



GENERATIVE ENERGY

Historically, BIANCA DU PLESSIS reminds us, Stellenbosch's Millstream is synonymous with agricultural growth and advancement. For those now living alongside it, adapting their homes to embrace changing needs has resulted in designs that push boundaries while honouring this particular boundary.

ABOVE: The Box, clad in thermo-treated pine and glass, is home to the third of three generations that live on the panhandle property adjacent to the Millstream.

TOP AND BOTTOM RIGHT: Every element of the home's interior and exterior is bespoke, crafted to the owners' exact specifications.



“The family is rooted in the area,” says Hein. “Living adjacent to the old family home also provides great continuity.” On the Millstream side, The Box is centimetres from a large pin oak that was planted by the professor himself. The structure rests on two bright yellow poles, a colour that Arn describes as ‘road-works yellow’. “But the colour also serves a purpose,” he adds,

“as grandmother parks under The Box and needs to negotiate her way around the poles.” The design features of The Box bear visual testimony to the mindset of the grandparents and the parents – that they embrace a structure so foreign and seemingly at odds with the original home, yet so perfectly suited to the environment and in keeping with the next generation’s spirit.

SOFT-SPOKEN SHOWSTOPPER

We walk along the Millstream to the neighbouring house, Die Hoek. The sturdy Mediterranean-style home of Gerhard and Marna Giliomee was built in 1938 and purchased by Gerhard’s parents in 1976. VKDB Architects were tasked with renovating the interior, implementing structural changes to allow for light and warmth, and the addition of bathrooms and a guest suite. The house’s 350mm-thick outer walls and original layout meant that the kitchen was small and dark. “We had to balance Gerhard’s fond memories of family meals prepared by his mother with Marna’s request for light and the addition of a pantry,” says Hein.

While great pains were taken to renovate the street-facing side of the house in the vernacular of the area out of respect for the historical significance of the neighbourhood – even the front gate was painstakingly restored to its original state – the entire south-facing side underwent a dramatic renovation. The walls facing the Millstream were removed and replaced with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the dense mix of indigenous and exotic plants on their doorstep.



LEFT: The Box rests on two yellow poles that guide the elderly owner to safe parking under the unit.

BELOW: The south-facing side of this Mediterranean-style home underwent a dramatic renovation with the addition of a sleek 4m-long cantilever.

THE WAY OF WATER

As early as 1680, settlers in Stellenbosch constructed a canal to channel water from the Eerste River to irrigate their fields and power the mill. Running from today’s Mostertsdrif to the town centre, the Millstream contributed greatly to the growth and prosperity of the new settlement and, as the oldest surviving man-made structure in Stellenbosch, it signifies the town’s historic core.

Houses along the Millstream tend to be gracious family homes that, due to their age, are frequently in need of renovation but are also subject to the specifications of Stellenbosch’s Heritage Committee. This calls for a historically informed approach to go hand in hand with bold visionary solutions. Hein Visser and Arn Erasmus of VKDB Architects walked me through three such projects that have recently been completed.

UNEXPECTED GROOVE

We meet at the home of a retired academic who, with his wife and children, had lived in the adjacent house for many decades. When they retired and one set of children returned from working overseas, it was decided to develop the panhandle property as their joint family home. Their granddaughter greeted us at the gate. The home now houses three generations: the grandparents in a unit on the ground floor, the next generation

on the first floor, and granddaughter in The Box. “We call it simply ‘The Box’,” says Arn, who designed the unapologetically non-conformist addition to the family residence.

VKDB was approached in 2021 to attach another space to the existing house. “To minimise disruption, we decided against brick and mortar and opted for a lightweight structure. The Box is constructed with premanufactured solid cross-laminated timber (CLT) panels and clad with thermo-treated pine, with a glazed front facing the Millstream. It took four months to convert the existing spare bedroom and bathroom into a living unit with two bedrooms and an open-plan kitchen and living area,” he adds.

Granddaughter admits that she was a tad apprehensive at first. “Do I really want to live with my parents while studying at university? But once the planning and building process started, it was extremely exciting. I have total privacy and independence.” She also has the coolest gaming set-up. The Box leans into the lush vegetation that grows alongside the Millstream, with massive fern leaves unfurling against the large window, just centimetres from the computer she and her dad built together. For an avid gamer, it’s the perfect pairing of tech and nature. “I grew up in Kenya, so it’s wonderful to live next to my grandparents,” she explains. “Though my parents are right next door, it never feels cramped.”

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“Everything shouldn’t remain as in a museum,” says Hein. “It has always been a family home and it needs to change and breathe as the family’s needs change.”

The garden was Gerhard’s father’s pride and joy and the primary objective of the renovation was to open Die Hoek up to its phenomenal surroundings. The previous sun room, a 1980s’ post-modern addition according to Hein, was demolished to make way for a sleek 4m-long steel cantilever designed by Arn. The absence of support beams allows for seamless garden views and spatial integration between the interior and exterior. From every angle in the large open-plan kitchen, dining and living area, the garden is the hero, in particular a magnificent Japanese maple that is glorious when its leaves change colour in autumn.

Gerhard and Marna moved into their ‘new’ old home in June 2023. “After not wanting to move here, I now never want to leave,” says Marna. “From our very first night in this house, falling asleep to the sound of the Millstream, I have felt at home. It’s a completely different house. I’m still amazed at how the architects managed to integrate old and new.”

While working in the garden, Marna found a garden gnome and decided to give it a new home at the base of the Japanese maple. Then when she and her children were unpacking boxes that belonged to her late parents, they found two ceramic frogs. Now keeping the gnome company, the frogs represent the grandparents in the new home. Of all the impeccable finishes and impressive architectural features that characterise Die Hoek, this gesture – the pride of place given to a gnome and two frogs – signifies that family ties hold sway in this handsome home.

BELOW: A garden gnome and two ceramic frogs at the base of the Japanese maple tree pay tribute to Gerhard and Marna’s parents.

BELOW RIGHT: Die Hoek’s wooden staircase was updated during recent renovations, with the addition of a new banister and larger window to let in more light.



TOP RIGHT: The distinctive butterfly roof of a home that embraces brutalist design features.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Over the years, VKDB Architects have renovated the home in keeping with the growing family’s needs, remodelling the sides and rear with timber box and glass to add bedrooms.

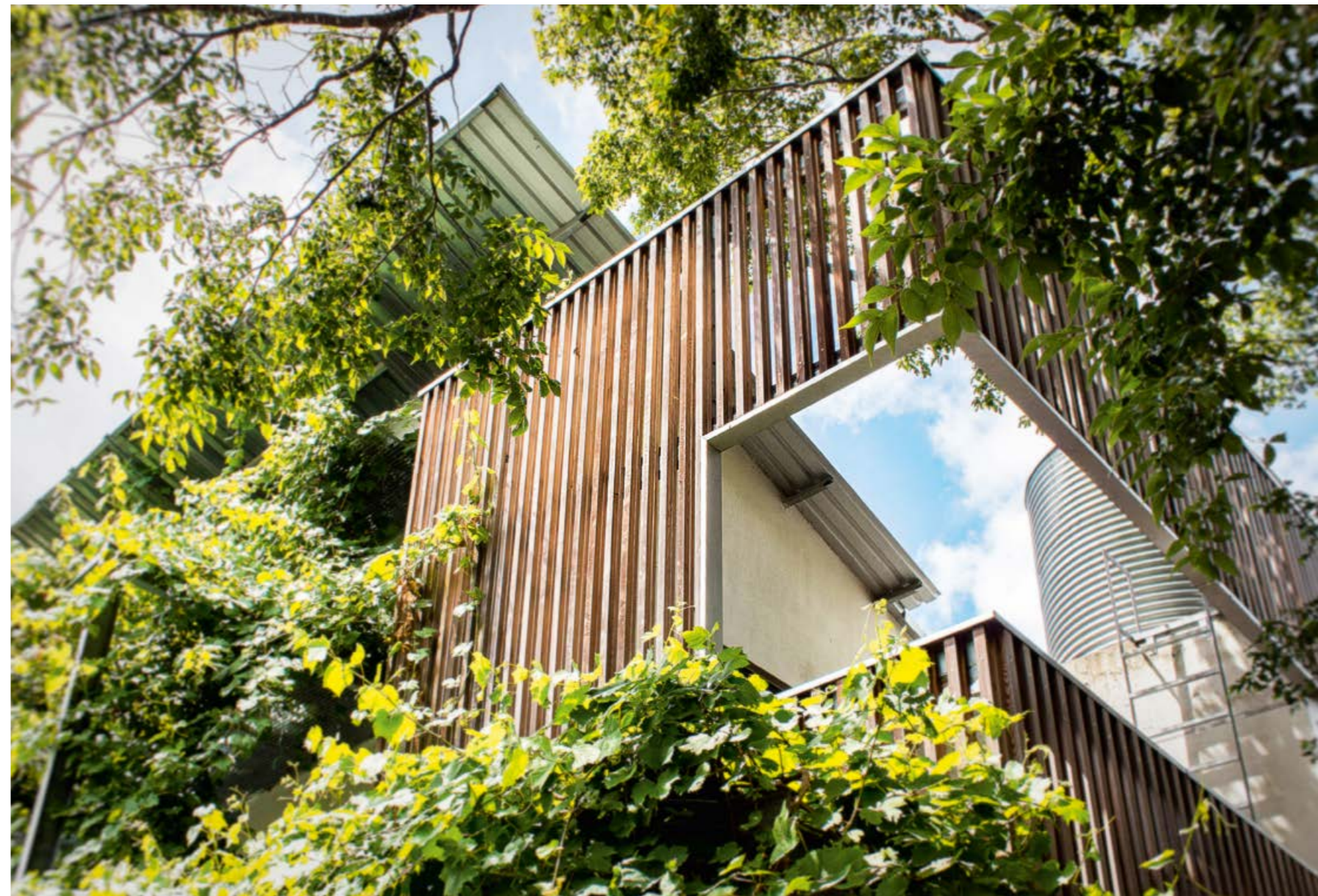
THEIR HOMES DO NOT SET OUT TO PROJECT STATUS, BUT ARE THE KEEPERS OF INTER-GENERATIONAL BONDS, WRAPPED IN WOOD, STEEL AND GLASS, AND BLESSED BY WATER.

BRUTALLY BEAUTIFUL

Higher up in Mostertsdrif and on a tributary of the Millstream, a third home’s distinctive butterfly roof and brutalist lines grab the eye. The house was originally designed by a relative who is an architect, but as the family grew, VKDB Architects stepped in to add space and renovate the interior in keeping with its evolving needs. Significant additions to the original home, completed in 2019, were intended to maintain a functional and inviting space for the next generation so they would not feel pressured to move out. These changes entailed timber box and glass remodelling to the sides and rear of the house and gave it six bedrooms: a master suite and a bedroom for each of the five children.

Arn designed the most recent addition, a guest bedroom with floor-to-ceiling pine cladding that was inserted under the existing first-floor deck. In this home, every element of the interior and exterior design is bespoke, in keeping with the owners’ desires. Blackwood used in the interior renovation was harvested from a family farm and the bathroom tiles, selected by the owner, were crafted by hand. A massive plaster relief in the double-volume central space – created by a 70-something-year-old great aunt – forces you to tilt your head back. Drop your gaze and you’ll see a large cement cornerstone protruding from the plastered wall, with tiny foot and handprints from when the young family first moved here almost 20 years ago.

These families clearly cherish living on the Millstream, for the tranquillity, history and abundant vegetation that emanate from it. Their homes do not set out to project status, but are the keepers of inter-generational bonds, wrapped in wood, steel and glass, and blessed by water. **V**



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