A simple brief has been transformed into a work of fine landscape art south of Hobart’s CBD.

It is not often that a client requests that their new home be “…just a box, not a dumb box, but a simple box.” When this happens, it is a fine opportunity for architects to stretch those minimalist, alignment muscles and get to work. Cherie Bacon and Terry Wakefield seized this exact request for their house in Beauty Bay and Architect Practice Lane Architects have expertly taken the succinct brief to heart. But as any designer knows, “simple” requires much work beneath the surface to ensure that what you see is only up to the imagined result.

The site for this house sits on the edge of a small bush reserve, it is a new subdivision within a dense residential area south of Hobart’s CBD. A right of way runs along the northern boundary. The subdivision has been created out of a private, wooded reserve that was used and viewed by locals. Bacon and Terri selected their site for the established trees and have encouraged Practice Lane to work as many as possible on their title, although it does seem as though owners of adjacent allotments may be less inclined to protect this heritage.

One out of the box
Fortunately, the site also overlooks a public, council-owned reserve to the north, which has a dense, vegetated canopy.

The form of the building is a long, rectangular lake clad in Western Red Cedar that beds into the slope at the west end of the site and projects over a cantilever to form a cantilever and double height entry portal on the east elevation. The selected level on the slope gives enough elevation in the building to offer some privacy to the main living floor while retaining a modest overall building height. On the south and west elevations, which are most susceptible to overlook from new neighbors, the facade is wrapped by a rendered masonry wall with minimal penetrations, while the northern face opens out to the sun and the canopy view, with a series of crisp incisions in the timber skin.

The programmatic diagram for the building has all the living spaces running along the porous, warm, northern side, and all the service spaces - circulation, laundry, walk-in-robe - against the cooler south side wall. Openness is promoted throughout it through a network of shared living areas, flash-pull cavity sliders or thermal or dual-leafed airlocks. This alignment - features within the house, the reduction of traffic areas and penetrations and a matrix ofuller palettes that give this box its simplicity while increasing the perceived size of a 3D volume. Certain dimensions, such as the 8m of the entry area or the depth of the study, are carried through to the floor in flow between inside and outside. As Daniel Lane describes, each space is "singular, each relates to another". Surface materials and fixtures intreweave three connections. Throughout, joinery is detailed to reduce or remove the need for mouldings. Any machinery required to service the house - washing machine, dishwasher, heating, extraction - are concealed within storage joinery or, in some cases, behind eastern vents.

While the brief of a simple box has been sensibly achieved in this building, it is the captured view to the reserve to the north that completes the design. Queensland architects Dennis and Vukusic created an expression, "borrowed landscape", for the suburban strategy with which residential outcomes can be created by carefully framing foliage from adjacent blocks, reserves or backyards. These clients readily identify this aspect of the design as an important part of their living experience.

Beausa relates that one clear surprise and delight is the way the visual sliver of tree canopy is an integral part of the interior spaces. "When you come up the stairs, which are quite closed to the outside environment, and step into the living area, the large windows and doors give a real sense of space." While I don't believe that this particular dwelling has contributed significantly to the degradation of the private reserve, I can't help but recognize some irony in this scenario as I recall the large hole, stripped of all but one tree, steadily growing on their neighbor's plot, its readiness for a six-car garage. If borrowed foliage is patiently essential to suburban homes, then what level of responsibility does any local authority, developer or subsequent buyer need to accept in order to protect or provide "landscape" for others?"