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THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO INCREASING YOUR HOME'S VALUE



life in the tree tops



High up in leafy Balgowlah, one couple has found peace without leaving the city. Jenny Wills reports.



Reach for the sky: Stephen and Sally Dunne (pictured below in their kitchen) are delighted with their home's redesign, which opens it up to light and brings the outdoors in

Pictures: Peter Brennan

The sea change is such an appealing notion: tossing in the city life for a bohemian existence in a sleepy seaside village. But the reality for most is that it won't happen, or not for a while anyway. But what if you could have your sea change without leaving the city? Live surrounded by trees, eating breakfast on a terrace overlooking the water?

Stephen and Sally Dunne led the typical life of successful career couples, living close to the city and work. But a couple of years ago, those sea-change yearnings took hold and they bought a 1950s house at Balgowlah, overlooking Manly harbour.

"We both work, and work hard," says Stephen, a funds manager with AMP Henderson. "So it's nice to come home and be somewhere different from work. There's a haven feel here. I'm living in Sydney, yet I can walk to a national park and fish from the rock wall, or take my racing ski out and paddle around the harbour."

It was the perfect location, requiring only the perfect house to match. Two years later, the Dunnes can confidently say they have it all – plus the bonus of a newborn son, George, to share it with.

Stephen and Sally's brief to architect Caroline Pidcock was simple.

"Aesthetically, we wanted to upgrade and modernise the house to a contemporary design," says Sally, who's on leave from her consumer marketing role with Westpac. "But we also wanted to open the house and bring the outdoors indoors."

The original house included large expanses of glass looking out to the view, but a rabbit warren of rooms made the space difficult to live in, and the lower level lacked light and warmth.

Caroline Pidcock is a leading advocate

of sustainable design, and fundamental to that principle is the need to work with an existing house as much as possible.

"We didn't demolish and start again, losing all that embodied energy of the original house," says Caroline. "We took off the original roof and added some second-storey elements over part of the house, and over the lounge room we added a new roof that opened the room to the sky."

The jumble of rooms was demolished, the entrance way realigned and lightened with glazing and louvres to regulate airflow. A skylight above the stairwell flooded a once-dark area with light.

To keep the house intimate, and make it easier to heat, Caroline included wide sliding doors that allow the living area to be closed down. "Zoning a house is useful, from a thermal and aesthetic point of view, for happy living situations," she says.

The original balcony needed only a material upgrade with stainless steel railing and stone tiles. A new kitchen, opening to the balcony, features a wide terrazzo island, creating a casual dining area, and a frosted-glass sliding window, bringing in more light, while hiding a neighbour's brick wall.

A similar issue of light had to be addressed on the ground level, which includes a study, guest bedroom, bathroom and reading room. In the boundary-facing bathroom, an opaque glass door lines up with the window to channel light, and large french windows in the study and reading room also maximise the light potential. In contrast to the living area, with its clean, neutral tones, there are splashes of vibrant pink that add warmth where the sun cannot oblige.

"We had different reasons in different rooms for choosing colours," says Stephen.

It's nice to come home and be somewhere different from work. There's a haven feel here

"Downstairs, the walls had been white with a black floor, but we wanted to get warmth through strong colours.

"We had this idea of connecting to the garden, so there is a very grounded feel to this area, connecting with the earth. The middle level is about open living, and upstairs we wanted a very Zen feeling, where you have a greater connection with the sky."

A wall of glass leads from bedroom to timber-lined balcony set among the treetops; blue tiles mimic the sky and you could spend hours just sitting and looking.

Beautifully crafted joinery wraps from the landing to the bedroom and dressing room, which in turn leads to rice-paper glass doors opening to an immense black limestone-tiled bathroom. In central position is a deep, free-standing bath.

Outdoors has two distinct characters. At the front of the house, the form is modern and clean. The plants are architectural, the water features sharp but serene. At the rear, a rambling garden, with 50 years of growth, provides an oasis of green and ever-changing colour. From the bottom of the garden, the full scale of the house is visible, larger than before but comfortable in its environment. A tree house perfect for a city sea change.



LOVE MOST The light and the blending of textures – wood, glass, tiles and sandstone.

LOVE LEAST That we chose not to replace all the original windows to save on cost and add to the house's sustainability.

THE PAIN We moved out during renovations so it was relatively painless. The experience of working with the architect and builder was quite positive.

THE GAIN The house complements our position, in terms of view and bringing the garden and trees inside. It is much more integrated and there is much more light.

DURATION Six months.

COST Around \$500,000.

ARCHITECT Caroline Pidcock Architects, Ph: 9357 1366.

