Light and shadow

A house on Queensland's SUNSHINE COAST is a bold mix of tropical modernism and Australian vernacular. PAUL MCGILLCICK shared a visit to this rustic retreat with its architect, DAVID TEELAND.
The vision of Habitus as a regional magazine of the Asia-Pacific is driven, in an important extent by the recognition that there are key climatic and cultural affinities between Australia and its northern neighbours in South and South-East Asia. At the very least the region shares an all year round benign climate and to a certain extent a tropical and sub-tropical climate. This is conducive to an outdoor lifestyle, connection between indoor and outdoor living, and living in the landscape.

In recent years, architects throughout the region have looked to traditional architecture for inspiration. Initially, this was a largely sentimental quest, but architects quickly realised there were things to learn from traditional strategies which would help us to live with the climate, not against it, leading to the extensive adoption of passively-strategies for cooling, ventilation and the use of natural light.

While tropical modernism may be mostly associated with the architects of South-East Asia, its equivalent has been strongly in evidence in Australia. In the more temperate parts of the country, names like Jean Murdoch and Peter Stutchbury are familiar. But in the tropical and sub-tropical parts of the country there are plenty of familiar names: Tropico in the Northern Territory, and Queendomodes such as Gabriel Poole, Ben Addis, Kerry and Lindsay Clare, Shane Thompson and John Malmeing among others. As early as 2006, Peter Hyett celebrated Australian tropical modernism in his book, Local Heroes: Architects of Australia’s Sunshine Coast.
So, it's always a good idea to check up on what architects are doing on the Sunshine Coast. Tread Architecte Stone and Timber House is an intriguing recent addition to the story: a house which responds to the sub-tropical climate of the Sunshine Coast with an engaging mix of tropical modernism, a dash of Asian aesthetic and a hinting of traditional Australian country style.

On arrival, the impression is anything but South-East Asian. This is a very large property and from the road the house sits somewhat in the distance on top of a rise. There are two man-made lakes (for flood mitigation), home to large numbers of wild ducks, and the property is ringed by a conservation eucalypt forest. In short, this is a very beautiful location.

Things change as we get closer. The house has a strongly linear form which derives from the idea of an original house (the eastern wing) now linked to a new central living-dining-kitchen space and new western wing. The house and its two open north-facing courtyards are reflected in lovingly cultivated sub-tropical gardens.

This hint of Asia is picked up with the entry sequence, an extended journey of arrival. From the driveway drop-off, we walk down a path of natural stone. On our left is a spotted gum before screens, filtering the north-eastern sunlight and partially screening off the main courtyard. At the end of this path, visitors can turn left and enter the courtyard or continue to the formal house entry. If they do this, they will pass through an exquisite transitional space with a small pond and the calming sound of a fountain. This space has a high pyramidal-shaped ceiling with a skylight at its triangulated apex. This acts like a sun dial with a brilliant slash of sunlight which moves across the wall during the course of the day.

In the introduction to Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's wonderful essay, In Praise of Shadows, Louis Kahn is quoted as saying, "The sun never knew how wonderful it was until it fell on the wall of a building." This plays with sunlight - the house has a series of naturally lit gallery spaces - is made possible by the need to pitch the roof at a minimum 25 degrees to cope with the heavy sub-tropical rainfall.
The spacious, flowing interior of the house—broadly, just one room deep, time allowing—employs natural lighting and cross-ventilation, which continue the material conversation between timber, stone and the garden landscape which gives the house its subtle South-East Asian quality. Long overhangs and high-pitched highlight windows amplify this through framed glimpses of borrowed landscape.

The roof form extends into generous overhangs which provide shading. The rain runs off these gutterless overhangs onto the side gardens and creeks.

The western wing is the private domain. Apart from the master bedroom and bath room, it includes a private sitting room. Here is a series of finely customized rosewood windows begin, to continue around the rear elevation and the main living room. Private it might be, but it wouldn’t sit quite right in this wonderfully open house if it remained entirely private; hence, the intriguing opening, like a service bay, which simultaneously connects and separates the sitting room and the living room.

An enticingly long corridor connects the new wing to the main house, the original house. Along the way is a new eastern wing of guest bedrooms which helps frame the main courtyard leading from the living and kitchen area. This courtyard is...
The heart of the house with its sheltered terrace looking past a water feature and out to the panorama of the grounds and the forest.

The original house is now mainly a games room, leading out to the secondary courtyard and swimming pool. With its bar, pool table, kitchenette and additional guest bedroom, it makes the whole guest wing effectively a self-contained unit.

Ultimately, this house is all things to all men. While it has the delicacy and meditative aesthetics of Asia, it is equally a modern version of a country homestead with all its typical informality and roominess. On the one hand, the house is perfect for large gatherings and entertaining. On the other, it has many intimate spaces, offering privacy and escape from the mobs. And, while it has the ruggedness of a homestead, it also enjoys a delicate materiality with an understated conversation between a variety of materials, highlighted by some beautifully wrought finishes and craftsmanship.