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Narrow escape

Architect finds upside to skinny Chelmer site

A small lot of 400sqm was all the space owner and architect Mathieu Levesque needed to build his family home and architecture studio in Chelmer. The narrow site would have been overlooked by many, but his keen architectural eye recognised something special.

“A lot of people would have seen it as a problem site requiring a vehicle turnaround, having a council condition for the tree roots, and a heritage building next door, but we just looked at it and thought it would work in every way we wanted it to,” Mathieu says.

Constraints aside, the site had great potential, namely that its long side faced north and the neighbouring camphor laurel tree contributed to an attractive outlook. Mostly it suited Mathieu’s vision for a very specific building type and form.

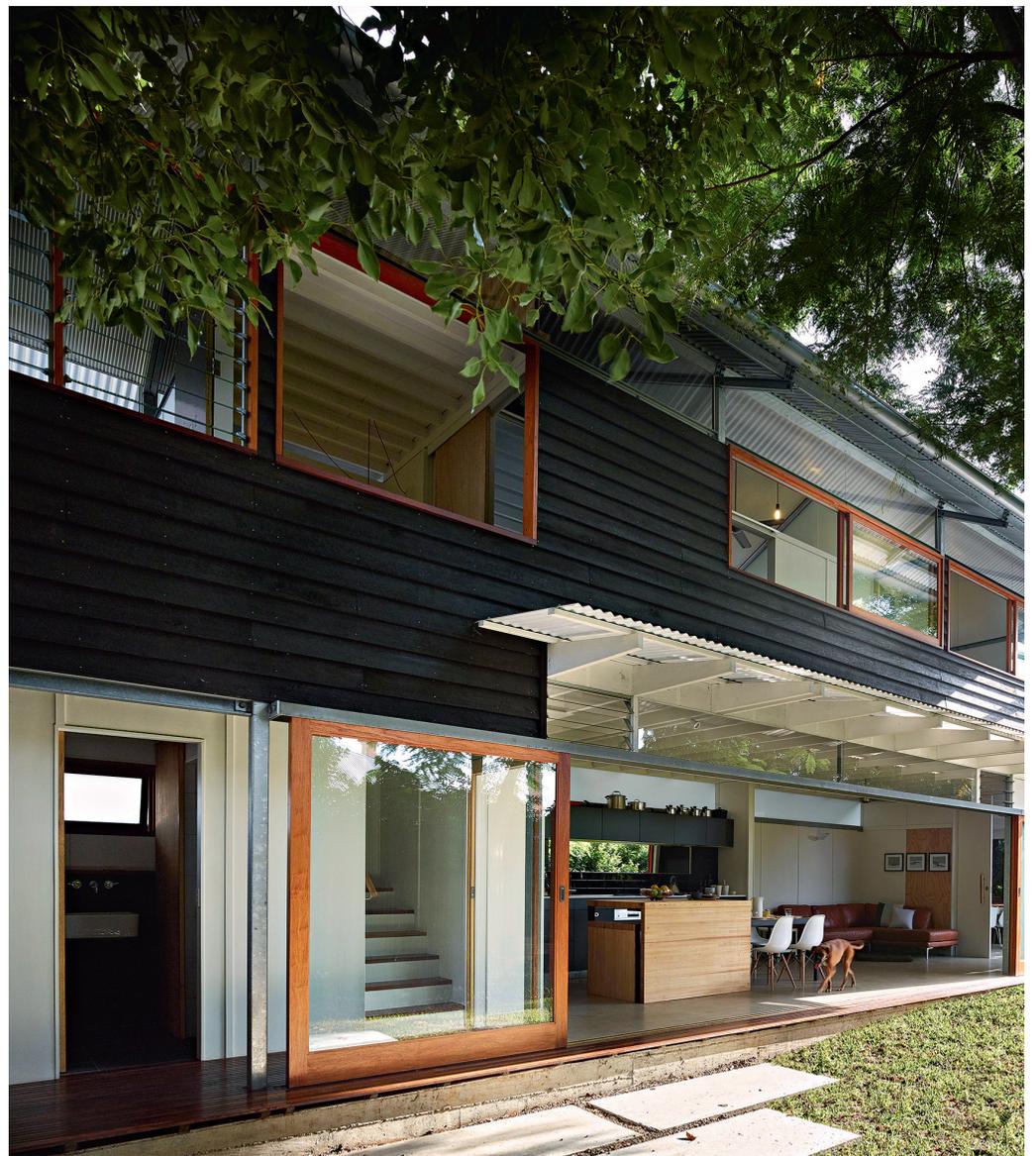
“We were looking for a block that would allow us to do something pretty simple, to keep costs down,” Mathieu says. “As soon as we saw this one, we realised we could have a long, thin building facing north.”

Creating such a thin building required careful consideration, not to mention a little sacrifice.

“The house is about getting rid of the bits you don’t really need. This way you get so much more out of your smaller footprint.”

Here, that footprint is just 3.6m wide, which equates to a single room. At ground level this defines the width of the kitchen, dining and living space, placed end to end, and upstairs, the bedrooms, bathroom and architecture studio.

Further efficiencies are achieved through dual-purpose rooms – the downstairs bathroom doubles as a laundry, with a toilet for the home office above.



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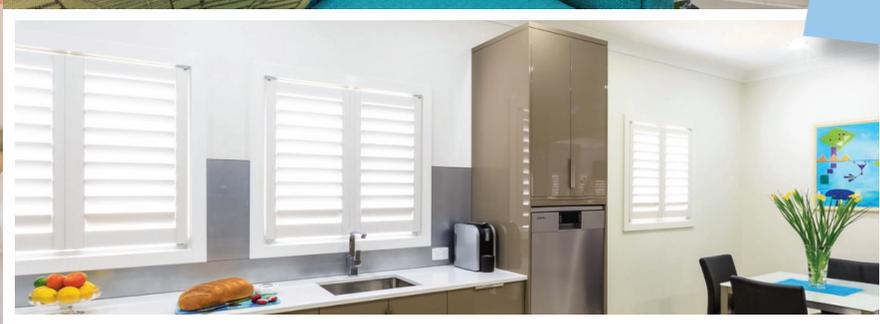


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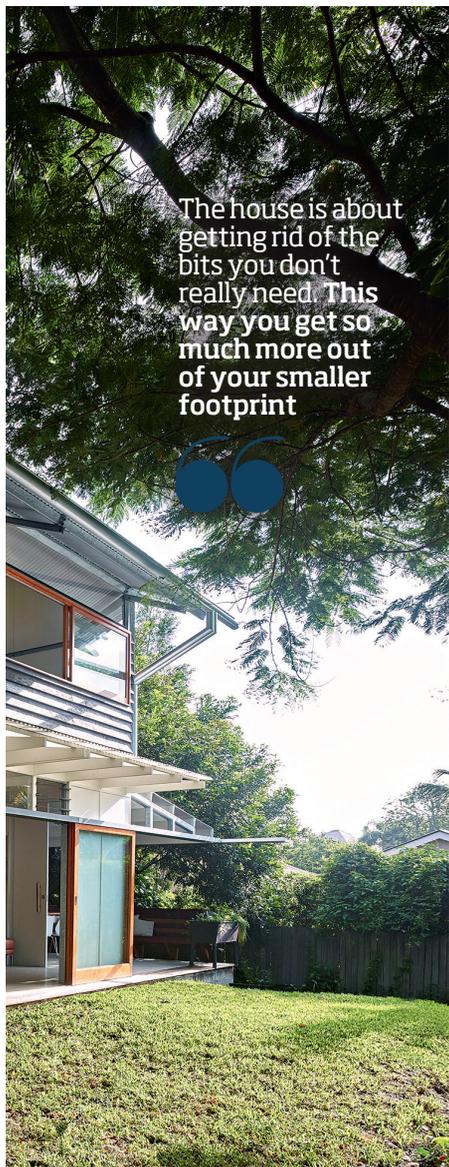
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The house is about getting rid of the bits you don't really need. This way you get so much more out of your smaller footprint

Offsetting the narrow house is a generously proportioned garden. "The site diagram was a long building facing north, meaning you push close to the south boundary. What you end up with is so much more yard and landscape on the northern side," Mathieu says.

To exploit this relationship, the northern side of the home is designed to slide away, dissolving the boundary between house and garden. At ground level, a tremendous sliding aperture opens up the living space, while upstairs there are successive sliding windows. This arrangement allows the modest interior to "borrow" space from the garden.

Taking full advantage of this connection, a long timber platform borders the ground-floor living area, contributing extra lawn-side seating.

In terms of construction, a similar logic of simplicity and efficiency was applied, driven in part by Mathieu's owner-builder status.

A modular system and steel structure was the starting point. Simple sheet materials were used inside and compressed fibre cement and timber weatherboards on the outside. Once the ground slab was completed and the frame and roof put up with minimum help, the infill and interior were built by Mathieu.

As well as being home for wife Hanna and the couple's new baby, the building accommodates Mathieu's architecture practice. The domestic and professional spheres are separated by stairs, enabling visitors to come and go without

with
**MICHELLE
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entering the house proper. The Chelmer house reflects Mathieu's interest in new ways to use basic materials.

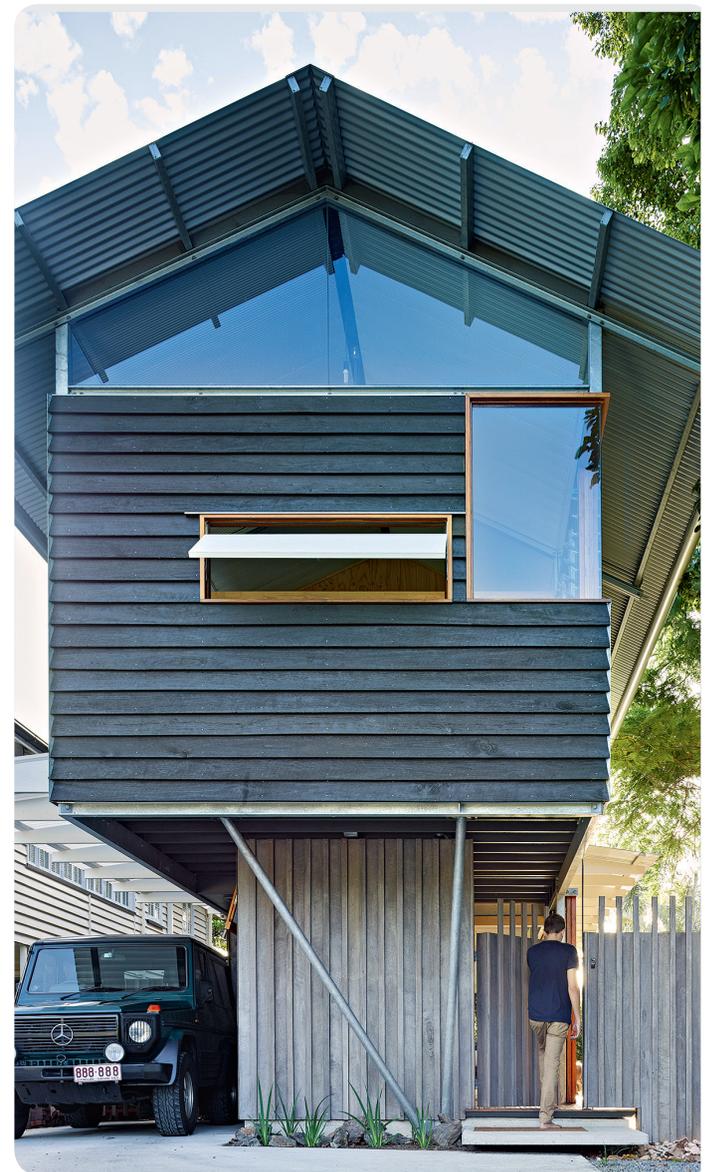
"It shows people that doors don't have to be standard sizes, and walls don't have to be flush plasterboard. You can have inexpensive alternatives that have more colour and texture."

ARCHITECT • Levesque and Derrick Architects, ph: 3158 9875.

OWNER-BUILDER • Mathieu Levesque.



GIVE AND TAKE ... The house borrows space from the yard. **PHOTOGRAPHS** • Scott Burrows



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