



PHOTOGRAPH BY DALLAS KILPONEN

Practical work spaces: Caroline Pidcock (left) values space and natural light in an office, which fits in with one of her projects, an eco-tourism resort on Port Stephens (below left). Hal and Di McElroy (below) share their work area with what is believed to be the ghost of a murdered prostitute.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SIMON ALEXOVA

GHOST SHARE



It was once an inn, built in 1862, and there's supposed to be a ghost in the attic (and, some say, in the dungeon-like basement where the temperature suddenly

drops as you enter). There are nooks, crannies, 13 rooms in all shapes and sizes, and a balcony that's a sun trap.

But for top film and TV producers Hal and Di McElroy, makers of the ABC series *Dog's Head Bay*, their Hunters Hill office is simply a happy, practical, inspiring place to be, and just five minutes from home.

"Someone said, oh my god, it's going to change your life, and they were right, it has," said Hal McElroy of the couple's decision to move operations to this lovely old building about a year ago, after working in a rundown warehouse in Rozelle where they shot the TV murder mystery series *Murder Call*.

"We've been living down the road for 10 years and every day we'd drive down past this building..." he said, "and we knew it was vacant and we thought 'oh can we afford it?' and 'is it the right thing to do?' and all that sort of thing but because we spent half to three-quarters of an hour every day driving to work and back we thought the sensible thing was to find somewhere close to home, because you can get another hour's work done, or you can go home an hour earlier."

The McElroys' combined film and TV credits cover just about everything important in Australia (*Blue Heelers*, *Water Rats* and *Return To Eden* on TV and films ranging from *The Cars That Ate Paris* to *The Sum Of Us*). Now married for 23 years, the couple joined forces professionally when they moved into the Hunters Hill office, forming their new company, McElroy Television.

Mr McElroy said he simply liked the building's "position, character, style".

Said Mrs McElroy: "We'd looked at other places. They were characterless. They were buildings that had just been renovated. They were squares, boxes. But this - I love that crazy attic up there. It's actually perfect for a screening room. I can go up there and read scripts, watch tapes. It's all sort of higgledy-piggledy and that appeals to us. We spend a lot of our time here."

He said it was terrific to work with his wife after always having done so informally. "To be able to do it in this environment is fantastically stimulating creatively because it's wonderfully relaxed, it's very open and friendly, we know exactly what the other's doing, there isn't distraction, unless you want to be distracted... and we find that we're working faster, harder, more efficiently, more creatively and therefore more effectively."

The couple did few renovations when they took over the office from John Singleton Advertising.

They kept the walls and carpet the soothing pale eucalypt colour and brought in their huge boardroom table carved along its rim with the names of all their film and TV productions.

They have not seen the ghost, said to be of a lady of the night brutally murdered by a client, but cheerfully describe a former house they shared where another ghost was said to be in residence - "one of our friends saw that one".

The pair, who have an office each, keep their space orderly but there's a fair bit of movie memorabilia around: Hal's *Alvin Purple* mug, the logies for *Blue Heelers* and *Water Rats*, a portrait of Russell Crowe and lots of photos of the family on location (they have three children, Zoe, 21, Rome, 15, and Jake, 14).

Despite their rambling office space, the McElroys' attitude to work is very disciplined. He's a stickler for punctuality and regular hours, believing everyone who works for him is entitled to a life.

And he makes decisions quickly. "We can decide pretty much instantaneously what we want to do and we try to be driven, guided, by our instincts, rather than our intellect," he said. "If you listen to your instincts and respond quickly to them, and make a decision, then most often it's the best decision."

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GIRL POWER

Architect Caroline Pidcock and her "girls" - the six members of her all-female practice - have recently moved to new premises in a converted Waterloo warehouse.

It's all modern, minimal, clean and uncluttered, freshly painted in off-white and grey, with shelves from IKEA, green Artek chairs from Scandinavia and desks the team built themselves from solid-core doors.

But there's a touch of fun in the form of flowers, soothing background music that's on all day and even an aromatherapy oil burner.

"I'm trying a number of citrusy ones," said Ms Pidcock, one of her profession's leading new achievers. "There's orange today, and there's lime and lemon. They're meant to be invigorating and stimulate the mind."

Ms Pidcock and her team are clearly happy in their new space, an open-plan office with only small partitions between desks. They moved from a cramped former corner shop in Erskineville to the bright and roomy new location that was the first option Ms Pidcock looked at.

"I really liked the light," she said. "I really liked the feel of it and the location and the fact that there were other architects around (there's another architectural firm down the corridor, plus some builders and joiners). I just thought I could probably spend a whole lot more time looking and I wouldn't find anything I liked."

She believes space and natural light are vital for a good office.

"The other thing we've got is loads of storage space. And it's all quite accessible storage space, for all the trade literature and stuff, and lots of layout space and table space to put plans".

She pointed out, however, that like most modern practices, hers did not actually have the proverbial "drawing board" any more, thanks to technology.

Ms Pidcock mainly does residential projects for clients in Sydney and rural NSW and has had at least a dozen projects featured in glossy magazines. She works 60 or 70 hours a week but is determined to cut the hours back, and unwinds by swimming up to 1.5 kilometres five times a week at a pool.

She usually has about 25 projects on at the same time, is passionate about ecologically sustainable architecture and is working on an eco-tourism resort at Port Stephens.

"I like a house which is naturally lit, and naturally heated in winter and cool in summer and connects well from the inside to the outside," she said.

Ms Pidcock studied at Sydney University and worked for a few practices here and in London before starting up her own. She taught architecture at Newcastle University for two years and was the faculty's only full-time female teacher.

She said that although architecture student numbers were divided about 50-50 between the sexes, there was a huge attrition rate among women once they started work.

"I still think our profession is quite chauvinistic. Not overtly so, but the people who get rewarded, and the type of people and attributes that get rewarded and promoted, are the more aggressive ones, whereas females tend to be very good at collaborating and working on teams and getting everyone together and then not claiming ownership for it but saying 'yes, we as a team have done this'."

She thinks, however, that it may be an advantage being a woman in the domestic market. Female architects tend to form less combative relationships with builders and are seen by clients to have more sensitivity to home issues. But she said her own practice was not always all-female and was only that way now by accident rather than design.

As for her own dream house, she almost sighs when contemplating it. "By the sea," she insisted. "It would have a fantastic view of not just water but coastline and other things... but I've got to earn a few squillion first."