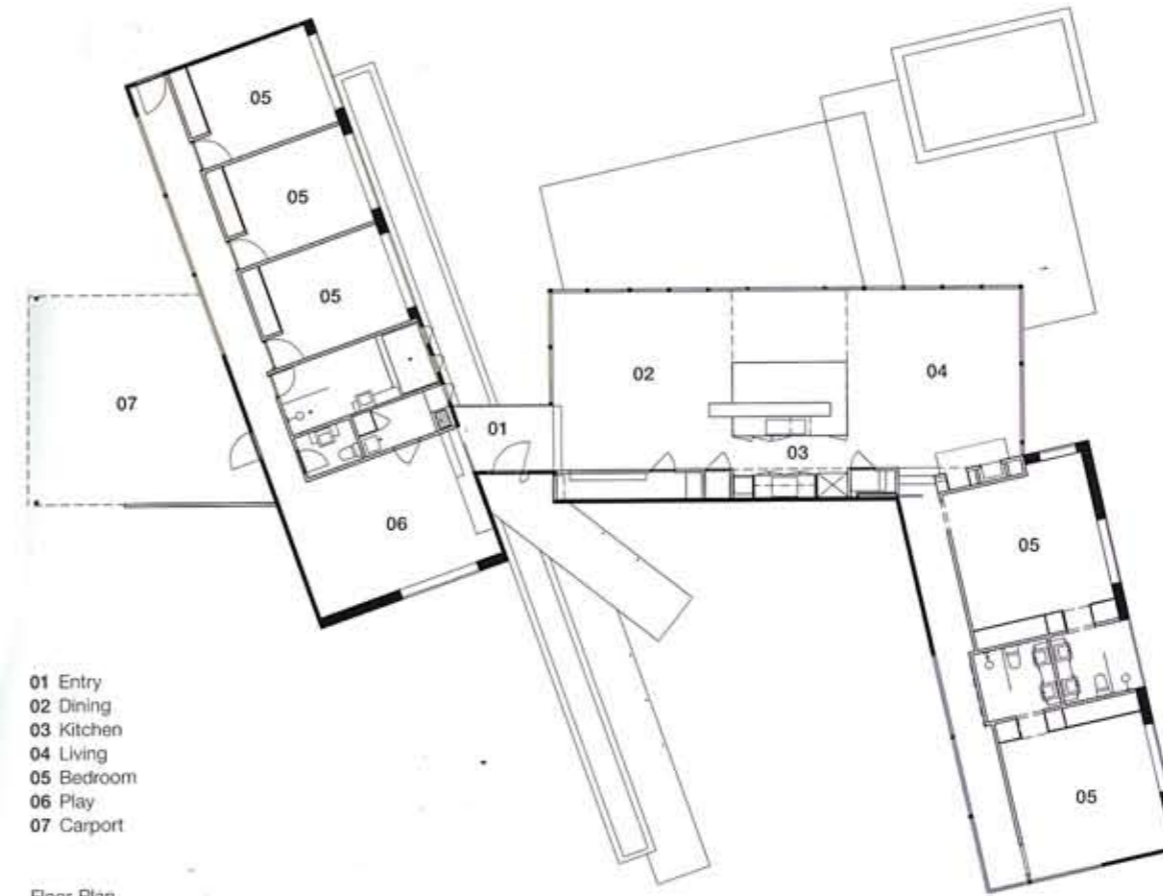
01 Timber entrance 'catwalk' 02 Muted material and colour palette 03 Rear façade 04 View at night

WHO DOESN'T WANT a slice of coastal idyll? Owning an escape hatch from urban existence is a desire shared by thousands of harried workers who long for a calm view of the horizon to salve the frenetic pace of their weekday lives. Prime holiday havens like those on the Mornington Peninsula were once the exclusive domain of a handful of gentry. Yet, as more and more people ascribe to the romantic notion of a seaside getaway, the ideal of the beachside retreat comes under duress. At Portsea, where the real estate has claims to being the most expensive in Australia, crown land and old-money family estates are being subdivided at a rapid rate to meet boom-time demands.

This weekender designed by David Dennis is a response to the condition of encroachment. Situated within a recent subdivision [of what was long-held Baillieu family grazing land] on route to the Portsea backbeach, the residence is surrounded by developer-driven mansions whose tenets are maximise views, maximise exposure and maximise footprint. Dennis employs a strategy of disguise to combat the increasingly 'suburban' environs, using the tactics of camouflage, costume and cosmetics in a deliberate play of conceal and reveal.

Set well back from the boundary and ensconced down a gentle gradient banked with mass-plantings of native grasses and flax, the exterior presents a defensible musculature. Dennis likens the solid façade to a bullet-proof vest or a flak jacket with only small openings. Even its colour palette suggests army camouflage through muted hues stolen from the trees, grasses and sands of the site. A mammoth stacked slate wall, with only a slim ingress, bridges two extruded cedar boxes whose low-slung fenestration dissuades neighbourly peering. From within the house, sightlines to the front of the property are concentrated into 'snapshots' of the garden and deny views of the street or surrounding houses.

Dennis amplifies the notion of a defence force by cleverly exploiting veneers that offer both effect and economy. The seemingly impenetrable stone wall is actually slate tiled with a considerable degree of craftsmanship and finesse. The cedar cladding is another applied surface finish. A timber-decked entrance 'catwalk' and riverstone-lined watercourse are the first indications that bulletproof surface appearances might only be skin deep. Certainly in the evening, illumination of this water-feature and the façade render the exterior more seductive. >>



- 01 Entry
- 02 Dining
- 03 Kitchen
- 04 Living
- 05 Bedroom
- 06 Play
- 07 Carport

Floor Plan

Project name Portsea House
Designer David Dennis
Builder Individual Builders Pty Ltd
Engineer Kennedy Cox and Associates
Landscape architect Ecoscapes
Time to complete 6 months design, 6 months construction
Council Mornington Peninsula Shire
External materials Cedar timber weatherboards with timber stain, Smart Rock, Timber decking
Interior materials Victorian ash floor with water based acrylic seal, Plasterboard, Blackwood timber veneer, Reconstituted stone bench-tops





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05 Illuminated entrance water feature 06 Blackwood timber joinery 07 View through living 08 Strip windows allow filtered views

>> Through the cosmetic veil of the façade, the residence begins to expose its programme and discloses its 'backyard playground' complete with a generous terrace, swimming pool and tennis court. Dennis' planning recalls the Venn diagram with simple orthogonal envelopes forming three distinct pavilions of similar magnitude. These are shunted on the site such that their intersecting volumes optimise northern aspects to living and sleeping quarters. This arrangement also accounts for cross-ventilation and the retention of existing vegetation.

Living and dining spaces are encased within the central living pavilion. Glazed on three sides, it allows impressive light penetration as well as glimpses into the children's bedrooms and study in the west wing. A massive island bench separates the two zones and its ceiling bulkhead mediates the kitchen-eatery to a more intimate scale. Storage and kitchen services are accommodated in an elegant band of pale Blackwood timber-veneered joinery along the rear of this space. Polished finishes such as the reconstituted stone benchtop and Signorino matt-white tiles bring a level of refinement to this informal living space without sacrificing its casual air.

Opening on to the Merbu deck and pool area, the outdoor terrace celebrates the happy perception of the weekender. Entertaining, swimming, tennis, lounging in the wind-sheltered sundeck and kids' play through the teatree grove are all encouraged. All the defences of the front of the house are broken down and relaxed at the rear. Garden concepts were developed with Ecoscapes and the selection of drought-resistant natives submits to the low-maintenance maxim of holiday living.

Sleeping quarters are cosseted away from this central zone in the two attendant pavilions. To the east, two master bedrooms enjoy light from framed garden vistas as well as privacy. En suites to each are consolidated into timber-veneered containers with polished fixtures and finishes that reflect the verdant landscape. The west flank commences with a timber-panelled sitting room complete with home entertainment system that nods to Scandinavian influences. The corridor segues past a powder room and bathroom and culminates with two smaller bedrooms and a bedroom/study. Dennis' program considers the prospect of extended guest stays, containing the parents' suites into one zone and children's into the other.

Throughout the residence, the material and tonal palette is an exercise in refined understatement. Victorian Ash timber floors complement veneer-panelled joinery. White walls and pale polished finishes encourage echoes of the landscape to enter the house.

Neither a shack nor an ostentatious display home, Dennis' beach-house offers seclusion from its neighbours and a sense of inclusion for its inhabitants. By dissolving the surface appearance of combat-fatigues up front to 'a leisure suit' out back, Dennis reveals his engagement with the conditions of the site and the ideals of holiday living. [M]