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Liam Flood, Director
Hooper Lane Studios,
Cnr Hooper Ln & Darley Rd
RANDWICK NSW 2031
ph/fax: 02 9399 8800
mobile: 0425 259 002
email: tothemil@bigpond.com
www.tothemil.com.au



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CUSTOM-BUILT HOMES | TO THE MIL

THE MEANING OF HOME

THIS DESIGN EXPLORES THE IDEAS OF FAMILY AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY WHILE TRANSFORMING A 1940S-ERA BRICK BUNGALOW INTO A PRIVATE YET LIGHT-FILLED SYDNEY HOME THAT IS SURROUNDED BY LUSH GREENERY

Words Emma Wheaton Photography Marian Riabic

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As the homeowner and architect of this project, Sarah FitzGerald relished the idea of having complete freedom to design their family home and explore environmental design options. "The main brief was to create a family home that our three children would grow up in, and that we would grow old in," she explains.

While Sarah was careful to pay her respects to the original 1940s-era brick bungalow house, her main direction for the home design came from considering issues of privacy and environmental sustainability while also exploring the concept of the family home.

Sarah measured and drew the plans while she was heavily pregnant with her third child. Finishing off the plans in the two weeks before the now seven-year-old was born, Sarah recalls how her husband, herself and their two young girls had moved into the home and immediately began planning for its development to coincide with their growing family. The design of this home was about family and making a space that was comfortable for it. Once her son was born, Sarah continued designing their perfect family abode.

"It was a very busy time with a four-year-old, a two-year-old and a newborn, but it was a pleasure to design a family home while being immersed in family life and being at home every day," she says. "I was able to take time to think conceptually about what a family home really is. The social aspects of living together as a family unit, as well as the responsibility you have to neighbours as part of your immediate community and to the world beyond this, were issues I considered in depth."

In keeping with the sustainable design concept, as much of the original house as possible was kept. A bedroom, studio and bathroom were added upstairs and the entire roof was replaced to unify the new with the old, says Sarah. The previous kitchen and laundry had been subject to alterations and additions over the years and were removed to make way for a new kitchen and an open-plan family/dining room at the back of the house. Another bedroom and study were also incorporated into the new

From the architect
"While Modernism may seem outdated to some, the principles, ideals and the aesthetic are still inspirational and can be combined with new ways of looking at the way a family lives together in contemporary society"
— Sarah FitzGerald

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access to the sun," says Sarah. When it came to the kitchen, the morning sun was important as well, but it also needed to be in the centre of the house as it functions as a social hub. A small internal courtyard was therefore created on the east side of the kitchen, and the roof was cut away to bring in the morning sun — problem solved!

Eaves were designed especially with the sun in mind, and cross-ventilation was also well considered. The new part of the house uses 300mm-thick rammed-earth walls, special e-glass for all of the windows, and concrete slabs for the ground-floor areas to achieve good thermal mass.

A third important factor for good environmental design — environmentally friendly technology — has also been utilised in this home and includes solar panels for hot water, and photovoltaic cells to produce solar electricity. Hydronic heating makes excellent use of the solar-heated water to warm the house during winter, with coils embedded in the concrete floor of the kitchen and living areas, as well as hydronically heated towel rails in the bathrooms, and radiators in the bedrooms.

So this family home would be comfortable for each of its five members, Sarah carefully considered having private space for each individual as well as room for everyone to be together as a family.

Thinking beyond the way the home works internally, Sarah also designed it with its external environment and the surrounding neighbourhood in mind. The residence is situated on the corner of a street and a laneway with two primary schools nearby, so it can get busy. With visitors in mind, the home's entrance was moved further along the laneway, ensuring it was at the centre of the plan and away from the busy street corner. The bedrooms are positioned on the east side of the home to embrace the morning sunlight. The children's bedrooms also feature large sliding internal doors for privacy, or they can open their rooms into one large area.

To ensure privacy from the laneway, which runs along the south side of the house, a thick wall of services runs along this side. "All the windows are either high or low



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design and the existing pool area was renovated, also incorporating a shower and small bathroom.

As rooms were being removed and the structure of the home changed, materials were salvaged and recycled wherever possible. Bricks from demolished walls were kept and the timber from the old roof beams was milled on-site and re-used as joinery for inside the home. Recycled timber was also used for the home's external cladding and for the timber floorboards.

After recycling, the second important factor for good environmental design is passive solar control. "As a result of this, every room was located to have good



CUSTOM-BUILT HOMES | TO THE MIL

01 Big glass sliding doors open up the entire living room, bringing the outdoors in and creating the feel of a pavilion

02 The home features open and light, yet private rooms that interconnect via outdoor spaces

03 Hi-lite windows for light and ventilation feature in the home's beautiful, airy living spaces

04 "The existing" steel windows were some of the features that I first fell in love with when we bought the property and these recall International Modernism," says Sarah, along with other design elements such as the flat roof and asymmetrical overhangs

05 Surrounded by the garden and often bathed in light and sunshine, the open-plan kitchen/living/dining room is the most used and well-loved area of the home

so that no one can see inside from the laneway, but we are still able to access light and ventilation," explains Sarah. Remarkably, she also created exact shadow diagrams, which meant she worked within a constraint so that their new renovations wouldn't cast any shadows onto neighbouring properties.

"The Modernist tradition of form following function is one that I adhered to, despite this possibly being considered old-fashioned," says Sarah. "The demands for varying levels of privacy for the family and guests of the house, as well as social consideration of the environment, influenced both the planning and the form of the house."

Clever concepts throughout mean this house feels open and flowing, filled with light and a sense of openness, when in fact you cannot see into any private parts of the home at all. The glass walls of the living areas bring the garden inside and, combined with lofty ceilings, create the feeling of a lush city oasis.

The materials used throughout were important to the overall design concept and Sarah aimed to create an atmosphere of ease and comfort in the home, despite the clean lines



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and raw minimal aesthetic. This was helped by the use of exposed brick, rammed earth, corten steel panels, recycled hardwood weatherboards and trowel-finished concrete.

The build itself took 14 months to complete and was carried out by local company To The Mil, directed by builder Liam Flood. With the initial plans changed due to budget constraints and the team having started work on version two of the design, part way through the build Sarah was able to come up with a third set of plans, this time closer to her original concept. "It was quite a shock to the foreman, Dave, when halfway through the build I completely changed the design back to a version close to the original ... I just turned on-site one day and took all the drawings and replaced them with a new set!"

says Sarah. Camaraderie was good on-site though, insists Sarah, who visited it each day. The sense of teamwork was excellent, as was the atmosphere, with everyone chipping in on ideas and solutions to problems that would arise — and to playfully argue over who was to get credit.

What were initially considered "issues" — of privacy, modern family interactions, sensitive connections to the site and environment — actually turned out to "enhance the design rather than compromise it", reflects Sarah. ■

Architect: Sarah FitzGerald

Builder: Liam Flood, To The Mil

Phone: (02) 9399 8800

Website: tothemil.com.au