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Eye to detail

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Fine eye to detail

Smaller houses with quality fittings often make better use of space than larger ones

GUY ALLENBY

LUXURY is a word that can mean a lot of different things to a lot of different people. "But it doesn't have to do with the size of something," Nic Owen says.

Owen is one architect showing it's possible to create a home that's contemporary and elegant — luxurious even — on a piece of land smaller than the terrace of a Gold Coast penthouse.

At Owen's Melbourne home the impression of light, space and comfort comes not from excess square metres but from "window position, colours and using certain things to deceive the eye", he says.

The house may be relatively small, but it's perfectly formed.

At the top of the stairs is a wall of glossy joinery along the living space that reflects light and makes the space seem significantly bigger. Indeed there's a lot of joinery everywhere "because you really need it in a smaller inner-city house and you can hide the clutter away", Owen says.

The home's compact bathroom has a light well outside the window that engenders a feeling of light and airiness in the space.

Mirror-fronted cupboards further increase this sense and big double



Architect Nic Owen's home in inner-city Melbourne swallows the entire 90sqm block

shower heads suspended from the ceiling above the bath, together with a narrow but expertly crafted vanity bench, lend a sense of quality.

Owen has used a simple palette of light timber, dark timber, white walls and the colour green ("it's powerful as well as calming," he says) as an accent for the bathroom ceilings, upstairs carpet and light wells in the living area.

The garage doubles as a rumpus room with low-voltage lighting and a polished concrete floor.

Owen's artist partner Josie Backhouse plans to create "a great big canvas artwork to go over the inside of the garage door so you wouldn't know the garage door was there," Owen says.

It's a smart, lean and stylish city

home, where not a skerrick of floor space — or the opportunities to create clever, useable storage — has been squandered.

It's like one giant, carefully considered and crafted piece of furniture merged with and married to a 150-year-old Victorian terrace.

Robert Weir, of Sydney's Weir Phillips Architects, is another architect with a feel for creating beautiful homes that don't depend on size for their elegance.

Not that this is such a radical idea.

In fact it's the substance of a conversation many design professionals habitually have with their clients at a project's outset.

"You say to a client: do you want to spend your money on details or space,"

The house may be small, but it's perfectly formed

Weir explains. "What happens? People inevitably go for the larger space."

Australia, he says, is a nation "obsessed with our real estate and we imagine resale is better the bigger it is", when the truth is larger spaces don't necessarily create more comfort.

In fact reducing the space can allow more in the budget for the things that define quality and elegance: finishing, detail and the best possible use of the space and light available.

Building costs are "\$5000 to \$6000 per square metre", Weir adds, so if you reduce a dining area by "three or four square metres, you've saved [up to] \$24,000 and you can build a banquette [built-in box seat] or a bay window for about \$2000".



The bedroom and ensuite in Dare Jennings's Robert Weir-designed home



Owen's 1860s terrace house



Inside Jennings's Sydney home

reflect and suit the needs and personality of its successful owner. But it's not huge, every detail has been carefully considered and there's no wasted space. It's a home that oozes quality and is designed to make its occupants feel good.

"It's often hard for people to isolate why a space felt good," Owen says, "but often it's because everything works. You turn a light on and it illuminates the bench surface perfectly. Doors close perfectly. It's like a BMW, or any beautiful European car: everything has had a lot of thought put into it. You come away and you feel good."

In the US the queen of the call for smaller, better considered homes is Sarah Susanka, an architect and author of the Not So Big House series of books, which have sold more than a million copies in the past decade.

As Susanka explains: "Not so big doesn't mean small. It means not as big as you thought you needed." She suggests we should be building houses about a third smaller than we build now but on the same budget as the original, larger plan.

Why? The result is better designed, better detailed, feels more welcoming and comfortable and, as she says, "The magic is that although the house is smaller in square footage, it actually feels much bigger."

Susanka calls for a return to not-so-big houses that relate to our daily lives, rather than filled with cavernous rooms that are never used; homes that are about quality, beauty and clever storage. In Australia, where an inner-city lifestyle is becoming ever more appealing, where the available space to create new houses can only get tighter and where the costs of building are sky high, it's an approach to living that is seeing its time.

"To be honest with you it does get driven by budget," Weir says. "The numbers come in [to build a house] and the client says, 'Well what am I going to do?' [I say] make the house smaller. People are almost always happy that they did and they find that they didn't need that much space. Once you build something that has that intimacy, people really appreciate it."

designed Jennings a house that is "like a loft space that uses joinery to divide it all up", Weir says. "He [Dare] is a man who likes collecting, so there are places to hang pictures and display books everywhere."

It's a comfortable, prestige home to

The result is less expensive but it speaks of quality.

"It's a bit like they do in a boat. If space is at a premium what gives it a sense of quality is all the built-in furniture," he says.

"And with built-in furniture not only do you use more of the floor space but you actually eliminate circulation problems and create spaces within a larger space. People gravitate to a bay window or a booth in a restaurant; it's that kind of idea."

When Dare Jennings, founder of the Mambo fashion label and cult motorcycle brand Deus Ex Machina, asked Weir to design his home he was "a single bloke and he said he didn't need that much room", the architect says. So Weir

Deft design seems bigger on the inside

GUY ALLENBY

ARCHITECT Nic Owen, partner Josie Backhouse and their four-month-old baby, Cedar Noon, share a home in Melbourne's Carlton that squeezes every possible square centimetre of useful and useable space out of its compact inner-city block.

Although the structure and its petite block began life as a narrow, single-storey terrace built in the 1860s, it's been transformed, quite incredibly, into a contemporary, light-filled and spacious-feeling home with a two-storey extension.

Owen, 35, designed the place for himself and family hoping "to achieve quite a lot of amenity with the little house", he explains. "We wanted quite a lot from a small house."

And how.

The couple planned on somehow folding in three bedrooms (one of which is now Owen's office), an open-

plan living room opening on to a deck, a kitchen opening on to another deck, a bathroom, a garage and a studio for Backhouse, 31, who's an artist.

And it all had to be conjured from a block with a 90sq m footprint, by means of a canny design that not only respected the bones and heritage of the original terrace — and kept its single-storey profile as you look at it from the front facade — but that retained or bettered the home's floor space ratio (the ratio of building to outdoor space on the total block).

Owen's deft scheme moved the back courtyard upstairs to a new first floor at the back, on to which the new living-dining-kitchen area opens. An additional courtyard also leads off the kitchen and links it to the studio in the loft space.

Downstairs are three bedrooms and a bathroom.

The new home offers 180sq m of accommodation in total, including the garage and outdoor terraces.



Nic Owen and partner Josie Backhouse

FRANCIS AARON