

Building study

Jørn again

The best summer house in the world?
Tim Morris revisits Sydney Opera House
architect Jørn Utzon's homes on Mallorca.
Photography by *Anthony Coleman*





Can Lis and Can Feliz, Mallorca

Jørn Utzon

‘My father had a team of 12 people working on the Opera House. He worked night and day on it. He did not go to parties or social events and would not see product representatives. He was totally focused on the project. He had little help in dealing with the politicians. At the end of the day, the exterior was his and the interior was not. But the building would not have been the same without him. In his retirement, my father felt at home in Mallorca.’

Jørn Utzon’s daughter, Lin, offers this insight into the Sydney Opera House designer’s esprit in later life from the living room of Can Feliz, completed in 1994, the second of the two retirement homes he built for himself and his wife, Lis, on Mallorca.

The first, Can Lis, completed in 1971, is located just outside Porto Petro in the south-east of the island, perched atop cliffs with shimmering views of the Mediterranean in a spot where the land falls vertically into the sea. ‘He loved the artistic culture of the Spanish. He loved Mallorcans, and they loved him back,’ says Lin. That the house is now reached via a road renamed Carrer Jørn Utzon in his honour is testament to the regard in which the Danish architect is held on the island.

It is easy to imagine how, having just resigned from the fractious Sydney Opera House project under a barrage of criticism from Davis Hughes, New South Wales’ minister for public works, and his boss, premier Bob Askin, a vocal critic of the project, the serenity of Mallorca might have appealed to Utzon when he visited in 1966 on his return from Australia. Relieved, no doubt, to have put behind him the unconscionable malice of his ousting, Utzon fell in love with the island over successive visits and resolved to construct there the home he had intended to build in Australia.

He asked a local farmer whether he had any land for sale and was offered three sites, which he respectively





described as ‘beautiful, marvellous and paradise’. One long, narrow plot, with a track to the front and a cliff to the rear and punctuated by pines and myrtles, stood out, and this became the site for Can Lis.

‘My father was a man of very simple tastes. His genius was in responding to the topography of a site and developing the technology to achieve the best solution,’ says Lin.

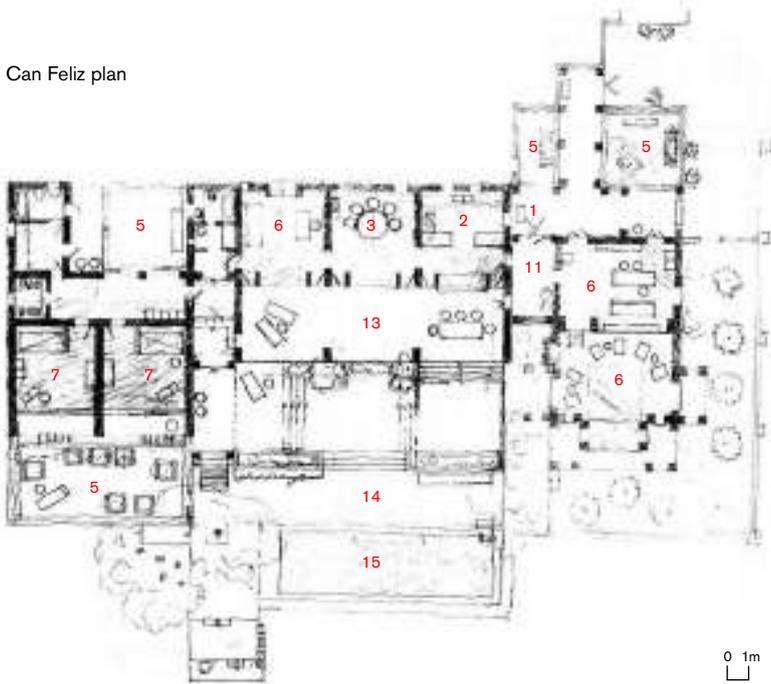
Can Lis’ elevation to the road is an understated sandstone wall pierced by one high-level window and a boarded front door with the number 77 etched into it. Inside the front door is a blank wall with a crescent opening framing the Mediterranean beyond. The crescent shape, repeated in a living room seating area, recalls the name of the access road before its renaming: Carrer Cala Media Luna – ‘Half-moon cove road’.

Utzon developed the concept for Can Lis by placing sugar lumps on a plan of the site in five staggered blocks along the cliff edge, in an arrangement reflecting earlier influences acquired from work with African farmers. Each block is individually adjusted to the contours of the land – even to the trees on the plot; and each had its own function. A kitchen and dining block has a colonnaded outdoor eating and seating area, then come a separate living area block and two bedroom >>



Can Lis and Can Feliz, Mallorca
Jørn Utzon

Can Feliz plan



1. Entrance
2. Kitchen
3. Dining room
4. Storage
5. Dining court
6. Living room
7. Bedroom
8. Bathroom
9. Patio
10. Studio
11. Hall
12. Study
13. Loggia
14. Terrace
15. Pool

blocks, each with its own sitting area looking out to sea. The living room in particular is a breathtaking space, with crescent-shaped sitting area and carefully located windows to give orchestrated views to the sea and bringing in shafts of light at different times of the day.

The positioning of the external tiled seating areas, too, provides spectacular views. The fixed tables and benches have seating to one side only so that the prospects remain

uninterrupted. One has to go outside to move from one block to another, a perfectly pleasant experience in the Mediterranean climate.

Window frames are not visible from the inside of the rooms, neither is there any 'furniture' in the normal sense. Everything is built-in stone, whether it be ceramic-tiled 'armchairs' with white linen cushions, shelving, or the beds, which are mere stone recesses. The local, butter-coloured sandstone was used, rough-hewn, with saw marks



Previous spread,

main image The Can Lis pavilions are orientated to match the cliffside contours

Previous spread,
bottom right

Crescent window off entrance patio and courtyard
Left The white-painted concrete lintels of Can Feliz can be picked out at a distance

still evident. The result brings the surrounding natural colours indoors.

The roofs were fabricated from standard concrete beams used locally for factory construction, covered by local arched, terracotta tiles.

'My father loved working with the local craftsmen,' recalled Utzon's son, Jan, some 30 years later when he collected the Pritzker Prize – belated recognition for Utzon's Sydney Opera House achievement – on his father's behalf.

'When he appeared at the building site with some bottles of wine, the craftsmen knew that he had had new ideas during the night and that some of the work already done would have to be changed.'

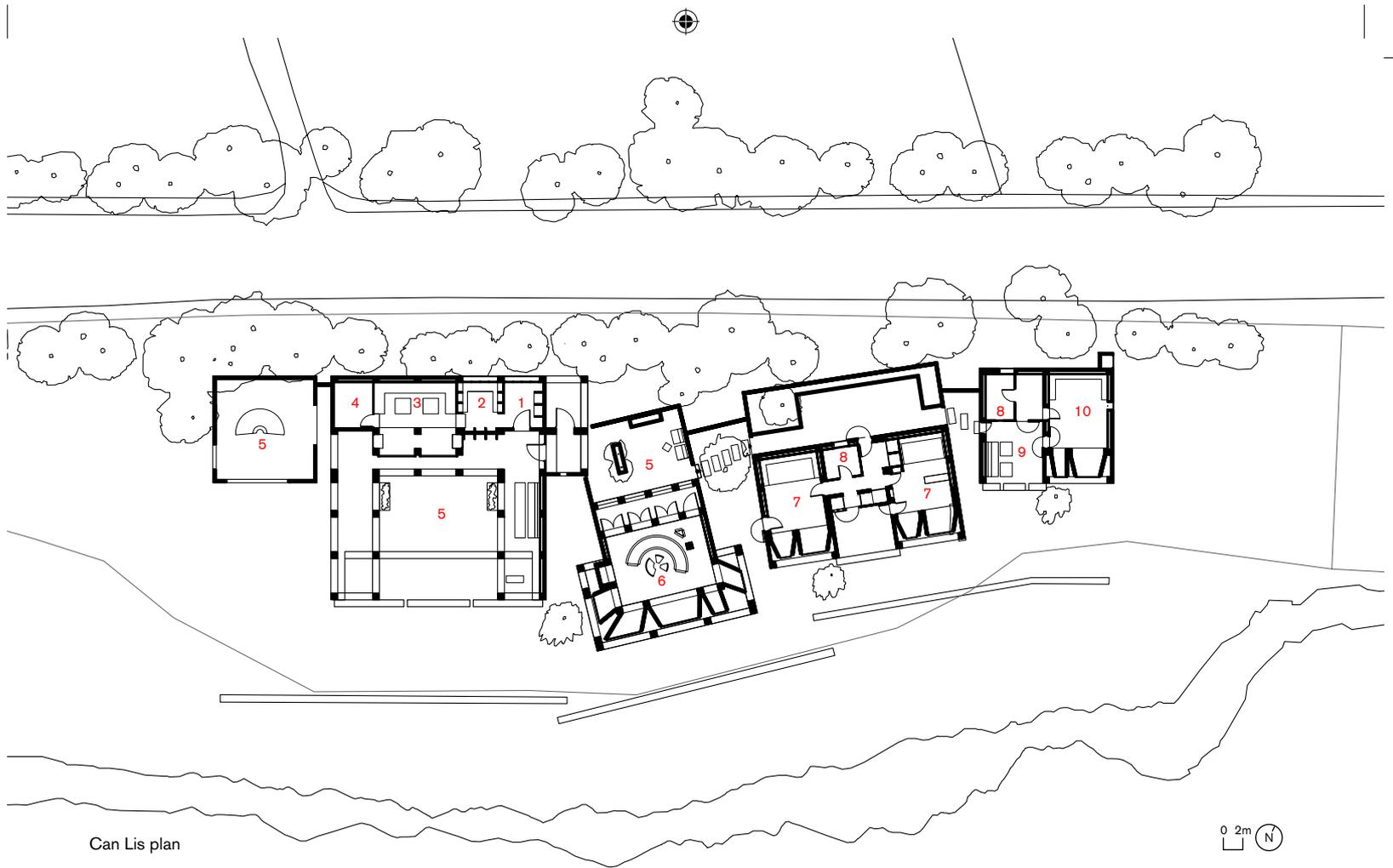
As Utzon grew older the glaring surface of the sea became too much for his eyes, weakened by a lifetime studying drawings. And the number of sightseers knocking on the door became too intrusive. So the Utzons decided to move further inland, to the 'paradise' site close to Sa Horta and for this site he designed a second home, Can Feliz, using the same materials. It is now occupied by daughter Lin and her husband. Can Feliz follows the same principles as Can Lis, but refines them. 'My father had learned a lot about the local materials and how to use them from Can Lis,' says Lin.

At Can Feliz circulation spaces are internal and the stone better finished, but it has the same industrial roof construction and the same frameless windows enhancing the drama of the diorama.

'My father came to site every day for the two and a half years that it took to build,' recalls Lin. 'He thought it was his masterpiece.'

Utzon had worked for Frank Lloyd Wright and Can Feliz sits in the

'When he appeared with bottles of wine, craftsmen knew he'd had new ideas'



Can Lis plan



Left Can Lis in elevation on Mallorca's limestone karst escarpment

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landscape in much the same way as Taliesin West.

'Both my parents would sit for months, look and talk about how they felt in the various parts of the site. They would consider the wind and the sun and take everything into consideration so that it would enhance the feeling of the place,' says Lin.

Utzon must have passed away a contented man in 2008, at the age of 90. When the Queen opened the Opera House in 1973, the architect did not receive an invitation to the ceremony and his name was not mentioned in the speeches; he was to be recognised later when he was asked to design updates to the interior. The Utzon Room, overlooking Sydney Harbor, was officially dedicated in October 2004. In a statement at the time Utzon wrote: 'The fact that I am mentioned in such a marvellous way gives me the greatest pleasure and satisfaction. I don't think you can give me more joy as the architect. It supersedes any medal of any kind that I could get and have got.'

Tim Morris is a chartered architect and managing director of Piece Regen

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Jørn Utzon

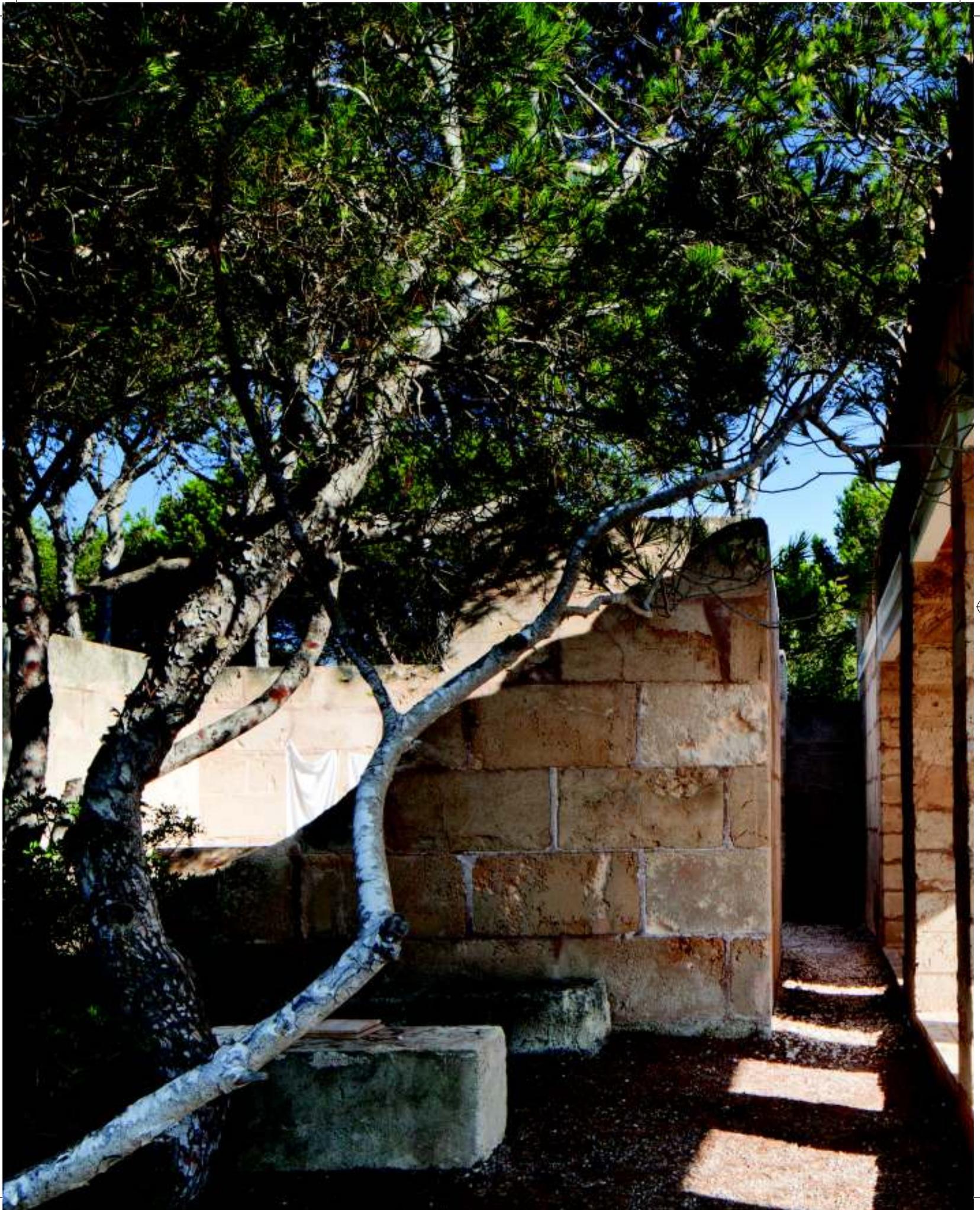


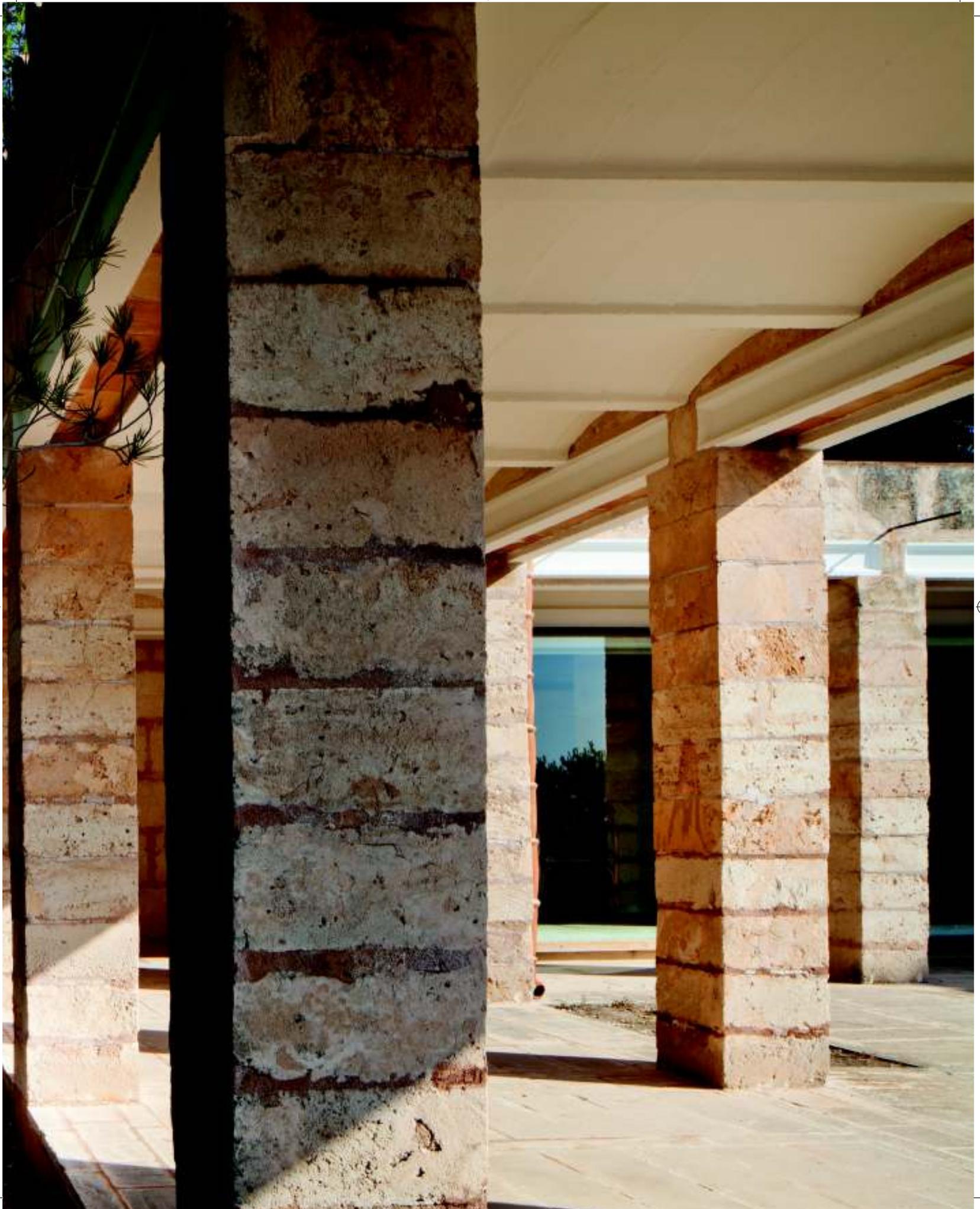


Clockwise from top left Courtyard with dining room beyond; Covered arcade flanking the dining court; The living room is designed to contemplate

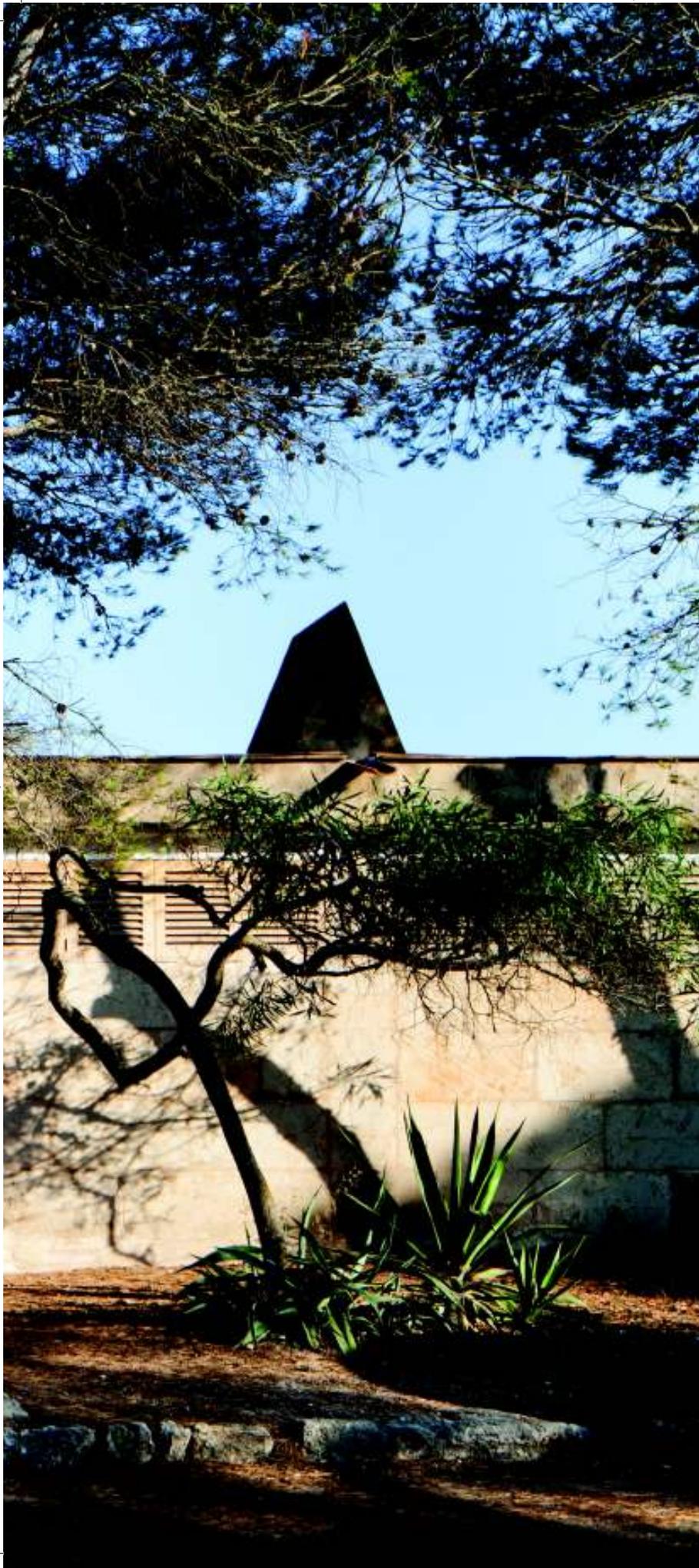
the sea and the passage of the sun; Recessed bed located in a freestanding bedroom pavilion; Living room with crescent-shaped sandstone sofa

Next spread Passage between courtyard and dining court
Pages 38-9 Entrance with view through windows to trees and the Mediterranean sea

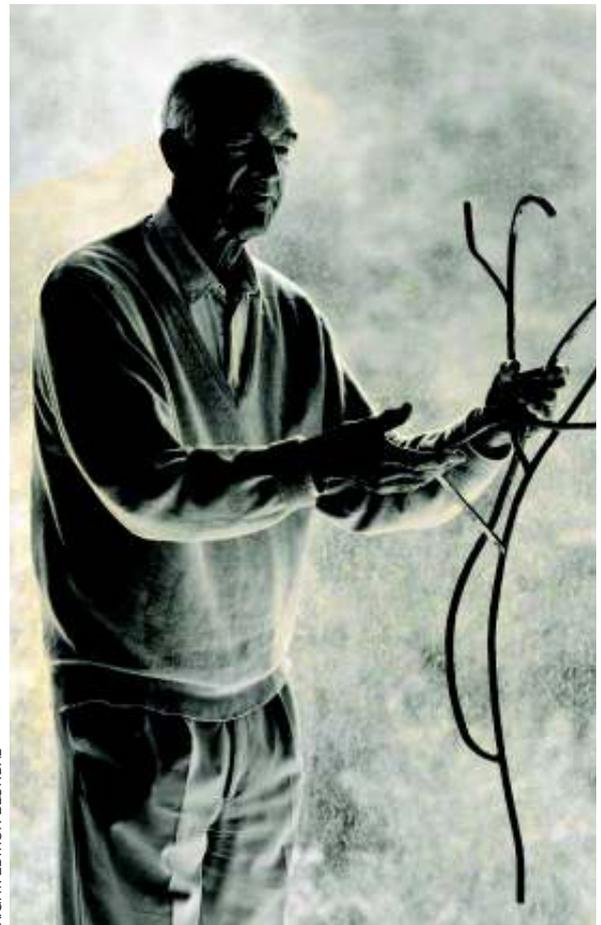








‘Utzon has made a house ...
as natural and ordinary as
the sun, stone and sea whose
intercourse it celebrates’
Richard Weston,
Utzon: Inspiration, Vision,
Architecture



RIGHT: EDITION BLONDAL