

# LOOKING TO THE FUTURE



The **SIMPLICITY** of what at first glance appears to be a compact concrete house in Pretoria belies **A SOPHISTICATED MODULAR DESIGN** that architect Johan Wentzel believes will future-proof the structure.

PHOTOS DOOK  
PRODUCTION ANNEMARIE MEINTJES  
WORDS ALMA VIVIERS

01



**01** The elevated concrete box allows for an array of spatial configurations. The matte black bicycle is from Simple SAM.

**02** The material palette is restricted to glass, concrete, steel, wood, plaster and paint. Refurbished teak parquet flooring adds warmth.

02

The story of this box begins with the passing of an elderly neighbour who lived alone. "It was quite tragic," says Johan Wentzel of W design architecture studio. "The old man could not cope with the upkeep of his house, so when the roof started to leak in the main bedroom he simply closed the door and moved into another room, letting the house slide into neglect."

When Johan and Grete van As bought the property, it was more of a plot with a ruin than a house, so they decided to demolish it. This prompted the designer couple to reflect on the shelf life of buildings, their single-purpose static nature and how to future-proof them. "The experience made us think and question whether we could design something that could be adapted, that could change over time and that could, even if neglected, leave a skeleton that would endure?"

This question was W design's brief to themselves and the start of an interesting exploration of modular design for longevity.

The process was driven by a quest for utter simplicity: "We felt that if we could strip away all 'personality' and reduce it to the essential, then it would last."

They started with a box, a concrete box oriented to the north and elevated. From the box, they carved out the space, ensuring that sufficient overhangs provide free, passive climate control by allowing the mild winter sun to penetrate the space all season long while keeping the harsh summer sun at bay.

"The decision to use concrete was not an aesthetic one. We used concrete because it is durable, you don't need to maintain it, and the building will probably look just as good or even better in a hundred years' time."

Since it is located on a small panhandle site, elevating the box means you gain space



on the ground plane and create the perception of a much larger space – the first floor is only 90 m<sup>2</sup> – as views open up to the treetops and over boundary walls for a more expansive feel.

Next, they started with diagrammatic scenario planning of what functions could be slotted in and out, under or onto the box while maintaining the integrity of the structure. With the box as the first block in this modular puzzle, it could become a one-bedroomed house with generous living space and home studio, or with various combinations of functions added it could become a two- or three-bedroomed family home.

Designing for the maximum three-bedroomed house, they proceeded to reduce the design to "bones and veins" needed to give the box its transformative quality.

Services such as plumbing and electricity were designed with potential adaptations in mind. For example, on the first floor the kitchen can be converted to a second bathroom by merely revealing the connections for a toilet, water supply and shower waste hidden behind cupboards and floor tiles.

"It was quite a cumbersome process, but in my mind you are creating all of this stored

value that can be unearthed later without it requiring major remodelling," says Johan.

Although it wasn't designed as a prototype, Johan and Grete have been surprised by the response to the building. "The design seems to resonate with a lot of people, from young couples starting out to our parents who want to scale down. It is an interesting concept to think about how we can approach buildings in a way that allows one to choose and adapt accessories and extras according to one's needs. The building is also a great example to show clients, who're often obsessed with square metreage, that you can do more with less if you do it well!"

For now, the couple will use it as a studio, and they are excited to settle into this first iteration of the box.

"We are so habituated to complete a building and then to hand it over to the client that it is quite a strange emotion to now be able to live in the building," says Johan. "It is like the dog who catches the bus – we only now begin to realise what a privilege it is." ✓

• W design architecture studio: [wdas.co.za](http://wdas.co.za)

01 Grete van As and Johan Wentzel.

02 The simple concrete box floats on untreated steel columns. The core of the building, plastered and painted a steel grey, accommodates services such as electricity, water and rainwater pipes.



If you'd like to go on a tour of this shape-shifting building with VISI and Saint-Gobain, go to [VISI.co.za](http://VISI.co.za) for details or e-mail [events@visi.co.za](mailto:events@visi.co.za).



## A QUEST FOR UTTER SIMPLICITY.

03 The garden is planted with indigenous grasses and trees, except for the lawn next to the building, which marks out the space for future densification of the site. Johan envisions a second similar box on the property.

AN INTERESTING EXPLORATION OF

**MODULAR DESIGN** FOR LONGEVITY.



**01** In the bedroom on the first floor, an Eames-look recliner and ottoman from Weylandts are complemented by classic anglepoise lamps from Tonic.



**02** The upstairs is divided into the bedroom on one side and a workspace on the other side of the central core, which houses a kitchen and a bathroom. The light-filled workspace can double as a dining room.

01 The ground floor houses an open-plan space that can do duty as either a dining room or a boardroom. Future configurations of the box might see the ground floor filled in with a living room, a scullery and patio, or a studio.

*We love!*

YOU ARE CREATING  
ALL OF THIS  
**STORED VALUE**  
THAT CAN BE  
**UNEARTHED LATER.**