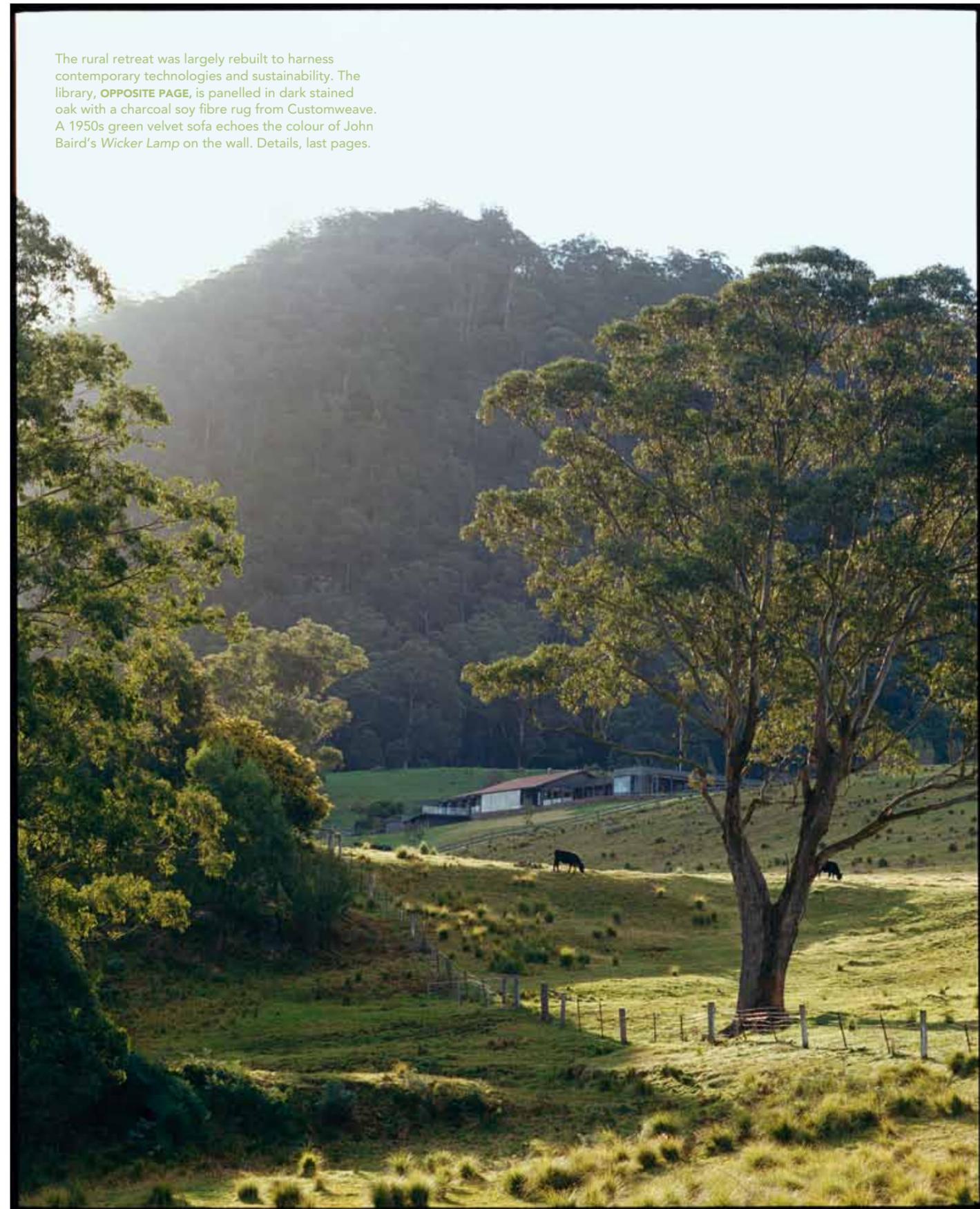




# HIGHLANDS

High on a hillside in rural NSW, the staples of ordinary Australian country life are valued as highly as the craftsmanship and technologies that have created this modern idyll. PHOTOGRAPHER: MARCEL AUCAR PRODUCER: HELEN REDMOND

The rural retreat was largely rebuilt to harness contemporary technologies and sustainability. The library, OPPOSITE PAGE, is panelled in dark stained oak with a charcoal soy fibre rug from Customweave. A 1950s green velvet sofa echoes the colour of John Baird's *Wicker Lamp* on the wall. Details, last pages.





Sydney designer Nic Graham wrapped a stone wall around an existing fireplace in the main room, which features the great trussed ceiling, **THIS PAGE**. On an old worker's table sits a Jonathan Adler vase from New York with branches of golden ash, and a sculpture by Kylie Stillman made from old law books. **OPPOSITE PAGE**: windows punctuate the corridor leading to the guest wing. The sofa, covered in old French tea cloths, is from Plinth in London.

"THEY DIDN'T WANT THE LOOK OF A FURNITURE CATALOGUE AND CERTAINLY NOTHING THAT SAID 'HOTEL'."



Full-height glass in the living room, **OPPOSITE**, capture the 180-degree views. A pair of oversized linen sofas from Poliform and a grey flannel 'Dog Kennel' day bed from George Smith in London are grouped by the fire on a Belgian sisal rug from Natural Floorcoverings. A bronze-panelled bar, seen at right, is a "bit of yesteryear" with Eames stools from Spence & Lyda and old glass urns in front of the antique mirror. Plantings of silver foliage and Buxus topiary by Spirit Level Designs frame the north-facing courtyard, **RIGHT**. At the end of the corridor that connects the new wing to the old building, **BELOW**, the reflection pool gives a sense of infinity.



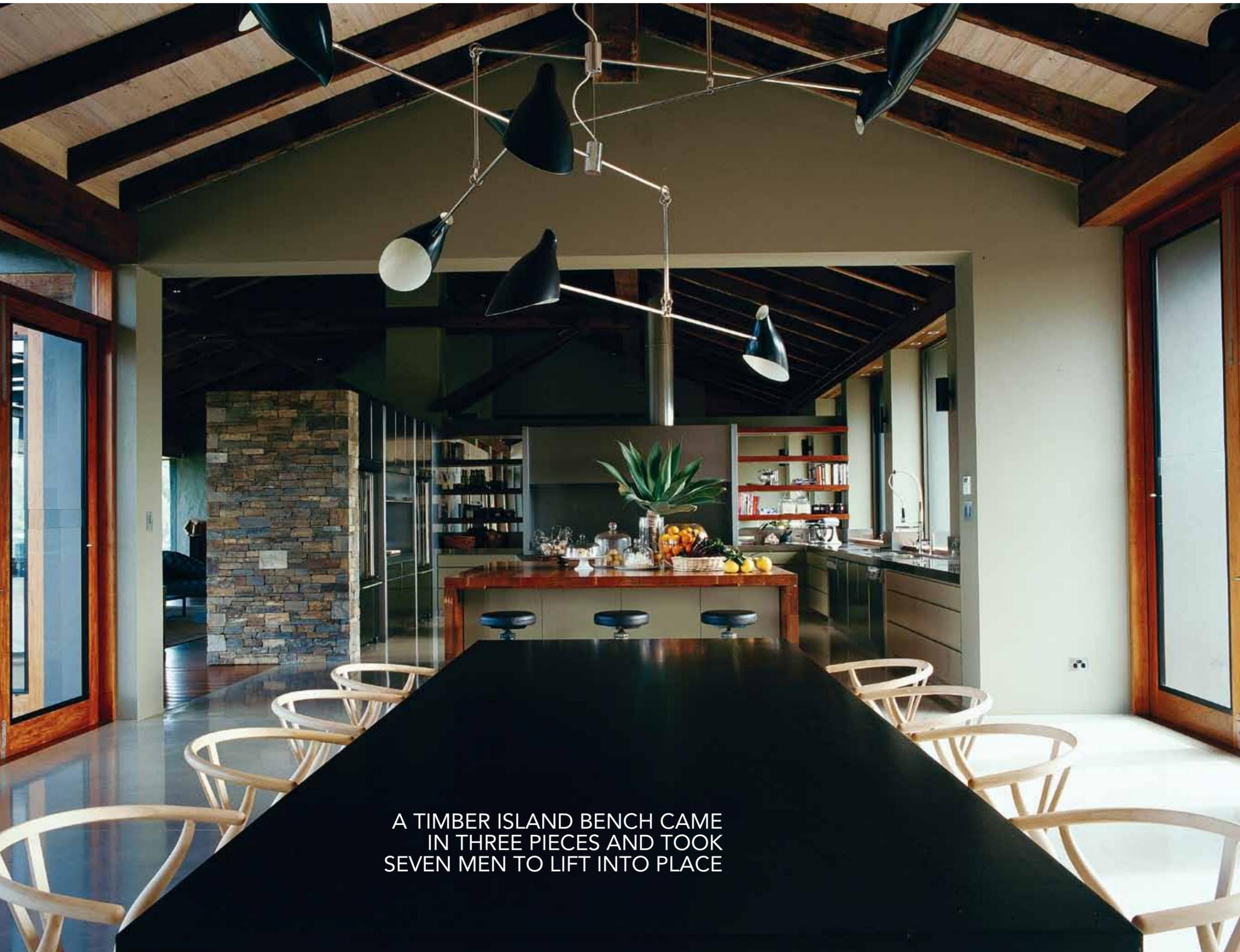
IMAGINE THE PERFECT rural setting: vegetables at the back door, tree-ripened fruit, space for children to run with no neighbours in earshot, clean air... and time to enjoy it. Once the staples of ordinary Australian country life, these simple qualities are all too rare in an increasingly complex 21st century. They have become the hallmarks of a new ideal of luxury.

The quest for space, fresh air and home-grown produce is made more vital when your base is Hong Kong. For one international couple, the search for such a place led them from the Southern Highlands to Tasmania and New Zealand until they chanced on this breathtakingly beautiful rural property, a former olive plantation, high on a mountainside two-and-a-half hour's drive from Sydney.

The house had been built eight years earlier; a mix of Texan ranch meets Swiss chalet, with a terracotta roof and rough plastered walls outside and heavy timber joinery inside. A master suite at one end was entered externally across a courtyard, with the children and nanny dismissed to the other end of the house. For this family, however, connectivity was important.

Sydney designer Nic Graham's initial site inspection became a discourse on self-sufficiency and country living. "We swapped recipes, discussed the pasta making, picking the herbs, goats in the paddocks and trout in the dam, and a wood-fired pizza oven in the middle of the vegetable garden," he says. Two weeks later he flew to Hong Kong with plans showing a new wing separated by a light well and a water feature at the end. The clients wanted more bedrooms and bathrooms, with the family together at one end of the house and guests at the other.





A TIMBER ISLAND BENCH CAME  
IN THREE PIECES AND TOOK  
SEVEN MEN TO LIFT INTO PLACE



The open kitchen is fitted with stainless steel and open shelves. Industrial bar stools from Doug Up On Bourke line a spotted gum timber bench laden with cakes and fresh-picked produce. The custom-made stained black oak and metal table sits with Hans Wegner 'Wishbone' chairs from Corporate Culture and under a David Weeks light from FY2K. **ABOVE:** Double French doors open to a timber deck and valley views, and to a north-facing garden on the other side.



Achieving the “simple country home” was far from simple. Sustainability was important so a bore was sunk, ensuring a supply of quality water. Infrastructure changes included new plumbing, security and electrical upgrades – the entire house was virtually restructured.

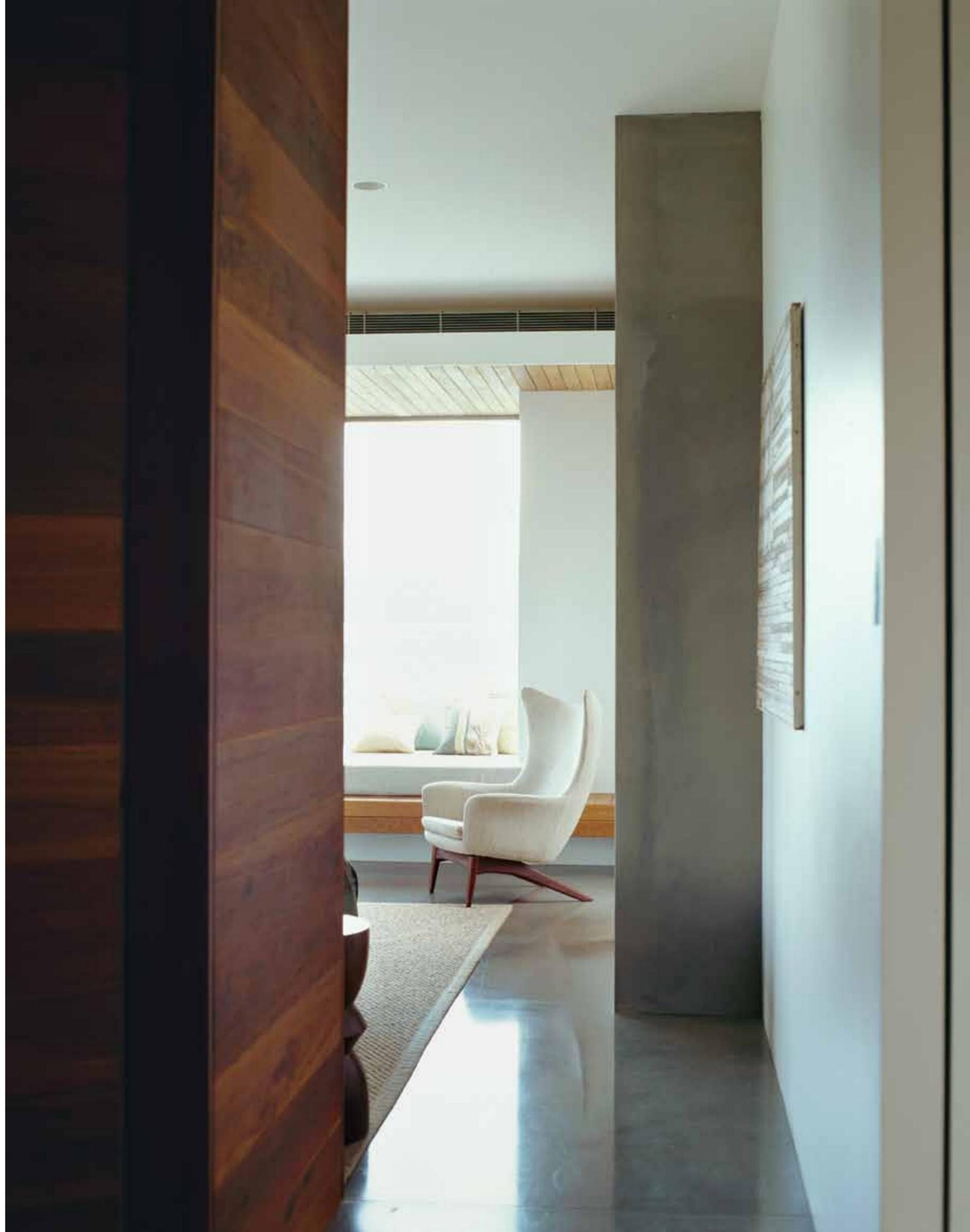
A central corridor was cut through the house, giving cross ventilation and cross views where there had been none.

The open courtyard that separated the master bedroom from the rest of the house was covered to create a new dining room, and the former master suite was converted to a play room. A porte-cochère created a secondary entrance to the new wing through a breeze-way gallery. “When you’re adding a new wing to a house, it’s an old architectural trick to separate it with a long corridor, and if you can fit a vista at the end that’s good,” says Graham. “We love being able to look across the water to the view with the reflections and sense of infinity, but it’s also a feng shui exercise, it keeps the good spirits from escaping out the window.”

The new wing introduced clear lines of frameless glass and concrete floors with under-floor heating, as well as timber detailing and large square walls of rendered plaster. These contrast with the old timber beams in the main rooms, and continue the character and warmth of the original timber floors.

At the southern end of the home’s new wing, the master bedroom, **RIGHT** and **OPPOSITE PAGE**, features iron bark timber panelling and polished concrete floors.

The freestanding bedhead masks a dressing area with a recessed bookshelf. Luke Williams’ artwork hangs on the wall, and the recycled timber stools by Jo Wilson in the bedroom and bathroom are from Planet Furniture. A set of twin cast iron baths, **ABOVE**, are from Antique Baths. The ensuite incorporates a sauna and a large shower alcove which engages the view through full-height sliding doors with separate insect screens, creating a sense of bathing alfresco.





The master bedroom has a magnificent, uninterrupted view from a frameless glass window box. A large linen mattress and custom-made cushions by Cloth create a niche the whole family can cosy up in, taking in the changing vistas and reading together. "The weather can change in 10 minutes, and seeing the shadows and clouds roll in is awe-inspiring," says Graham. The 1950s Grant Featherston chair is from Vampt Retro 'n' Deco and the Belgian sisal rug is from Natural Floorcoverings. Details, last pages.

The bedrooms in the new wing are connected by a covered external breeze-way with aluminium louvres for enclosure and light control. At the southern end a frameless glass box cantilevers beyond the line of the building to experience the entire view. Add a large mattress and a pile of cushions and the whole family can cosy up here and read. Books, indeed, are a real passion in this house and every possible niche has been co-opted. A designated library is used for reading, card games or a turn at mahjong.

The house pivots around the great main room with the trussed ceiling. Pushing the room out into a former chamfered bay window and extending the glass to the floor captures the view and connects to the garden and lake below. "The way the clouds roll in and the light changes subtly through the day, you don't need anything to interrupt it," Graham says. A new dry stone wall was wrapped around the existing fireplace to enclose the kitchen.

Not surprisingly, the kitchen is the heart of the house. In Asian cultures the kitchen is often behind the scenes, but here the decision was taken to really embrace it and the whole family becomes involved. Jams and chutneys and a constant stream of cakes pour from the kitchen. Rather than a walk-in pantry, Graham has created a mega pantry with a large stainless-steel preparation bench, open shelves for crockery and jars separated by two large fridges, a central area for the rice cooker, pasta maker and appliances, and a large commercial Viking stove. A timber island bench made in Melbourne came in three pieces and took seven men to lift into place.

Furnishing the house has been all hunting and gathering, scouring antique shops and second-hand outlets over the span of a few years. "They didn't want the look of a furniture catalogue and certainly nothing that said 'hotel' or Hong Kong," says Graham. "It's all about layering." Natural, un-tricked materials, such as stone, timber, concrete and bronze, suit the rural setting both inside and out.

Inheriting the building's low-slung roofline and terracotta roof, Graham rendered the exterior walls in a dark olive brown and added a steel pergola to give the house rhythm and a contemporary line. Cantilevered terraces and timber decks create spaces for outdoor entertaining and a landscape plan worked in partnership with Sydney company Spirit Level Designs has transpired along with the house. There are lawns for the children so they can run straight out to play (something they can never do in Hong Kong) and the garden continues to grow and evolve as native grasses, lilli pilli hedges and topiary *Buxus* connect the house to the landscape. At its apex is the vast kitchen garden, proliferate and resplendent in all seasons. All that's missing is the wood-fired pizza oven.

HELEN REDMOND