

# SCOPE

*Contemporary Research Topics*

## Art & Design 27: Architecture

August 2024

Encounters

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1027005>

FROM RED CLAY TO FRAGRANT PINE:  
THE SEARCH FOR ROOTEDNESS THROUGH ARCHITECTURE

Leana Scheffer

Published by Otago Polytechnic Press.

CC-BY the authors;

© illustrations: the artists or other copyright owners or as indicated.

## FROM RED CLAY TO FRAGRANT PINE: THE SEARCH FOR ROOTEDNESS THROUGH ARCHITECTURE

Leana Scheffer

*Sitting with my two-year-old feet buried deep in the pale, soft mounds of the still-damp sandpit, I pause my dreams of building towers to look across the quiet garden. The deep roof overhang shelters my sandpit from the sweltering African sun and stretches the afternoon shade towards the boundary wall. I reach to my left to trace the rough edges and uneven bumps of the dark clinker brick wall – a formidable but reassuring companion to my first memory of home.*

As a recent immigrant from Pretoria, South Africa, to Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand, feeling at home has become a pivotal theme in my adjustment to a foreign environment. I diligently prepared for the physical move and expected to bring 'home' with me as simply as bringing an extra sentimental suitcase. But living in a home of foreign materiality offered an unexpectedly unique body-centred experience and accompanying emotional and psychological responses<sup>1</sup> that sharply contrasted with my expectations of the qualities and values I have come to associate with home. As our body's sensory experience mediates our understanding of the world through an interpretative phenomenological lens,<sup>2</sup> I expected home to be what Pallasmaa defines as "the refuge of our body, memory and identity,"<sup>3</sup> and Bachelard's proposal that home is a place of "integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind."<sup>4</sup> To enrich my understanding of home through materiality, I examine my experience of a brick home in South Africa and the embedded meaning I associate with this materiality and compare it to my experience and the associated meaning of a New Zealand timber home.

### BRICK DWELLING

*Outside is bright and hot, where even the light breeze feels dry on your skin and the unrelenting high pitch of cicadas is all around – a typical 34-degree summer day in Pretoria, South Africa. You follow the patterned brick path to the front door as heat radiates from below your crunching footsteps. You step onto the brick tapestry of the covered porch, keys at the ready, breathing a sigh of relief for the shade. Quickly, you unlock the folding steel security gate securely bolted deep into the solid face-brick wall, and both door locks of the solid timber door. You step inside, turn to relock the gate and leave the door open to let the warm light breeze mix with the cool, still air inside. You turn back and it takes a moment for your eyes to adjust to the darkness inside. The soft hum of cicadas fades as you move into the foyer – safe inside.*

*The foyer is a rectangular volume, taller than it is wide but twice as deep. All the walls and the ceiling are painted white and a curved white cornice merges the two planes. The hard brick walls underneath the continuous plaster form a reassuring boundary, holding space, sound and temperature. The earthy ceramic tiles and dark timber skirtings create a soothing uninterrupted surface that allows your eyes to rest but announces your arrival as each step creates a distinct 'clack' that echoes down the corridor. Through its furnishings this foyer whispers that this home cherishes the support of extended family, admires quality handcrafting and historic narrative, appreciates beauty, values a variety of art forms, acknowledges the importance of place, respects nature and nurtures connections with others.*

*You lean through the living room door to greet the family. The large northern windows look across the garden, but the covered porch lets in no direct summer sun. An exposed face-brick fireplace forms one of two focal points of the living room, the other being the TV cabinet. The fireplace is empty, as it is only used for a few weeks during the deepest winter, but the furniture is arranged to acknowledge its importance. The basket-weave pattern of the mahogany parquet floor complements the running bond brick pattern of the fireplace surround. Visual repetition of both textures offers comfort through predictability. In contrast, each block of brick and timber is genuinely one-of-a-kind, a tapestry of different colours, patterns and textures. You turn back through the foyer.*

*The corridor is a windowless volume that extrudes from the end of the foyer at a right angle for almost the entire length of the home. Its width is about a third of its height. You reach out to touch both cool walls as you move towards your bedroom, the echo of your footsteps running ahead. The single overhead light exaggerates the texture of the white-painted plaster. Spaces alternate arrhythmically as you move through the long space; above each door, a brick ventilation block adds to the visual rhythm.*

*You hear a deep reverberating rumble. Delighted, you open the steel frame window to see the thunderclouds rolling in on the now brisk breeze, a sheet of angled rain slowly moving towards you. Occasional flashes of light pale the oversaturated garden colours as you sit by the window waiting for the first drops to fall. You smell the rusty dusty scent even before the large drops pat down on the hot brick paving and red clay soil. The first drops are always absorbed but quickly evaporate, turning the rust-heavy scent into a hot steamy vapour that lasts only a few minutes as it starts to cool. The sheet of rain has arrived, drenching the earth with water and darkening the brick pavers to a deep red ochre. The wind keeps moving the rain clouds and it only takes a few minutes for the outside air to cool, achieving equilibrium between inside and out. The thunder shower is over just in time to catch the sunset, leaving a feast of oranges above and below.*

*You recall that these bricks are made just outside of town, using the same iron-rich clay soil as in your garden. You have driven past the open mines with their terraced layers cutting deep into the orange-red hills, and seen the muddy water pools used to mix the clay. The pale stacks of bricks drying in the sun remind you of the texture and smell of making mud cakes as a child. The size of the pillar of smoke billowing from the warehouse leaves you wondering how much heat is needed to fire all those bricks that build your city, and those that have built your memories.*

## HOME AS A CAVE

Analysing the experience of inhabiting a brick home offers insights into the themes and embedded symbolism of brick materiality.

The similarity in colour, texture and porosity between the bricks and surrounding clay soil creates the impression of a hollow carved into an earth mound, like a cave.<sup>5</sup> The material continuity connects the home to place through a sense of groundedness and belonging to the natural 'place.' The prevalent use of brick in the surrounding built fabric also reinforces its belonging to the man-made 'place,' with both ideas supported by Zumthor's argument that architecture connects us to natural and man-made places while it also forms place character,<sup>6</sup> extending the connections to place.

The brick sensory landscape strongly emphasises the tactile and visual senses, amplified by contrasts in temperature and light between the outside and inside. Brick provides physical comfort through its ability to respond to and embody temperature changes.<sup>7</sup> The brick pattern's "visual repetition ... offers comfort through predictability." The acoustic comfort of the brick interior creates a dampened perceptual soundscape<sup>8</sup> while offering the comfort of acoustic intimacy.<sup>9</sup> The concept of comfort is furthered by focal points like the brick fireplace as a central hearth, offering social comfort through family gatherings while also encouraging moments of quiet contemplation.

Brick forms an impenetrable physical barrier that manifests the line between unsafe and safe, as it offers protection from other people, dangerous animals and exposure to the elements – a refuge for the body and mind.<sup>10</sup> The

opposition between inside and outside holds a sense of “alienation and hostility between the two”<sup>11</sup> and suggests security through separation. The barrier quality facilitates access control between public and private and offers safety through increasing levels of privacy and intimacy. Interior rooms are separated by thinner, less formal barriers that provide additional levels of privacy, intimacy and optional access. Bachelard describes this as “protected intimacy,”<sup>12</sup> in that it provides a place to be unapologetically honest and safely vulnerable. As brick is made of the same clay that nurtures the local crops and native flora, you are aware of your dependency on this material, on this place, for your everyday survival and well-being. This nurturing quality expands how brick provides refuge.

Pallasmaa explains that architecture “enable(s) us to see and understand the passing of history, and to participate in time cycles that surpass individual life ... to perceive and understand the dialectics of permanence and change.”<sup>13</sup> Brick’s ability to show weathering emphasises its connection to time by making visible how time passes. Simultaneously, brick’s continuous presence and its natural resistance to wear evoke a sense of lasting strength, timelessness and endurance that can be trusted to exist for generations to come.<sup>14</sup> The idea of permanence and time is further supported by spaces like the foyer, dedicated to expressing and preserving a lineage of familial values.

The most prominent experiential feature of a brick home is the way in which its materiality lets us “become aware of being enclosed, of something enveloping us, keeping us together, holding us.”<sup>15</sup> The experience of enclosure emphasises the distinct divide between the unsafe outside and the safe inside, where the thick brick protects the interior and its occupants, becoming a place of refuge. The notions of comfort, safety and permanence further reinforce this idea of refuge while also bringing our attention inward through a heightened awareness of enclosure. Bachelard proposes that a house’s cellar provides a private refuge and intimate retreat for the unconscious.<sup>16</sup> Although a cellar provides an extreme form of enclosure, the experiential similarities of the brick interiority offer a similar respite, arguably for many forms of the self. Interior spaces edged by explicit physical boundaries add to the perceived importance of the interior in the spatial hierarchy, while the trust conveyed by the material’s associations with permanence is transferred to the interior character. Brick’s embedded associations with refuge and retreat combine with the physical experience of interiority to shape the idea of a home as a cave.

## TIMBER DWELLING

*Your exposed but sun-screened skin feels prickly in the warm and humid outdoors as you carry the clothing layers that kept you warm and dry in this morning’s drizzly brisk wind – a typical four seasons in a day for Dunedin, New Zealand. Walking up the steep sidewalk, you are serenaded by birdsong from treetops above and greeted by friendly faces walking their dogs. Many of your neighbours are outside and wave as you walk by. You stop to exchange weather updates with your next-door neighbour pottering in the garden.*

*The moss-edged concrete footpath leads you home through garden shades of green, purple and blue. Damp, dark chocolate soil underneath it all. The low afternoon sun deepens the linear shadows of the white-painted horizontal weatherboard facade. The low rectangular mass is raised off the ground, held lightly between two red-brick cladding edges, only a single leaf wide.*

*You step onto the uncovered square concrete plinth and take out the keys, stopping to wave back to your elderly neighbour, waving from her kitchen window. The front door’s large glass pane and white timber edges frame the view to the inside as you stop to unlock it. As you step inside, the timber step greets you with a distinct hollow ‘thunk’. The carpeted timber floor creaks and thuds as you swap your outside shoes for indoor ones. You leave the door open to let the now soft breeze and garden birdsong move through the space, uninterrupted – you are home.*

*The foyer boundaries are subtle in the open-plan space and seem not to exist at all when the front door is closed, instead becoming the transition space between the open-plan kitchen and dining areas. The existence of the foyer is tied to the act of entering or leaving the home. The furnishings ‘in’ this foyer divulge that this home admires innovation, values beauty, respects quality handcrafting and nurtures connections with nature.*

*From the entrance, you can see the L-shaped volume of the open-plan living, dining and kitchen spaces wrap around the bathroom block from left to right, and two bedrooms to the left of the living and dining area. Interior walls are lined with identical smooth timber panels painted in a calm natural cotton colour, forming a continuous vertical plane winding through the home. Silk-textured white paint causes the flush-plastered ceilings to softly reflect light deep into the space, while seeming to be higher than they are. The honesty of the simple layout encourages your trust.*

*Large double-glazed, white-painted timber windows sit within the timber-framed walls and let in wide shafts of sunlight. You recall winter's blue-white midday sun glaring at an impossibly low angle, reaching deep into the house. Today, the morning summer sun only narrowly stepped through the large windows before being interrupted by the arm-length deep roof overhang. Window frames join seamlessly to windowsills and hand-width window trims, all in white timber. The continuous surface creates the illusion of the exterior cladding folding inward, framing the garden and mountain views. Interior doors have a similar wide white trim on both sides that subtly frames the views into adjacent rooms.*

*As you watch the sun set behind the treeline, you marvel at how much of this home is made of timber – beams, posts and sheets, all from the same living source. You remember seeing the locally grown pine logs transported on trucks along the highway through town, first to the docks, then on a train and then on cargo ships for export far and wide. It makes you wonder what stories they tell of the South Island sun, Otago rain and Dunedin loam and sand – of this place – in their new homes.*

## HOME AS A NEST

Analysing the themes arising from the experience of inhabiting a timber home provides insights into the materiality's embedded symbolism.

Timber's tendency to weather if left exposed to the elements gives the man-made material a distinct impermanent quality that contrasts with the longevity of the surrounding living trees. The raised structure emphasises its vulnerability to the elements and reminds us that regular maintenance is needed to keep the home habitable. The materiality's impermanence frames the activities housed within, a reminder that inhabiting and being are fleeting and tied to time. Bachelard argues that "mankind's nest, like his world, is never finished,"<sup>17</sup> highlighting a recurrent effort to rebuild, reinhabit and, perhaps, to reinvent home.

The daily climatic variability and dramatic annual changes in the natural light of this place make you profoundly aware of your body experience, increasing your awareness of being in place and in time. Timber speaks to place in its continuous presence in the surrounding landscape, the exterior skin and throughout the home interior, where it becomes progressively more covered and refined. Bachelard likens the interior–exterior relationship to the way that a tree extends the refuge qualities of the nest within, where "the entire tree, for the bird, is the vestibule of the nest." The timber's concealed interior presence allows for a connection directly with place – by experiencing the place through your body, instead of through the material as a symbolically mediated connection.

Timber's most striking theme explores different ways to connect with place, people and home. In contrast to Pallasmaa's proposal that "sight implies exteriority, but sound creates an experience of interiority,"<sup>18</sup> the permeable acoustic quality of the timber skin offers an immersive exterior connection to place and community, while also facilitating an immersive interior connection between the individuals that share the home. Pallasmaa argues that "sight is the sense of the solitary observer, whereas hearing creates a sense of connection and solidarity",<sup>19</sup> emphasising the influence of acoustics in feeling connected. In the timber home the visual experience focuses on observing and being observed, as seen in the framing and articulation of apertures that highlight exterior and interior views. Contrary to creating a "solitary observer," the reciprocal visual connection shares your inner space with others, as they share their inner space with you, creating a visual network of shared space.

In time, the connecting quality of timber matures and is transformed into multiple dynamic relationships between the self, the other and place, reminiscent of a dynamic ecosystem. The material's impermanence reminds us that relationships decay if not maintained, encouraging us to rebuild connections to people and place, like a bird returning to rebuild its nest each season.<sup>20</sup>

## HOME AS ROOTEDNESS

Understanding what home means to me provides the foundations of how I could connect, integrate and belong in a foreign place. Bachelard explains that to grasp the meaning of home, we must understand "how we inhabit our vital space ... how we take root, day after day, in our corner of the world."<sup>21</sup> My inhabitation process followed my physical in-body experience, emotional and mental response to that experience, and the meaning I attributed to both as part of my sense-making process.<sup>22</sup>

Materiality has an integral role in the experiential quality of architecture as we explore and know the world through our bodies.<sup>23</sup> The unique experience of a material becomes an associated characteristic of that material, just as material characteristics are projected onto experiential qualities. The materiality of a home therefore imbues the typology with subtle qualities specific to the material, which in turn become attributed to the essence of a home of that materiality.

My brick home was essentially comfortable, safe, permanent and grounded in place, its cave-like interior offering an experientially rich refuge and opportunity to look inward.<sup>24</sup> These qualities shaped my everyday experience and understanding of the world, while establishing the brick home as a place to build a deep relationship with the self and very close others.

My new timber home offers the opportunity to nurture connections, embrace impermanence and to experience and 'be' in place in a meaningful way. Pallasmaa elaborates on the experience of place as "a constant dialogue and interaction with the environment, to the degree that it is impossible to detach the image of the Self from its spatial and situational existence."<sup>25</sup> These surprising qualities have shown me a different way to inhabit, building dynamic relationships to social and physical place by sharing experiences and being with others inhabiting the same place.

Reflecting on this alternative way of inhabiting and my role in the dynamic place relationships has also allowed an extended understanding of myself and my being, in context. Inhabiting a timber home will take time to understand fully and will likely grow and develop in time. Experiencing inhabiting through new materiality has deepened my understanding of home as a place that reveals, shapes and connects us to ourselves and to others, as it roots us in place.

## CONCLUSION

Exploring the meaning of home through materiality started with gaining a deeper understanding of my experience of inhabiting brick homes in South Africa and the embedded meaning associated with it. The same exploration of my experience of my new timber home yielded surprising insights into the materiality's embedded meaning, and how it differed from that of dwelling in brick. Ultimately, the process has consolidated and enriched the meaning of home, keeping the valuable and inviting the new, while allowing me to become rooted in place.

**Leana Scheffer** (ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2964-2093>) serves as a senior lecturer at Otago Polytechnic, supported by a Master of Interior Architecture by Research and a Graduate Diploma in Tertiary Education. With a decade of teaching across South Africa and New Zealand and eight years industry experience, her research explores phenomenology and place-making, critical regionalism and heritage, and neuroscience in architecture.

- 1 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012); Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. M Jolas (New York, NY, Penguin, 1994).
- 2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C Smith (London: Routledge, 2002); Jonathan A Smith, Paul Flowers and Michael Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2012).
- 3 Pallasmaa, *Eyes of the Skin*, 64.
- 4 Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 6.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Peter Zumthor, *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments, Surrounding Objects* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006).
- 7 Nathaniel Coleman, *Materials and Meaning in Architecture: Essays on the Bodily Experience of Buildings* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).
- 8 Elie Grinfeder et al., "What do we Mean by "Soundscape"? A Functional Description," *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution*, 10 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fevo.2022.894232>.
- 9 Pallasmaa, *Eyes of the Skin*.
- 10 Ibid
- 11 Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 212.
- 12 Ibid., 26.
- 13 Pallasmaa, *Eyes of the Skin*, 52, 71.
- 14 Coleman, *Materials and Meaning*.
- 15 Zumthor, *Atmospheres*, 47.
- 16 Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 3-37.
- 17 Ibid., 104.
- 18 Pallasmaa, *Eyes of the Skin*, 49.
- 19 Ibid., 50.
- 20 Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*.
- 21 Ibid., 4.
- 22 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*; Smith et al., *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*.
- 23 Pallasmaa, *Eyes of the Skin*.
- 24 Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*.
- 25 Pallasmaa, *Eyes of the Skin*, 64.