

COURTYARD HOUSE HA ARCHITECTURE

Words by Hayley Curnow • Photography by Tom Ross • Styling by Jess Kneebone • Architecture and Interior Design by Ha Architecture • Build by LocBuild • Landscape by Kihara Landscapes



Courtyard House by Ha Architecture is a transformational addition to an established bungalow in Hawthorn, in Melbourne’s inner east. Driven by a reverence for Japanese architecture, the design pursues a harmonic response, attributing space not only with an aesthetic dimension but also a liveable one.

Enamoured by the restraint and sober materiality of Ha Architecture’s Little O’Grady Street Residence, the clients approached the emerging practice to deliver a refined and ritualistic space for their next phase of life. The clients’ Singaporean-Chinese heritage and time spent travelling in Japan seeded a fascination in Japanese culture and design – a pivotal point of reference in the architecture. “Pursuing a courtyard typology to bring a northerly aspect to the living spaces was a mutual decision which evolved very organically,” reveals Director and Architect Nick Harding. “We were driven by simplicity, asymmetry and nature, with a shared belief that less is more.”

While the clients and architects were aligned in this endeavour, cutting a dramatic courtyard into the enclosed bungalow posed significant planning challenges – particularly given the strict heritage covenant on the dwelling. “We were required to maintain the traditional frontage and art deco garage, while the rear addition was bound by the existing materiality of brick, stucco, timber windows and terracotta roof tiles,” explains Nick. Negotiating the planning controls with tact, Ha Architecture carefully masked the visibility of the courtyard from the streetscape

and ingrained the mandated materials in the architecture with intention. “The response is a subtle incision on the exterior,” he muses, “yet the impact on the interior is transformative.”

Ha Architecture’s research on the traditions of Chinese courtyard homes and understanding of the ritualistic living habits of the clients informed a simple diagram of interfaces with a reduction in privacy as one moves through the home. “The house unfolds as a sequence of defined yet connected volumes, with each level change offering a directional change in focus as one descends the site,” says Nick. The clients’ belief in Zen principles inspired the design team to consider the spiritual nature of space, seeking harmony in the home’s aesthetic and liveable pursuits and demanding a trusting relationship between all parties. Project Architect Madeleine Hodge encouraged the clients to partake in a collaborative process of design and ideation, ensuring their specific needs and beliefs were suitably instilled in the design. “It was a pure brief in many ways – a forever home specific to the clients, with no real need to maximise yield for resale purposes,” Nick says.





From the untouched traditional frontage, a stepped entry flanked by bedrooms suspends visitors in a contained volume, extending the sense of intrigue. “We wanted to create a convoluted entry lifting up to a skylight as a point of transition,” explains Nick. Grounded in warm timber tones and bathed in natural light, the effect of this gesture is evident as one steps into the openness of the main circulation spine – a marked halting point between the private and public zones with captivating views across the broad pebbled courtyard, brimming with bamboo. “The sense of discretion and the surprise of the courtyard cut-away are hallmarks of the project,” reveals Nick.

Indeed, the courtyard incision is the key gesture unlocking the project’s conceptual agenda, informing a rational and simplified plan driven by orientation and aspect. Careful consideration of the courtyard’s proportion and positioning carves a generous living space with a north-facing aspect – a source of light and warmth in the client’s principal dwelling spaces. A multi-use retreat along the western edge capitalises on soft eastern light, elevating the clients’ morning yoga practice and connecting them with natural circadian rhythms.

“The home’s existing roof line is carried back and around the courtyard, creating an intimate internal garden” explains Nick. A ribbon of Japanese-inspired bi-fold screens is executed as a room divider between inside and outside. Along the east, the screen’s timber battens are arranged vertically for shading, while along the north, horizontal battens protect the house from northern sun. “The adaptability of the building envelope allows for a multitude of permutations,” explains Nick. The operable screens allow occupants to actively adjust their connection to light and ventilation, giving permeability to the once enclosed bungalow and creating an ethereal play of shadows across the interior.

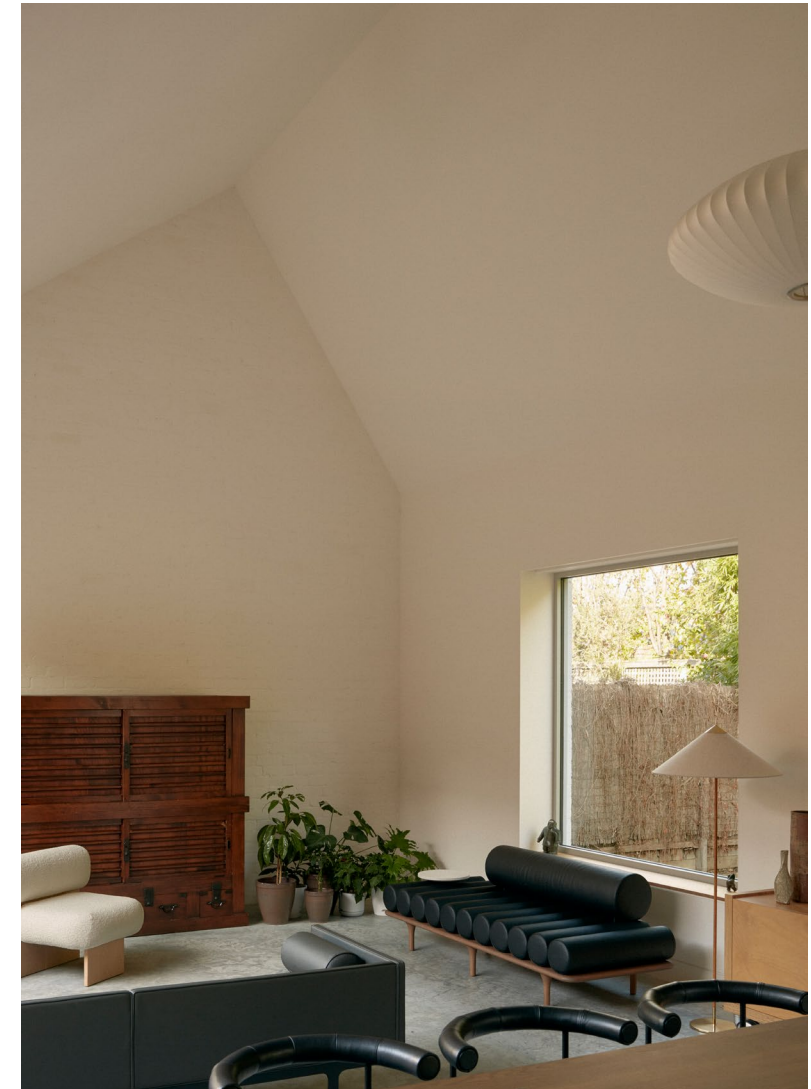
The interfaces and openings of the interior are skilfully designed to connect the clients with the landscape at every opportunity. Dining, living and retreat spaces open laterally to the courtyard, with blackbutt decking extending the boundaries of the interior beyond the building envelope. The south-facing main ensuite is conceived as a contemporary Japanese wet room and onsen. Timber screens enclose a private garden sliver with a sequence of three maple trees ascending in height; a soothing composition of natural elements that elevates the rituals of bathing.





Warm neutral tones unite the original house and its new addition.



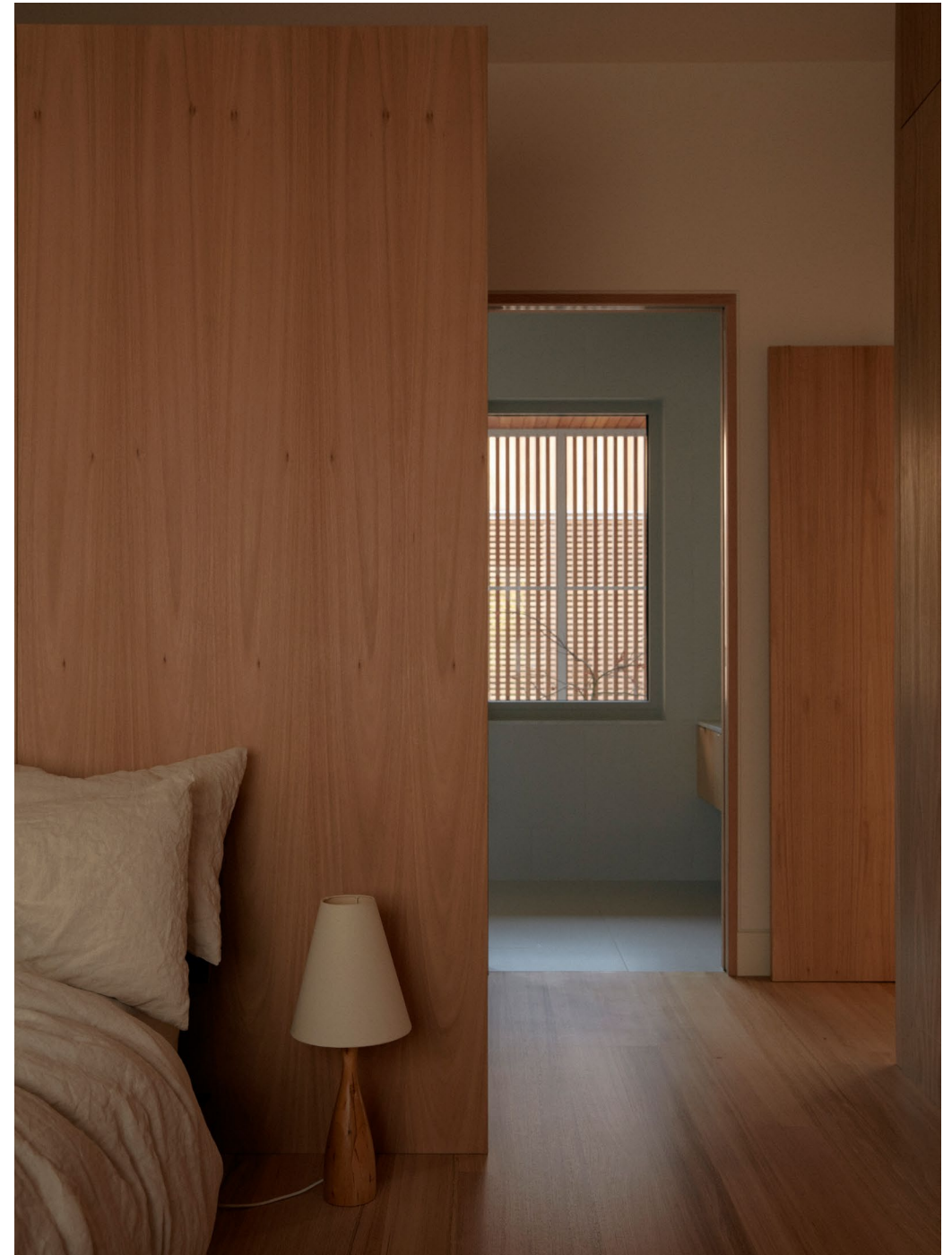


“The interfaces crafted in the architecture reached their pinnacle due to the beauty of the garden design,” observes Nick. Created in collaboration with specialist Japanese landscape designers Kihara Landscapes, the garden is driven by tranquillity, textural harmony and seasonality, with a consideration of feng shui principles. A central maple tree creates symmetry and a point of focus in the courtyard, complemented by running water over natural boulders and pebbles, a picture of calmness and quiet repose. The artful framing of bamboo gently swaying in the breeze brings a soothing, cinematic quality into the experience of the home, enhanced by honest materials and elemental forms.

The pared back interior reflects the clients’ interest in minimalist design, with the axiom ‘form follows function’ a guiding light. Burnished concrete and blackbutt timber floors ground the articulation of voluminous white backdrop spaces, which Nick explains “give breathing space for the clients’ cherished antique chests, artworks, ornaments and collectibles.” Fine profiles of white Carrara marble balance the warmth and grain of timber joinery in the kitchen and bathrooms, while brushed tapware and discreet fittings maintain an understated elegance.

The restraint of the addition sits in poetic contrast to the detail of the home’s original character, which has been thoughtfully preserved in the guest bedroom. “Decorative timberwork, leadlight windows and an exposed brick fireplace create a time capsule to the home’s origins,” reveals Nick. Hand-crafted ‘leaf inlay’ brickwork salvaged from an existing fireplace has been repurposed as a lintel detail along the southern elevation – a tender reference to the detail of the old home ingrained in the new.

By overlaying the parameters of the site and brief, Ha Architecture has crafted an intuitive response that addresses function and beauty in equal measure. “Solutions always seem to unfold and take their purposeful trajectory,” Nick reflects on the simplicity and stillness of the built outcome. “The execution of an ambitious, formal plan is incredibly satisfying, but watching the clients harmoniously undertake their lifestyle in a tranquil space is the ultimate reward.”



A sense of quiet and repose permeates the interior.



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