



AS FEATURED IN HIGHLIFE MAGAZINE OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2016

a perfect fit

PHOTOGRAPHS **TONY SHEFFIELD**

It took more than a decade for architects Gillian Simon and Darren Kindrachuk to find their dream block of land for a country weekender, but building proved far more straightforward. They show MELISSA PENN their very modern, modular designed home.



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The large front door opens to reveal the living area and breathtaking 180-degree views over Sutton Forest, Mount Gingenbullen and all the way to Mount Gibraltar.



WHEN SYDNEY-BASED ARCHITECT couple Gillian Simon and Darren Kindrachuk were looking for land to build on in the Highlands, they had in mind a contemporary home featuring lots of glass, minimal heating and cooling requirements, and low-maintenance landscaping. They had only two prerequisites for the block: northern orientation and views.

The combination proved elusive for more than a decade. “We looked at so many pieces of land and came close to buying a few,” says Darren. “But once we did the due diligence we realised there was always a problem. Either there was an easement, or a shared driveway, or there was an issue with a neighbouring property, or a powerline was planned to go through it. At one point I think we’d seen every vacant block of land in the Highlands.”

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FROM TOP SUN STREAMS IN VIA FLOOR-TO-CEILING DOUBLE-GLAZED GLASS DOORS; TOY COWS ADD A QUIRKY TOUCH; BASKET BY BURRAWANG ARTIST BROOKE MUNRO; CLEAN LINES, MODERN FURNISHINGS AND STREAMLINED DESIGN IN THE LIVING AREA. **OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP** STRIKING ARTWORKS SUCH AS SIMON TAYLOR'S *MOONLIGHT SHIMMER* COMPLEMENT THE BREATHTAKING DISTRICT VIEWS; THE SIMPLE YET IMPRESSIVE ENTRANCE. **PREVIOUS PAGES** VIEW TOWARDS MOUNT GINGENBULLEN.





“The land was double the budget we had in mind,” says Gillian. “But we both just went, this is amazing!”

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FROM TOP THE MAIN BEDROOM INCLUDES A SITTING AREA; AN OFFICE AREA IS TUCKED BEHIND CUPBOARD DOORS IN THE BEDROOM; BRONZE SCULPTURE *TERPSICHOE* BY CLEMENT MEADMORE. **OPPOSITE PAGE** MINIMAL LANDSCAPING AND SPOTTED GUM DECKING SURROUND THE HOUSE.

One day in 2012 they were in Exeter to see a client of Gillian's who had bought a property in the area. A newly released parcel of land was for sale. The subdivision hadn't been finalised and there was no road, but as soon as Gillian and Darren walked to the top of the hill and saw the five-and-a-half hectare block's position and its sweeping district views, they knew they'd found what they'd been looking for. "The land was double the budget

we had in mind," says Gillian. "But we both just went, this is amazing!"

The idea of building a country home took shape about 20 years ago after Gillian and Darren moved to Sydney from Hong Kong where they worked together for an Australian architectural practice. "We started taking day trips to the Highlands to escape the city and both loved it," says Gillian. "Gradually the



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FROM TOP THE HOUSE WAS SITED TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE SUN AND DISTRICT VIEWS; WATER TANKS ARE CONCEALED BEHIND THE SHED; THE MODEST RECTANGULAR STRUCTURE IS CLAD IN BLACK STAINED PLYWOOD.



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conversation came round to maybe we could build here one day.” Growing up in Canada’s mid-west, Darren was particularly drawn to the Highlands. “My grandparents both had farms so I was used to cattle and farming,” he says. “The landscape here reminds me of a combination of home and the English countryside, which I also have an affinity for. A country house was in the back of our minds for a long time before we made it happen.”

Gillian and Darren had firm ideas about the house they wanted to build. They live in an old heritage apartment in McMahon’s Point and wanted their Exeter home to be a reflection of their love of modern architecture. “We wanted that minimalist feel – simple and strong. It had to be low-maintenance with a bit of a Zen approach and a few effectively placed elements,” says Darren.

As luck would have it, Gillian works as regional manager for Melbourne modular design firm Intermode. In the end, rather than design the house themselves, they went with one of Intermode’s concepts, a decision that had both practical and business advantages. While the two-year-old home is Gillian and Darren’s weekend, they also open it once a month to prospective clients.

“We thought, do we do something we orientate north and design ourselves, or do we pursue an Intermode design?” says Darren. “In the end, using Intermode aligned with our aesthetics, aligned with a business opportunity, and we decided it made sense.”

“It’s exactly what we would have designed for ourselves anyway,” says Gillian.

The 24-week construction by local contractors took place on site (“Not in a factory, which is what most people think when you say it’s a modular design,” says Gillian) and was not without its problems. The ground where they decided to site the house is reactive clay so special piers had to be sunk, the clay removed and filled with non-reactive fill. “We knew about the problem when we bought the land – it was one of the compromises,” says Gillian. “If the clay dries out extensively or is saturated, it moves, so we’ve built a moat around the house to divert the water. The piers work a bit like pencils holding up the slab even as the ground moves.”

The result is an unpretentious rectangular structure, clad in black stained plywood, with a flat roof, concealed guttering and simple landscaping. A wide gravel pathway leads to the large front door that opens to reveal the living area and breathtaking 180-degree views over Sutton Forest, Mount Gingenbullen and all the way to Mount Gibraltar. Polished concrete floors, Danish mid-century furniture and contemporary artworks are understated accompaniments (last year the house was shortlisted in the national Interior Design Excellence Awards Residential-Single category).

The layout is based on Intermode’s standard 1.2 square metre modules. Most building materials come in widths that correspond with the 1.2 square metre modular grid so Gillian and Darren say the system is an efficient and cost-effective way of obtaining an architecturally designed home. Clients can customise the modules depending on their design and budget.

Gillian and Darren’s compact layout has the master bedroom at the eastern end and a guest bedroom at the western. In between are two bathrooms and the living area’s lounge/kitchen/dining. An office area, storage and laundry are concealed behind cupboard doors on the southern side of the house. A spotted gum deck wraps around the house and floor-to-ceiling double-glazed glass sliding doors and windows frame the view from every room.

The north-facing glass doors underpin the home’s heating

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ABOVE THE GUEST BEDROOM. BELOW A BATHROOM WITH A VIEW.



and cooling system. The roof overhangs are positioned so that in winter the sun hits the glass all day, acting like a greenhouse and passively heating the slab, which then re-radiates the heat overnight. The couple installed a hydronic heating system but say they rarely use it, or the living area's gas heater, as the house performs so efficiently.

The interior, which is an elegantly simple combination of clean lines, a white colour scheme and minimalist decorating, is a cosy 24 degrees on a sunny day even in the depths of a Highlands winter, says Gillian. "We have to open up all the doors to cool off if the sun is coming right in," she says.

"We come down here from Sydney to warm up," adds Darren. In summer the overhangs block the direct sun from hitting the glass so the slab stays cool. It doesn't get too warm inside because they open all the doors to aid cross ventilation and/or deploy the automatic blinds.

These days, weekends are spent cooking, often with friends to stay, watching the neighbours' cows, taking walks and slowing down. "We open the doors and congregate at the dining table," says Darren. "Because the space embraces the outdoor and indoor, you feel like you're outdoors anyway. It's a very relaxing place to be."

More than 12 years on from that initial land search, what are Gillian and Darren's thoughts about their country retreat? "We wanted something simple and straightforward so it's satisfying to sit back knowing we've created exactly that," says Darren.

"When we drive up to the house," says Gillian, "all we can see is the black exterior and you kind of forget what's behind it. The entry gives you a bit of a glimpse but when you walk in and see the view it's just, 'Wow!'. You take in the whole of the Southern Highlands. I love that about the house." **HL**