



MONASTIC HAVEN

THIS HOME IN INNER-CITY BRISBANE WAS A FINALIST FOR *belle* HOUSE OF THE YEAR 2000. FLOODED WITH LIGHT DURING THE DAY AND WITH A VIEW OF THE STARS AT NIGHT, SIMPLE FINISHES MAKE IT A TEMPLE TO NATURE.

TEXT BY MARGIE FRASER. PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID MATHESON.



THIS PAGE LIGHT FLOWS INTO THE HOUSE THROUGH CLERESTORY WINDOWS UNDER A STEEL ROOF. OPPOSITE PAGE A BANK OF WINDOWS FOLDS AWAY, OPENING THE BEDROOM TO A 160-YEAR-OLD TREE THAT WAS CAREFULLY PRESERVED DURING CONSTRUCTION.



The poetry of a narrow leafy block in inner-city Brisbane, resonating with seclusion and security, inspired architects Chris Bligh and Shane Thompson to create a retreat for clients concerned with natural materials and a simple existence.

The clients wanted a toxin-free house which felt as much outdoor as indoor, and to invest in the builder's craftsmanship and the integrity of the design rather than in showy finishes.

Bligh and Thompson of Bligh Voller Nield spent 14 months collaborating intensely with the clients before coming up with a solution to suit all needs. The house, in Toowong, has a huge "outdoor" room as a centrepiece which embraces the views while maintaining privacy. Light floods in through clerestory windows, while a wall of doors at the entrance folds back to bring in the trees and streetscape. The high central structure with its simple steel roof is flanked on both sides by lower roofs which shelter bedroom and kitchen zones. These lower structures allow for a minimal setback from the property's boundaries and also intensify the contrast between open and sheltered areas.

"The space has a classical symmetry to it," says Bligh. The layout is temple-like, with high walls and light pouring in from above, and an inner sanctum at the rear which forms a hermetic space.

Bligh describes entering the house as "a progressive journey through the landscape" – under the branches of a carefully preserved tree, into the open outdoor space, then beyond to the hermetic library/sitting room. Floor levels and materials mark the transitions, with timber that rises a step into the flanking rooms and a raised concrete slab forming the base of the final library/sitting room. Beyond this, a "gorge", or lap pool, slashes across the back of the house, which adds to the property's atmosphere of protection and isolation.

"It took a while for the client to get used to the openness," says Bligh, "as he was originally from Melbourne and not used to the way we live on verandas here in Brisbane."

The client describes the house as an inverted Queenslander, where the veranda has come inside and design has eliminated the need for hallways. "At first, we thought the plan looked too grand >



THIS PAGE HARDWOOD FLOORS ARE TREATED WITH CITRUS OILS AND LIGHT FLOODS THE "OUTDOOR" ROOM. **ABOVE LEFT** TIMBER LOUVRES IN THE BEDROOM ADD A TROPICAL FEEL.

in scale – we wanted something very humble – but, in fact, it is deceptively small. And it's built like a ship," he says, pointing to solid studs neatly adjoining floor and benches and the perfect shadow lines around steps. "There's only one builder who could fulfill this brief – he had to be a committed craftsman," he says, referring to builder Greg Thornton.

Exposed timber beams and studs form the skeleton for fibro walls painted pure white. Hardwood floors are treated with citrus oils, and the whole is encased by a skin of low-maintenance corrugated iron. The simplicity of the natural materials draws attention to their textures.

"There are no big architectural gestures here," says Thompson. "The idea was to create a sense of calmness through not drawing attention to things. Simple materials are used to help create a play of light and space throughout. Each area of the house resonates with the light in a different way."

The strong light source from above affords an intense awareness of the weather by day and a view of the stars at night. The single-span roof floating above the windows registers the drumming of the rain. Says Thompson: "The house is very much in touch with the natural qualities of the site and with the outside world. The rituals of everyday living have become the liturgy for the house."

The monastic purity of light and whiteness, the sense of simple space and attention to materials are reflected by the owners' approach to preserving the root system of a rare tree outside the bedroom window. This 160-year-old brown pine, a native to the area, is one of only two surviving examples in Brisbane. The bedroom design was modified to a cantilevered structure, and the tree now stands as a guardian spirit, illustrating the ambiguities between outside and in, built and natural, spiritual and practical, which are so well orchestrated throughout the house.

FOR FURTHER DETAILS, SEE FACT FILE.



THIS PAGE THE LIVING ROOM FLOWS THROUGH TO THE MORE ENCLOSED "CAVE-LIKE" SPACE OF THE LIBRARY. PAINTING BY TODD HUNTER, SCULPTURE BY KRISTA BERGA. ARMCHAIR AND SIDE TABLE BY ARTEK. SOFA FROM IKEA. **OPPOSITE PAGE** IN THE BATHROOM, THE SIMPLICITY OF WOODEN FLOORS AND WHITE WALLS DRAWS ATTENTION TO TEXTURES.

ECO-FRIENDLY TIMBER TREATMENTS

■ Hardwood floors were treated with a citrus oil. Livos Natural Paints has a similar product containing orange and lemon peel as a preservative in the oil. Livos Natural Paints, 17/26 Megalong Street, Katoomba, NSW 2780, tel (02) 4782 6155.

■ Tung oil is a natural alternative for treating timber floors. Timber's potential to expand or contract results in movement in the boards. A polyurethane coating can glue boards together while Tung oil allows independent movement. Floor Seal by Feast Watson is a tung oil-based product available through Dulux.

