



# SEMI-URBAN B L I S S

With its work area cleverly separated from the living space by two staircases, this “floating” building in Pretoria’s leafy Menlo Park provides its owner with the best of both worlds.

PHOTOS DOOK PRODUCTION ANNEMARIE MEINTJES WORDS ADÉLE DE LANGE

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01 An elegant Sanna Swart sculpture stands at the top of the stairs.

02 Two staircases split the upstairs level into two independent wings.

# THE BUILDING SEEMS TO FLOAT AMONG THE TREES, AND EVEN WRAPS AROUND AN EXISTING STINKWOOD.



**01** The concrete-and-glass structure floats on some playfully juxtaposed columns. All the windows slide open, allowing the outside in.

**02** Architects Johan Wentzel and Grete van As of W Design Architecture Studio.

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**W**ouldn't it be great to roll out of bed, straight to the office, without the hassles of traffic and parking? Or to enjoy a coffee at your favourite café, without having to return to walled-in suburbia at the end of the day?

This is exactly what architects Johan Wentzel and Grete van As of W Design Architecture Studio had in mind when they conceptualised this contemporary but unpretentious building (owned by George Sutherland of Event Wizards) in the semi-urban neighbourhood of Menlo Park, in the east of Pretoria. "We wanted to design a building that could change over time into whatever our clients need it to become – whether that's a home or an office, and especially to make it possible for them to have multiple variations of both," says Johan.

At first glance, there's an unmistakable air of openness that invites you in. The building, nestled in between a mixture of residential and small business properties, seems to float among the trees, and even wraps around an existing stinkwood. "We wanted to create an illusion of space despite the relatively small size of the site," Johan explains. A transparent security screen replaces the traditional solid walls that have become the signature of suburbia. Grass concrete pavers extend to the street edge to add a soft green touch to the parking area.

Keeping professional and private lives separate is one of the major challenges of this kind of set-up. The architects resolved this dilemma by creating two separate staircases leading from the entrance foyer on the ground level up to the first floor, where it conveniently splits the upstairs level into two independent wings.

One of the wings is slightly bigger than the other, so it's easy to imagine how a start-up home office can initially reside in the smaller wing and then, over time, migrate effortlessly to the bigger wing, as it grows into a fully fledged business venture. Or, as the family grows, the spaces can be reversed to accommodate more (and older) children.

Another perk of living and working in the same building means that a step across the adjacent threshold is all that's required to prepare a quick lunchtime snack, or to clear your head for five minutes while sinking back into your favourite armchair.

The flipside of that coin is the potential

feeling of being bottled up in one place. But, somehow, in this space it's impossible to feel caged in... The wide vista of unobstructed views that open up on the first level – where solid concrete gives way to continuous glazing – creates an overriding sense of space, which goes way beyond the boundaries of the property.

The interior architectural style of the building is subtle and sophisticated. A striking patterned ceiling is created throughout by the layout of the off-shutter concrete roof, and rays of light filter through coloured glass beads that were used to fill the holes left by the concrete formwork in the walls. Commenting on the unusual finishes, Johan explains: "We wanted to keep the interiors simple, almost like

a blank canvas, so that whoever occupies the building in future can be a part of the creative process." The attention to detail and the pared-back decorative touches add warmth to the minimalist interior.

Tucked away underneath the deep shady overhangs of the cantilevering concrete roof, all the windows slide open to reveal the hustle and bustle of the lively street life below. A whiff of freshly baked croissants wafts up from the bakery down the road. A deftly clad woman steps out of her office persona and slips into her mom's taxi. Another car passes by... Perhaps it's a bit less about *where* you live and a bit more about *how* you live? Which world do you choose to live in? **V**

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**01** These mobile industrial-look steel shelving units can be used as privacy screens in an open-plan space.

**02** The light-filled office overlooks the leafy suburb.

**03** The informal, pared-back boardroom fits in with the building's multifunctional architectural style.

**04** The reloaded Persian carpet seen in the funky dining room (and throughout the house) is from The Persian Loom in Pretoria.

THE WIDE VISTA OF  
UNOBSTRUCTED VIEWS CREATES  
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- 01 The Bloom Easy Armchair by Kenneth Cobonpue and the wood-and-steel tables from Weylandts add a fantasy element to the living area.
- 02 The pulse of city life seems to come from a leisurely distance when you're perched among the tree tops.