

# EVERGREEN THINKING

*A treasured* family home continues to grow with its inhabitants by increasingly leaning into its CONNECTION to its enviable NATURAL SURROUNDS and commitment to *contemporary* style.



By ANNEMARIE KIELY Photographed by LISA COHEN

*These pages* in the living area of this Melbourne home, Okha Repose sofa and Bzippy Double Tier Hex side table from Criteria; Formiche side table by Piero Lissoni for B&B Italia from Space Furniture; Missoni Home pouf, enquiries to Spence & Lyda; timber side table from Tigmi; pink vase from Dinosaur Designs; green vase from Graham Geddes Antiques; Chromatic Sage rugs from Halcyon Lake; oak floorboards from George Fethers & Co.; *Untitled* (2014) artwork by Daniel Boyd (on rear wall) from Station; *Crossing* (2016) artwork by Kevin Chin from This Is No Fantasy; vintage Cab chairs by Mario Bellini for Cassina, enquiries for reissue to Mobilia; leather and timber dining chair from Fred Rigby Studio; oak dining table from Lowe Furniture. *Details, last pages.*



*This page* in a view of the house from the garden, Marmorino polished plaster walls; timber and oak floorboards from George Fethers & Co.; *Cosmetic Calculator* (2016) artwork by Jonny Niesche from Sarah Cottier Gallery. *Opposite page* in another view of the living area from the bar, Camaleonda sofa by Mario Bellini for B&B Italia from Space Furniture; Laurel side table by Luca Nichetto for De La Espada from Criteria; Atollo 235 table lamp by Vico Magistretti from Euroluce; handmade bronze island bench with limestone top produced by Barbera; Zig Zag stools from Mark Tuckey; *Crossing* (2016) artwork by Kevin Chin from This Is No Fantasy.







*This page* in the kitchen with breakfast nook, **benchtop** and **drawer fronts** in Granite White from Signorino; **cooktop** from Pitt; custom **table** with Marblo top and base in Sage produced by Barbera; Zig Zag **stools** from Mark Tuckey; **atrium** designed by Susi Leeton Architects + Interiors; down **cushions** and bench **cushions**, all from Westbury Textiles; *Moonlit Bay artwork* (on benchtop) by Susi Leeton.



Cast to the not-too-distant past, the notion of generosity in architecture measured out in square metres, maximum site coverage and the big spend on luxury materials. But now held to account by climate crisis and a chasm of inequities — from housing to health — the concept is shifting to one of repair; resolving what is already there and tapping into the free givens of fresh air, sunlight and surrounding nature.

It's a redefining of largesse that Melbourne architect Susi Leeton has spelt out in her refurbishment of this 1980s five-level house, stepping down to a riverside bend where mature trees and blurred boundary lines conspire to suggest immersion in a high-altitude forest.

"It could be two hours out of town," says the architect, whose monochrome austerity always uplifts with a warm essentialism and embellishes with objects of silent power. "The site was just a precious gem, facing south with magical shifts of light. Oh, I so love southern light. It's hard to believe that such idyll sits so close to the city."

She describes a first encounter with the formerly innocuous "peach-coloured" building, some 15 years earlier, when briefed by a client couple to make it habitable for two children, Leeton planned for their proximity to parents. But now, with the 'little ones' in their late teens testing the push-pull of privacy in a structure that didn't leverage look-out to trees, the client called Leeton back to exploit verticality and views.

"Foremost was creating the most efficient flow of spaces for family life," says Leeton noting that, as a mother of two teens, she was attuned to the stream of activity that, like nearby rivers, gushed, ebbed and branched off into quiet tributaries. "But essentially it was gathering ideas on how the family wanted to live in the place and ensuring they had the space to come together or be apart."

Hence her planning deference to a meandering waterway in pebble-smooth, opalescent channels coursing through luxury "camp sites" variously equipped for cooking, sleeping, washing, adventure and engagement with enveloping wilderness.

The architectural analogy, supported by a complex concealment of civil and structural engineering, is legible from fifth-level street-entry, where landscape designer Myles Baldwin began his seemingly ersatz terracing of contrasting temperate ground covers on the carport roof. It is the allegorical field, leading to the fairytale threshold bridge, crossing into a private paradise seemingly premised on the Swiss Family Robinson's life in a giant tree.

But if that narrative manoeuvre is missed, Leeton underlines it in the third-level entry where a 300-year-old Japanese log and an Edra Cipria chair as fluffy as a family of wombats insinuate an edge-of-river glimpse of native fauna and augur entry into a main bedroom made treehouse magic with layered transparencies and perimeter peel backs.

Leeton has looked to lower blood pressure, specifying "haptic" fabrics as light, strong and organic as a spider's web and styling ensuite showering into a standing drench of forest rain. The conceptual driver, she says of a scheme that made architecture recessive and nature dominant, was "feeling", the positive generation of which relied on reductive colour — "the softest grey-green like the back of a eucalyptus leaf" — reflections and the dissolution of window frames, so that nature became intrinsic rather than an incidental aesthetic.

She leads down a U-turn of stairs to level-two living where blanched oak floorboards punctuate with the planting of a maple tree pushing up through a cut-out in the ceiling plane. "I like the idea that it drops its leaves," she says of its seasonal show. "It reminds of the cycles of life that don't sync to our busy schedules. It's grounding but still fragile."

The specimen amplifies the sense of steeping into a forest valley and starts the zoning shift into public space, where Brancusi-like sculptures of radiata pine log position around a pebble-shaped stone table customised by Daniel Barbera. It is the bronze-legged >



*This page* in the hallway towards the living area, Marmorino polished plaster **walls**; recessed Flos **lights** from Euroluce; recessed pelmet **lighting** from Adrian Pizzezy Lighting; *Winter Landscape* (2017) **artwork** by Adrienne Gaha from Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art; *Grub* (2020) **sculptures** by Isadora Vaughan from Station; Japanese maple **tree**. *Opposite page* in the courtyard, **landscape design** by Myles Baldwin Design.





< island that becomes a bar when a floor-to-ceiling bronze-mirrored unit, reflecting outer light and leaf canopy into a golden glow, reveals its inner cocktail secrets.

It is the Japanese himitsu-bako puzzle box writ large, hiding access to a chef's pantry on the flank-side kitchen, which Leeton has detailed into a long float of granite bench under a raked glass roof that dapples sun onto worksurface and fills headspace (actual and abstract) with foliage. This discrete kitchen corridor loops to a laundry and back to a hallway accessing garden room, guest bedroom and library.

The architect has silenced all visual noise in this public "hub", save for nature and a knowing curation of contemporary Australian art, including Adam Lee, Adrienne Gaha and Daniel Boyd — and a "random" selection of auction-house gems.

Downstairs designates as the kids' zone; an autonomous but attached apartment of sorts replete with private suites, living rooms and an easy walk onto the tennis court. It takes full account of the census fact sheet telling us children are staying at home longer. And why would they want to leave, the question asks of Leeton, who could be accused of socially engineering a never-leave-home cohort of kids. "Why indeed?" ■ [susileeton.com.au](http://susileeton.com.au)



*This page* in the entry, Cipria **armchair** by Fernando and Humberto Campana for Edra from Space Furniture; ancient Japanese **log** from Tokyo Timber; *A Veil (Apocalypse)* (2020) **artwork** by Adam Lee from Station; Duro limestone **paving** from Eco Outdoor. *Opposite page* in the garden, **pool** designed by Susi Leeton Architects + Interiors. Project **builder** Skilcon. *Details, last pages.*

