

COURT OF MURCUTT

An intimate little office conversion which shows Murcutt's continuing interest in the courtyard form as the urban design strategy, as well as confirming his mastery of detailing.

**OFFICE CONVERSION,
REDFERN, SYDNEY,
AUSTRALIA**
ARCHITECTS
**GLENN MURCUTT
WITH MARSH FREEDMAN**

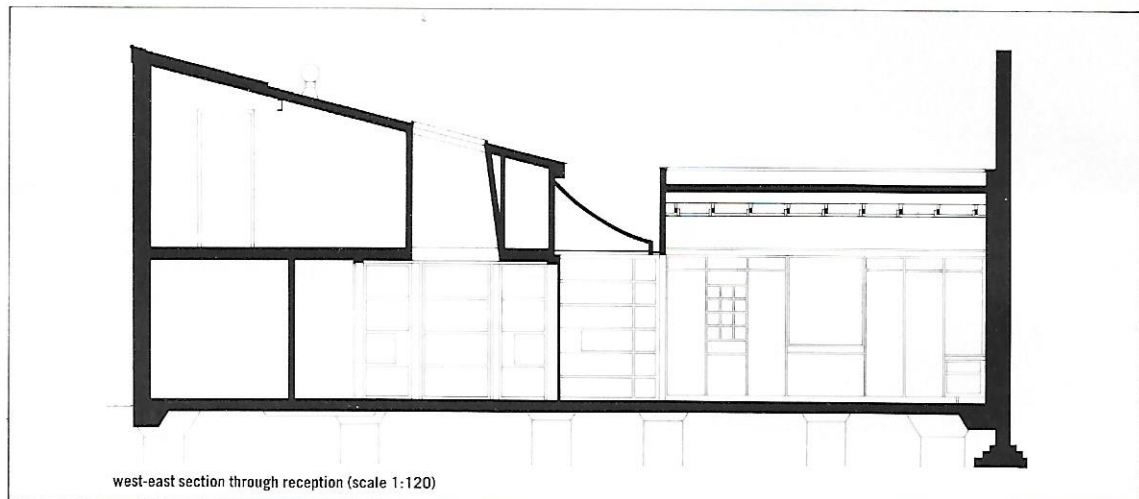
1, the inner, private courtyard: 'a nice sense of visible history—stone cottage, brick and timber office (right) and new concrete, steel and glass connecting structures.'

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**OFFICE CONVERSION,
REDFERN, SYDNEY
CRITICISM
RORY SPENCE**

2, the street front: 'two roller doors with a central entrance marked by an elegant oversailing steel roof'.
3, the porch: form comes from extending verandah and coupling it to a mirror image of itself.
4, 5, reception room—largely lit from north-facing clerestory—has almost Classical repose. (Sun shines from north in Australia.)



plan (scale 1:300)

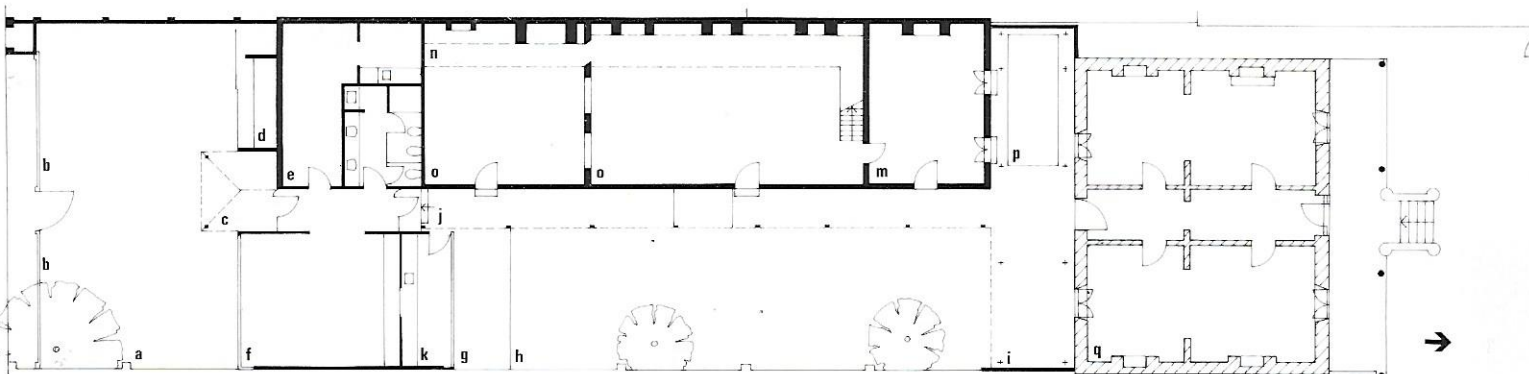
- key
- a, outer courtyard
 - b, roller door
 - c, porch
 - d, plant
 - e, store/printing
 - f, reception
 - g, terrace
 - h, inner courtyard
 - i, glazed verandah
 - j, corridor
 - k, kitchen
 - m, meetings room
 - n, gallery library
 - o, office
 - p, pool
 - q, house

Glenn Murcutt's new office for interior designers Marsh Freedman Associates, like his earlier office for the same firm (AR December 1985), is a conversion of an existing nineteenth-century property, in this case in the down-at-heel inner suburb of Redfern. Murcutt was responsible for the design and detailing of the building structures themselves, in consultation with Marsh Freedman, while Marsh Freedman carried out many of

the drawings and were responsible for the design of the joinery, colour scheme, paving and landscaping, and some of the decorative details.

The original stone cottage of 1840 has been restored by George Freedman as a residence, while a long thin brick structure, built in the 1870s and '80s as an addition to the cottage, has been altered and extended for the new office. The two existing buildings and the party wall of the adjacent warehouse already partially

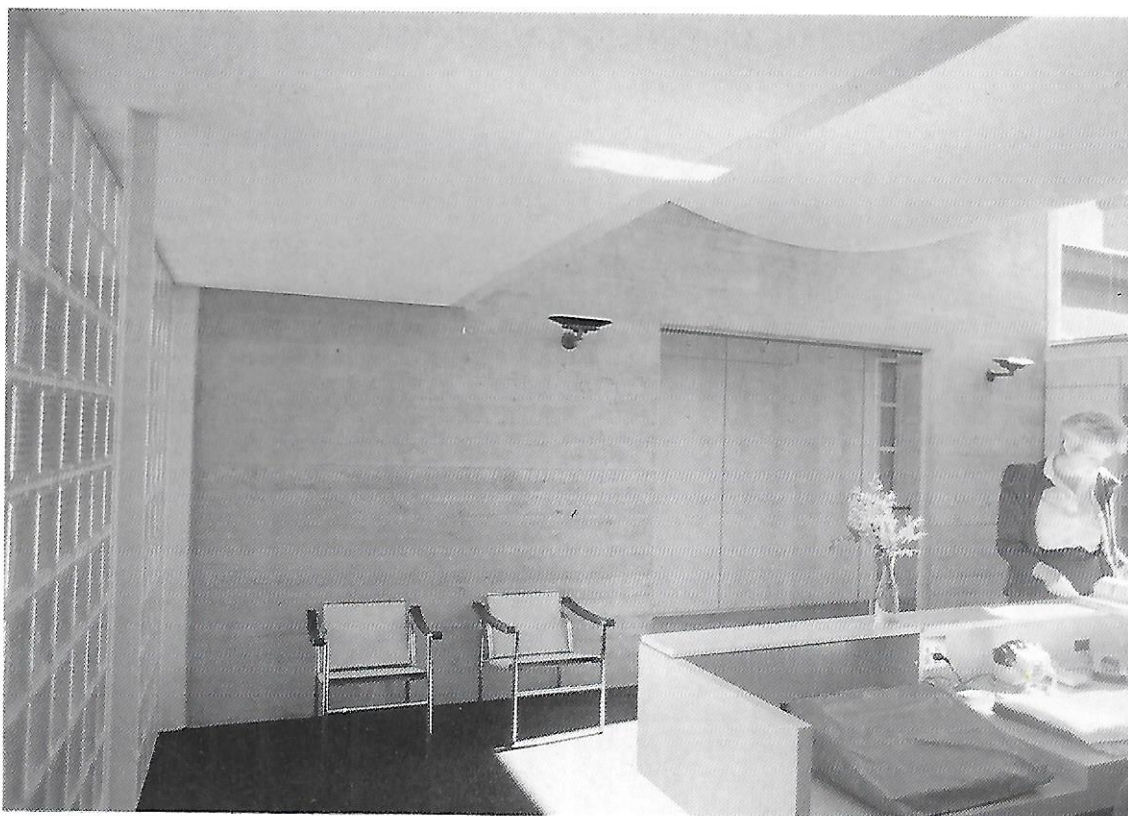
enclosed the back garden, but Murcutt has created a secluded, fully-enclosed courtyard by introducing a new reception area and kitchen facing the original cottage. He has also added a second completely new structure—a virtually free-standing steel and glass verandah, acting as a covered link and transitional space between the cottage and the later brick building, akin to the glazed hall in Murcutt's first Marsh Freedman conversion.



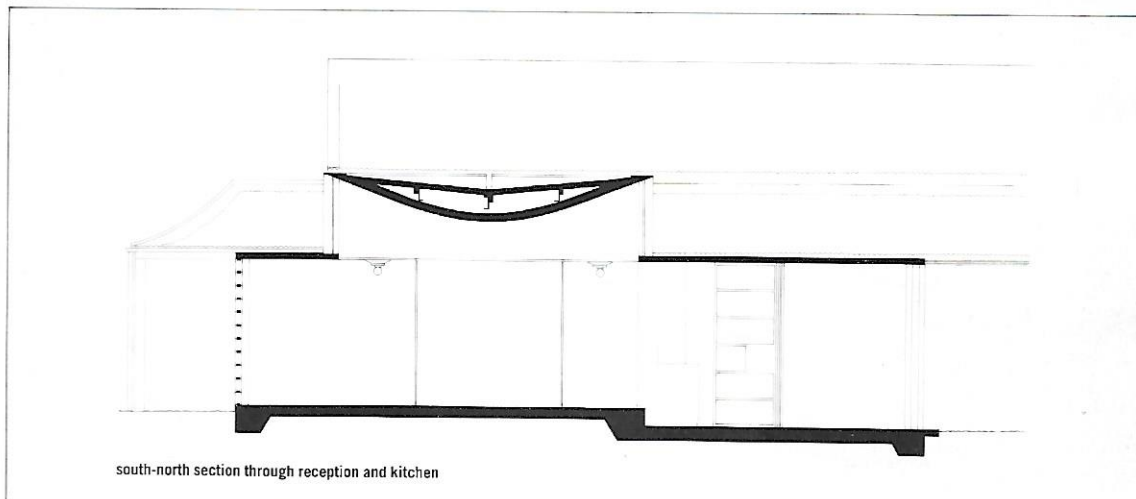
Entrance to the office is from the modest rear lane—James Street—via an entry courtyard, which doubles as a secure car parking area. There is thus a hierarchy of privacy from street, to semi-public courtyard, to private office courtyard—all controlled by the reception area. The street front consists simply of two roller doors for car access with a central entrance, marked by an elegant little oversailing corrugated steel roof, which reads as a contemporary equivalent of the precinct gateways in traditional Japanese architecture. The existing verandah down one side of the office has been ingeniously used as the partially open central circulation spine for the scheme, running from front to back of the site, allowing views from one end to the other, as in several of Murcutt's earlier projects: for example, the Douglas Murcutt House, Belrose, NSW (1969-72), the Munro Farmhouse, Bingara, NSW (1981-83) and the House at Moruya, NSW (AR November 1986).¹ This verandah has been continued in the extension to the office and coupled with a mirror image of itself to form an elegant, tent-like entry porch to the building, of an almost Oriental character.

The distinct existing elements of stone cottage and brick outbuilding have been extended as a theme in the new work, except in the case of the office extension. The two completely new structures, deliberately orientated at right angles to the existing buildings, clearly read as distinct objects, although they are in fact connected to the adjacent buildings. Their Modernist architectural forms contrast strongly with the older work. The complex thus comprises a collection of disparate elements, loosely united by the strong central spine and simple courtyard layout. It is a strange, almost awkward, but stimulating crowding of structures, cheek by jowl, as if designed to be separate but pushed together at a later date. There is a nice sense of visible history, emphasised by the use of materials—stone cottage, brick and timber office and new concrete, steel and glass connecting structures. This historical clarity is understandably blurred in the office extension, but would still be broadly legible were it not for the nineteenth-century bracket detail on the entry porch, imitating the restored original verandah behind.²

There is an eclectic disparity between the two new structures, despite their shared modernity. The reception room is an unusual, largely toplit space of great purity and almost Classical repose. The central area with its downward-curving ceiling, like a suspended catenary—echoing the existing verandah roof—is beautifully modulated by



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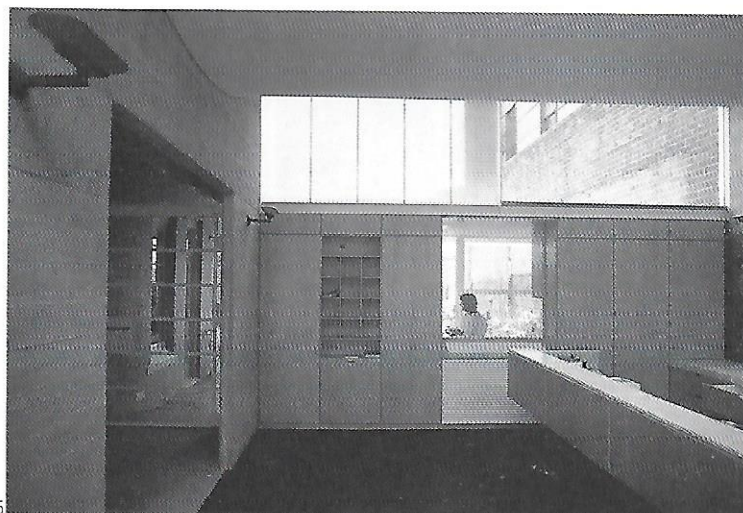


daylight from clerestory windows, through which one can catch glimpses of the chimneys and roofscapes beyond the confines of the site. The northern clerestory also admits sunlight, partly to backlight and animate the south-facing glass block wall to the entry courtyard. The room

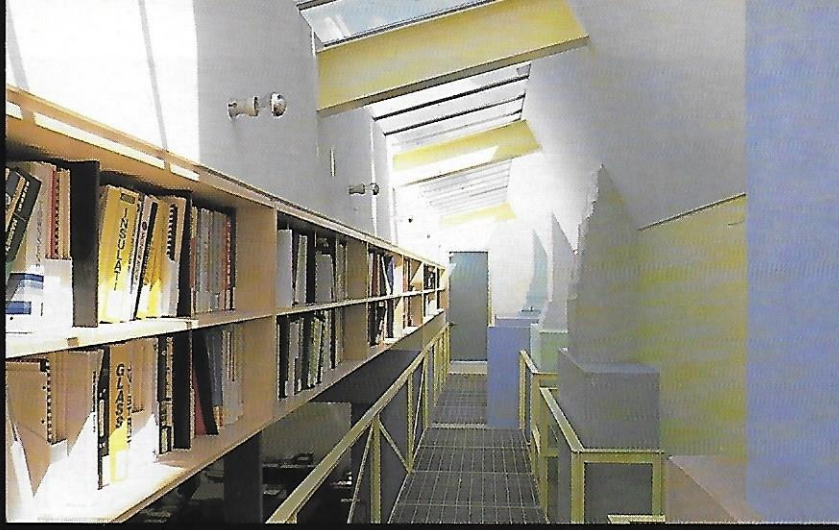
is flanked on one side by an unpainted, *béton brut* wall which leads one into the spinal corridor from the entry porch, but the party wall on the other side, although originally intended to be of the same material, has been built of concrete block lined by the client with a patterned fabric

that is alien to the austere architecture. A small window connects the reception area with the more private office courtyard via a delightful glazed kitchen with a sliding glass wall, opening on to a terrace shaded by overhead louvres in summer. The office courtyard is thus delicately edged on three sides with a variety of different verandah structures, which mediate between inside and outside.

In contrast to the calm and austere reception building, the glazed link between the two older buildings is a more decorative, animated structure, despite its + plan columns recalling Mies van der Rohe. The elaboration of structure and elegantly-shaped steel members is a deliberate attempt to find a contemporary equivalent for the scale of detail on the adjacent nineteenth-century work. The intense blue and purple end walls echo Luis Barragán's bold use of colour, reinforcing the strong cross axis, forming an explicit break between office and residence.

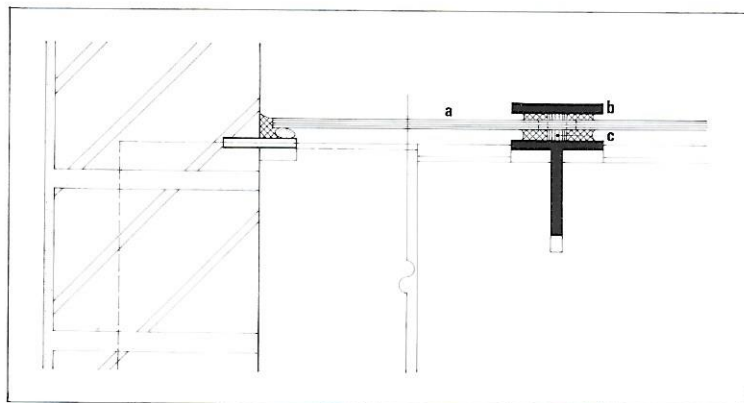


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**OFFICE CONVERSION,
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PHOTOGRAPHS
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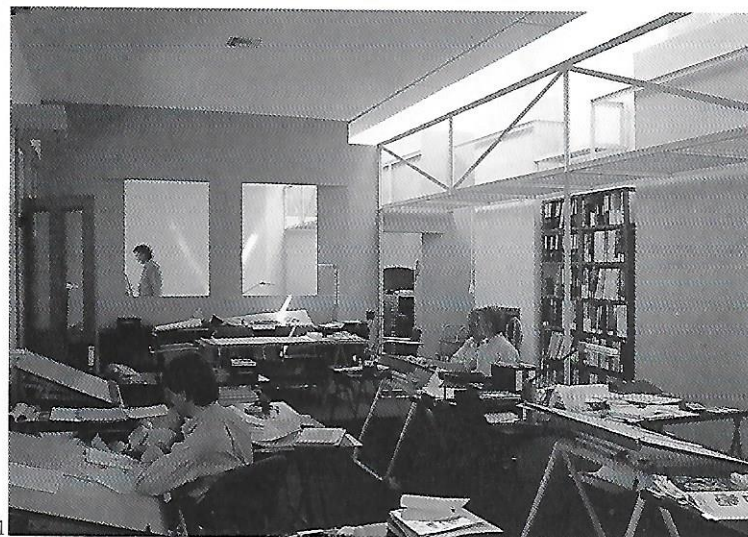
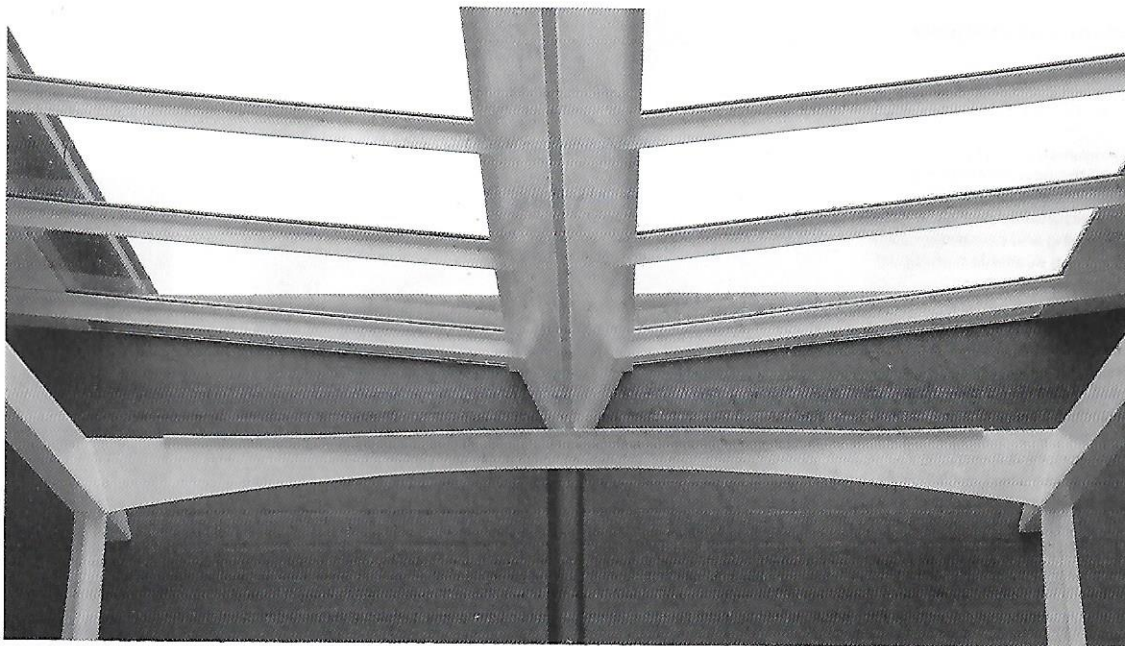
The interior of the existing brick building has been opened up to form a large office space, with a separate adjacent meeting room. Facing east and opening on to a verandah, the building previously received little light and virtually no sun, but a new rooflight, running the length of the office, now floods the rear part of the room with light and sun, mostly reflected off the back wall and a new raked false ceiling. In summer, the glass can be protected with sunscreen mesh. A lightweight steel gallery inserted below the rooflight doubles as a library and access to storage, while its industrial grid flooring further filters direct sunlight to the room below, in the middle of the day. The brick chimneys from each of the original small rooms create a series of enigmatic sculptural forms of varying profile, picked



detail of glazing link (scale 1:4)

key

- a. 6 mm thick toughened glass
- b. screw fix 50 x 60 mm ms flat through 3mm; 10 mm dia steel spacer set silicone to match adjoining supports
- c. 10 mm dia steel ferrule through 20 mm dia hole in glass



- 6, library in brick building is on gallery over drawing office.
- 7, 9, glazed link between two older structures: a deliberate attempt to find a contemporary equivalent to nineteenth-century scale of detailing.
- 8, looking from porch down verandah.
- 10, detail of steel structure of link.
- 11, 12, 13, interior of brick building: new rooflight floods back of the room with sunshine which filters through grid floor of gallery.



out in different colours. This intimate little office conversion continues the development of Murcutt's interest in the courtyard form as an urban planning strategy. Despite the modest nature of the project, it also clearly demonstrates some of his other concerns—notably, the inventive introduction of daylight and sunshine and a recurring preoccupation with linear circulation spines as a means of ordering buildings. The surprise here is the provocative diversity in the form of the new structures, producing an unexpected variety of experience.

Footnotes

1 Early colonial verandahs were often primarily external corridors. Here, the central spine also continues the typical early colonial central corridor plan of the old cottage.

2 Added by Marsh Freedman.