

Domain RENOVATION JENNY BROWN

Feelings of sanctuary, cubed

Public and private spaces are clearly separated but the effect is far from square.

A HUGE, spreading willow tree, probably 120 years old and evocative of the draping trees on willow-pattern plates, was the prompt for a Chinese-Vietnamese-Australian family buying a block on a ridge in Aberfeldie that gives them views from the West Gate Bridge to the Dandenongs. The street-screening willow was also one of the site clues architect Michael Ong played off in his first solo house project.

In a three-bedroom plan that gives the family three levels within a tall wood-clad "cube" that Ong says demarks the private spaces from the single level and concrete block work "public" or entertainment rooms, the architect has included many practical and subtly nuanced design elements, references to Chinese ritual culture, and carefully considered window placements set specifically to frame aspects of the great tree.

With its coolly commanding counter-posing vertical and horizontal forms, the Hans house is impressive enough as it stands. But this is a residence that should be even better in 20 years, when fish are swimming in a pool beside the entry and vertical greenery drapes the concrete walls of the several courtyards visible from the living room interiors.

"The play between brick, water, tree and creeping plants will let a softness overlap and push against the house, so it will become soft and hard at the same time," Ong says. "I can't wait for the greening because the garden will increasingly work in with the house."

To maximise the capture of northern light, the single-level tripartite living room wing "hugs" the southern boundary and turns back to embrace an inner courtyard also viewed through floor-to-ceiling windows. Like much else about the house, layering of form and function is a subliminal constant in the design narrative. Floors of different materials step up and step down. In the courtyard, the layering occurs overhead as well.

Because a partially canopied



The wood-clad cube (main) contains the bedroom zone, with stairs (right) leading down to a deck (left) and open-plan living spaces (centre).

courtyard was a fond memory of the client's Vietnamese childhood, the inner courtyard is partially over-mantled by the high, cantilevering "wooden cube" of the private wing. The deck is also wood. It steps down into a concrete courtyard that will become surrounded by garden. "The courtyard was a priority space," Ong says, and he envisages it will be wonderful on a hot day.

The entry, which flows on a raised plinth of concrete bricks, is again about sensual stimulus and ritual. Ong likes the block work

"aesthetic" but says that when used as a floor it defines the place where guests remove their shoes "as a show of respect. It feels cool to the feet. Then you step down onto the spotted-gum floor." To the right, in a small sitting space that overlooks the future fish pond, is a shelved cabinet as "an alcove for the altar".

Privacy was another priority and while the willow and the emphatic front facade do most of that work, the fact that the staircase to the upper floors is stashed around a corner in the entry lobby makes it

even clearer. The family bedroom zone is expansive and private, with the two boys' bedrooms of equal size on the first floor and a tremendously accommodating main bedroom suite on the second.

A fantastic view, overlooking a south-easterly city-to-mountain panorama, is seen through a six-metre-long window in the main bedroom. The en suite is a yellow and white tiled variation on the boys' green and white tiled bathroom below.

While definitively cubic extern-

ally, inside all sorts of cranks, crinks and angles make the Hans house interiors "good spaces ... stimulating spaces where you are always discovering something. It's not aggressive," Ong says. "It's soft."

The house won the 2012 Residential Exterior Award at the annual Intergrain Timber Vision Awards.

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