

# Building a Home in the Hinterland



Yandina House, Atelier Chen Hung

## Perspective

The best part of being an architect is getting to visit a great variety of properties, and the excitement of imagining their individual architectural potentials is somewhat addictive. Lately, we have been driving through the rolling hills of Jinibara country on the Sunshine Coast hinterland, visiting different sites and experiencing the gamut of landscapes on offer. There is something about an open, vast landscape that exudes a sense of freedom and optimism, feelings that we are longing for right now. A small cabin made entirely out of recycled Australian hardwood, on a northeast facing hill with perfectly framed view of the distant seascape, is a scenario too good to resist. It's not difficult to understand why so many clients have been tempted by the idea of a tree change.

For us, the design process is very much a journey of discovery. During research for current projects, we have learnt about history of the Jinibara country and practices such as a tri-annual bunya pine festival that brought together surrounding nations to congregate upon a nearby lake. There are remnants of this ritual embedded in this landscape amongst the markings of colonial settlement. If the houses we



Ocean Shores House, Atelier Chen Hung

build are integral parts of this land, how should the architecture respond to the particular memory of the place? These kinds of questions are becoming more present in our design process.

Being mindful of how the building sits in the landscape, generosity towards the public realm, or swapping the picket fence for a street-front native garden, are some simple examples of how to implement this sort of thinking in architectural practice.

It might sounds cliché, but nature is truly the greatest architect. It's a sophisticated system that is self-healing, self-regulating and self-renewing. I would like to think with every project small or large, we are making baby steps towards more refined and intelligent buildings. I hope our architecture can one day match the timelessness of nature: to be alive, ever-evolving and never static.

Drawing upon the experiences of designing for hinterland sites, we would like to share some of our findings with you. Building a home in the hinterland is an exciting venture and can be life changing when done with care. We hope you find these tips useful and practical to open up new ways of thinking about living and building amongst the rolling hills.

As always,  
Melody Chen

## 5 Things To Know

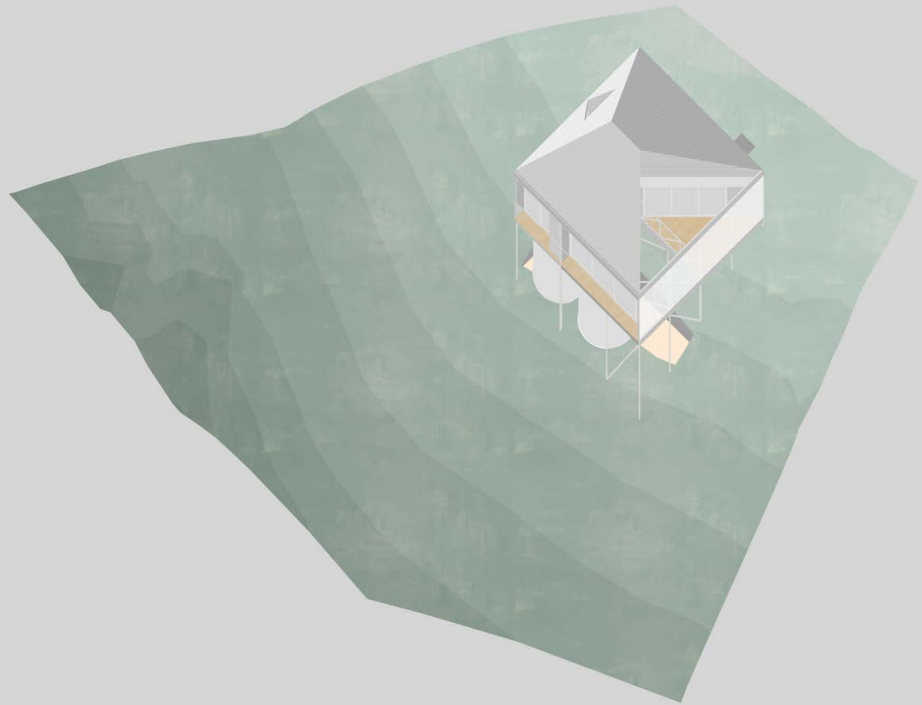
Are you having second thoughts about big city living? It might be time to give in to temptation and embrace the tree change. If you are considering the change, organising a move, or already there, you should consider reading on.



Angourie Site, Atelier Chen Hung

### 1. Embracing vistas, aspect and orientation

- Australia's lovely hinterland regions are known for sites set high on hilltops, down in sweeping valleys, along dramatic escarpments. Experiencing the environment from within is an integral part of the hinterland living experience. A hinterland architecture should capture this lush setting by embracing views through or across landscape elements, while ensuring optimal orientation for capturing energy from the sun.
- In Australia, a site orientated to the north is ideal for passive solar design. This allows for ingress of sun during cold winter months and control during warmer months. If you are just starting the hunt for a property, then look for a site with northern orientation, ideally with views in the same direction.
- If you already have a site in mind with a less-optimal aspect, intelligent passive solar design can greatly improve thermal comfort, while affording great savings on cooling and heating bills.
- Issues can arise when a desired view is in the same direction as an undesirable element. For example, a site located on a west facing hill with views to the south west presents both an architectural opportunity and an architectural challenge.
- In this case, an architectural solution could involve a retractable screen, protecting the house from hot western summer sun while offering views when needed.



Mapleton Retreat, Atelier Chen Hung

## 2. Working with topography

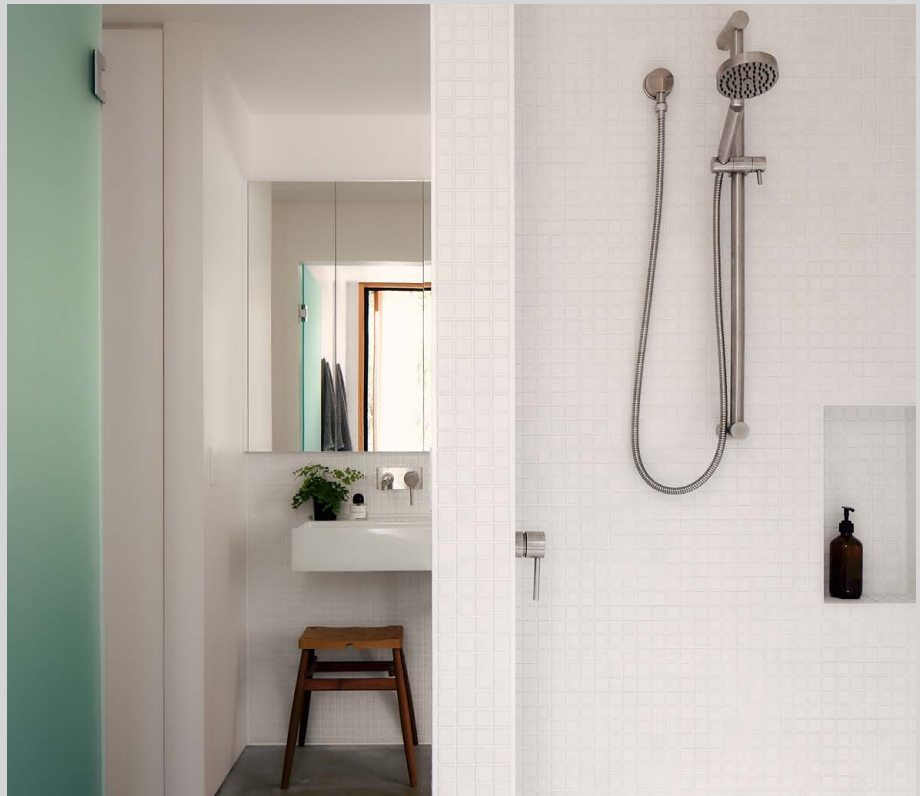
- A hinterland architecture is not just defined by landscape in terms of visual amenity, but in how it defines occupation of the ground plane. Architecture here is the medium that allows one to inhabit the landscape and connect to the ground plane.
- So: should the prospective dwelling perch lightly above the ground, constructed of timber like a traditional Queenslander? Or is it deeply connected to the earth, built of brick or stone, nestled closely to the ground in sympathy with changes in topography like an Italian villa?
- Existing ground conditions should be considered from initial design stages. This can be expressed through the construction of mezzanines or sunken areas.
- How do we go about thinking through these design options? Are the decisions purely pragmatic (e.g accessibility, water runoff) or more personal or poetic (e.g is it light + airy or firmly grounded)? A good architecture should respond to both.



Keperra House, Atelier Chen Hung

### 3. Maintaining existing vegetation

- Hinterland regions are often located in close proximity to forests and National Parks, thus any prospective dwelling must be located appropriately within this context.
- An existing clearing on the site would be an ideal location for siting the prospective dwelling to minimise removal of vegetation.
- If located in a bushfire-prone area, any prospective dwelling may need to achieve minimum clearance distances from existing vegetation. It is always recommended to engage a bushfire consultant at an early design stage to identify the bushfire risk level (BAL rating).
- Judicious siting can exploit existing vegetation to help provide shade on problematic aspects, and assist with framing outdoor spaces. Trees provide a lovely visual amenity while providing homes for native birds and wildlife.



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#### 4. Integrating building services

- Hinterland sites are not always equipped with the same utilities found in the city. Understanding existing or future mains utilities can assist to guide the position and design of a prospective dwelling.
- If there is no available town water, the prospective dwelling will need to have rainwater harvesting capabilities. Local council planning rules often stipulate a minimum rainwater tank capacity, but upgrades in capacity should be considered to suit household usage. It is a good idea to position water tanks during site planning to best work with siting and topography.
- If there is no available mains electricity, a provision strategy should be devised. The first option is to connect to mains, which may be costly if located far away from a connection point. The second option is to install solar panels and an appropriately sized battery system. With today's efficient solar technology, going fully 'off-grid' is a feasible proposition.
- Hinterland sites will require one of two sewage management methods in lieu of mains plumbing. On one hand, septic tank systems are usually simple, but their holding systems require regular effluent removal by council trucks. Otherwise, on-site treatment systems need less maintenance, but require space to irrigate out the greywater runoff.



Crafers West House, Atelier Chen Hung

## 5. Considering local planning regulations

- It is possible that there is a prescribed building envelope over the site, which defines where the prospective dwelling must be sited. It is best to check with council if your property has any such restrictions.
- Local council planning schemes may prescribe certain building character requirements for the area the site is located within. These may influence things like the roof profile or colour scheme in order to comply with regulations.

# ATEL -IER CHEN HUNG

Atelier Chen Hung is located on the traditional lands of the Jagera and Turrbal people. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded and pay our respects to elders past and present, and extend this respect to other Indigenous Australians.

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