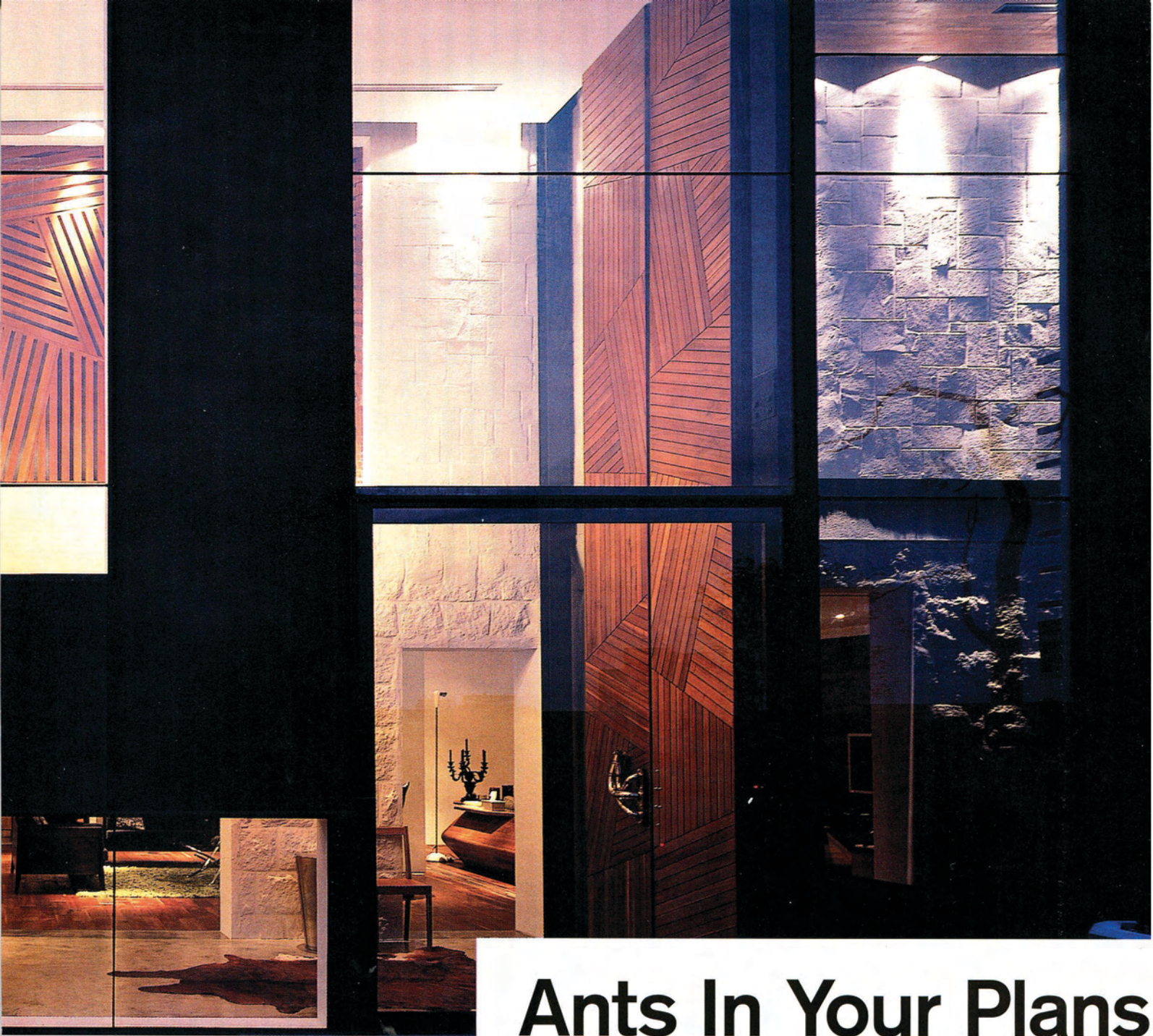




FARM LIVING: Diagonal windows add contrast to the Ant House facade. An exterior view of the house (bottom, left) demonstrates how vertical spaces lock together like "rooms" within an ant colony. The rolling deck (bottom right) opens to reveal the garage. A computer rendering (opposite) depicts how the home's additions act as a skin around the old structure





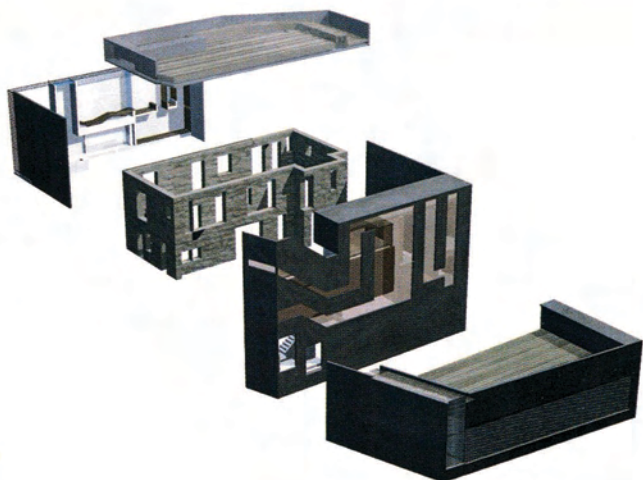
Ants In Your Plans

In northern Taipei, a delightfully disproportional home takes shape by enveloping an existing structure within a new one

Writer ARIC CHEN Photography RUAN WEI-MIN and SCOTT MORGAN

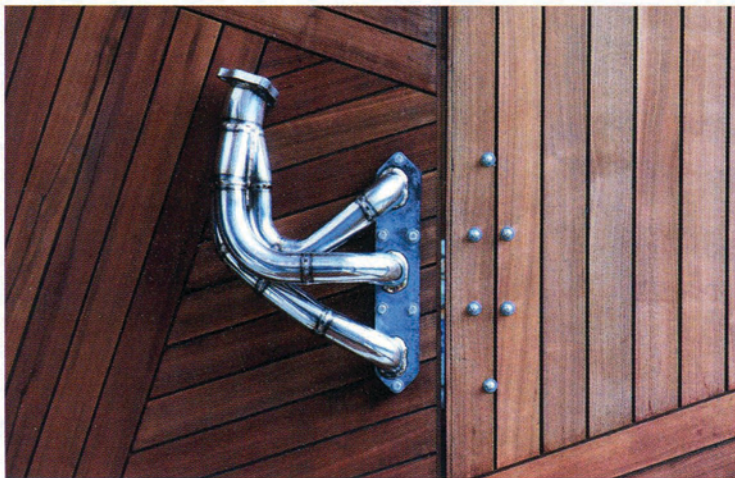
Maybe it's the crooked windows, snaking across its black facade like the circuits on a microchip. Or perhaps it's the random doorways, floating glass shower or the tall and narrow spaces with their surreal, stick-figure proportions. But something – in fact, everything – about the house recently completed by the Taipei firm Xrange, on the northern outskirts of that city, seems curiously off-kilter. The Ant Farm House, as it's nicknamed, is thoroughly, entirely – and brilliantly – out of whack.

There's a good explanation: the home is, in fact, a house within a house. When the clients, a real estate developer and his wife, first bought the property, "its condition was beyond words," says Xrange partner Grace Cheung. The culprit was an existing, rectangular stone house that was cluttered, dilapidated – and, >



by code, there to stay. So the designers gutted it, painted it white and built their new black box around it. And at just 30 to 70 inches wide, and 23 feet high, the narrow wraparound gap that emerged in-between offered an opportunity and a challenge, as well as a name. It reminded the designers of ant farms – or, as Cheung puts it, “the thinnest houses around.”

Like a puzzle, the interior of the two-story, three-bedroom home weaves in and out of the original structure’s windows, doorways and other openings like a slice of Swiss cheese. Filling the gap between old and new facade, a sliver of a library, pantry, staircase and other spaces surround the central living area and its conversation-pit lounge. The designers inserted lots of novel details, like an antler chandelier, sliding panels made of shoe leather and, for the car-fanatic client, Porsche engine parts turned into door handles and a retractable garage roof-cum-deck. Most remarkable, however, is the way



CREATURE COMFORTS: (Clockwise, from right) The house’s seven-meter tall foyer. The two-story study seen from the master bedroom. The doors leading into the study are accented with Porsche GT3 exhaust manifolds as door handles. The upholstered “ashtray” crib acts as a den and entertainment area

the home’s spaces compress, expand, interlock with and bleed into each other. Take the double-height first floor bathroom. A translucent glass shower juts out from the master bedroom above, while the undulating cypress wood floor of a second-story balcony holds a soaking tub before cascading downwards.

If the house is an extreme case of cosmetic surgery – a nip here, a tuck there, but still the same bones – then its black facade is what bares its new look. Its winding bands of windows reveal the flowing spaces behind them: the foyer as it gives way to the stairs, and a double-height study that flows into the doghouse. That’s right: clad in walnut panels, the study’s walls fold into a desk, beneath which a sitting ledge opens into an adjacent, interior doghouse so their English bulldog can curl up at their feet. “They wanted a house that was unique and couldn’t be copied,” Cheung says of her clients. You could say Xrange delivered – and by a wide margin. **AC**