



Woman of the land

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DESIGN:15

Jenny Sparrow's family has lived and farmed in Whitemans Valley for six generations. While the use of land in this valley has slowly evolved over the decades, there's a history at play here that architect John Mills wanted to capture.

The valley is now home to lifestyle properties, areas of dense native bush, and forestry blocks alongside active farms.

"Designing this house for Jenny, I knew it had to be of its site. She wanted to retire out here, on her land, in a home designed for her," John explains. "No longer needing a large family house, her brief was for a permanent, comfortable, secure home for a woman of the land in a beautiful landscape. There needed to be adequate guest amenities but the focus was on how this house would work for Jenny."

It's a place of climatic extremes, and the site itself is exposed on a soft ridge. Sometimes it snows in the

valley in winter. In summer, the days are long and hot. There's wind and a lot of rain. This house needed to embrace that with spaces that were strongly connected to the landscape.

John's vision was for a house that would become an island, floating in the sea of the landscape. That has been realised in a relatively modest home of considered dualities: a play of planes.

"The landscape slopes down to the north-west, while the roof slopes up to the north-west on a similar angle," John explains. "We wanted to harvest that winter sun from the north and draw it right into the house."

"There's a nice symmetry: the west and north elevations are the same, and the south and east mirror each other. It's a subtle play of spaces. From the centre of the house — the kitchen — there are panoramic views to the north-east and north-west."



The subtle tones of the silvering Siberian larch cladding allow the house to blend in with the muted colours of the paddocks and hills that stretch out around it.

Inside is a different story. A black oxide concrete floor is set against a ceiling of black-stained ply; together they provide a visual frame for the extensive views, accentuating the colours of the environment.

"It's a simple, rustic aesthetic suitable for a farmhouse with moments of softness and delight."

For Jenny, who returned to this land aged 65 to retire, the new house is a place of contentment, with strong links to her family heritage. On the wall in the lounge is a picture of a picnic in 1908.

"You can see the paddock where they were from my place. The women were wearing these magnificent, huge hats; the men were in suits. My grandmother was about eight years old in the picture.

"The land I own now was originally part of my parents' farm, and this particular slice of it was left to me. It felt like the right time to come back to this land, to the peace and quiet," she tells us. 

