

BISMARCK HOUSE ANDREW BURGESS ARCHITECTS

Words by Rose Onans • Photography by Peter Bennetts • Architecture by Andrew Burgess Architects • Interior Design by David Harrison, Karen McCartney and Andrew Burgess Architects
Build by Robert Plumb Build • Landscape by Dangar Barin Smith





Behind the traditional frontage of a 1940s semi-detached cottage in Bondi, a series of experiments with form, materiality and space unfolds. Yet, while experimental, the Bismarck House by Andrew Burges Architects is grounded by a sense of purpose in its dynamic responsiveness to the site.

The project was born of its long, narrow lot set on an eclectic urban laneway that provides rear access to commercial properties fronting Bondi Road. It is also the result of the collaborative working relationship between the architects and client Will Dangar, of landscape design studio Dangar Barin Smith, his wife, Julia, who worked closely with Karen McCartney and David Harrison on the interiors, and Bill Clifton, of Robert Plumb Build, builder and owner of the adjoining semi-detached home.

“It was an unusual project in that we didn’t really have a client; it was more [Will saying] ‘let’s do a project together!’,” says Min Dark, project architect and co-designer. She explains that, instead of the usual architect-client relationship, the project evolved through the ready-formed team encompassing architecture, landscape design, construction and interiors. The substantial level of trust between all parties framed the potential of the project from the beginning and enabled a greater level of experimentation throughout the design process.

The nature of the site and its interaction with the laneway became the conceptual starting point for the design. With the laneway, and the brick wall running along its length, forming a consistent, linear point of reference, the building alternately reaches forward and pulls back from this

straight edge to create a serpentine form in the landscape. The other edge is defined by the neighbouring semi, which had already been renovated and extended by Robert Plumb Build and Potter&Wilson Architects.

Within this envelope, “the geometry was really about what was the optimal response to the laneway,” explains Principal Andrew Burges. While the gable roof speaks to its neighbouring roofline, in contrast to the rectilinear form of the traditional semi typology, “the looping of the façade created a much more oblique way of looking up and down the laneway that minimises overlooking of the adjacent commercial properties. It opened the interior up to pockets of sun and breeze and gave the opportunity for the garden to extend the full length of the laneway.”

With the idea of a continuous garden, “we were conscious of the limits of this site and realised that setting up a level of containment at the perimeter was important,” Min reflects. “So the laneway is tightly controlled to allow living to extend up to the full width and length of the site. There are also points where that containment pushes in or out to frame moments of public engagement: the kitchen window is a stoop directly on the lane, and the existing cactus is returned to public space by the brick fence stepping in and around it.”





Typically, the internal plan of a semi-detached home is defined by the two parallel boundary walls. Bismarck House interprets this plan by shifting one wall out to become the northern perimeter fence on the laneway. Behind it, the curved façade of glass, steel and concrete sculpts out spaces that are given over to either the garden or the living areas of the home. “It was really key to have the project read so there’s not a sense of interior and exterior, but that you’re really sitting between these two boundary walls,” says Andrew.

While this northern perimeter wall, constructed from red bricks recycled from demolished structures on the site, functionally offers a great deal of protection from the outside world, it also subverts the traditionally impenetrable outer wall by inviting interaction and social engagement in the otherwise utilitarian laneway. The overscaled window with ledge seat beneath opens directly into the kitchen, encouraging passers-by to stop and converse with the inhabitants inside – an operable timber screen providing privacy when needed. Further down the lane, the wall steps in to offer a tiny pocket garden that creates a moment of reprieve within the urban context, echoing the way the eponymous Bismarck palm tree is nestled into the curve of the building.

“We all felt the social potential of the engagement with the laneway was super important and having the seat edge, that generous threshold, right on the lane where you could slide the screen open and be part of the lane,” says Andrew. He explains that, inspired by the idea of creating shared social spaces that blur the line between public and private through residential architecture, with the Bismarck House they sought to “understand scale and adjacency as potential initiators of social interaction.”

The upper level similarly plays with ideas of shared space, this time within the home, but where the lower level is a weighty structure of masonry and off-form concrete, the lightweight upper volume, clad in mill-finished aluminium, seems almost to float like a cloud. Both the cladding and windows were experimental, with the architects and builders prototyping the combination of pleated perforated aluminium fixed to a Colorbond weatherproof skin. The aluminium is peeled back to form an operable screen across the windows and required that the window openings to be cut in “excruciatingly late in the process of the build” to ensure the screens were in the correct position, Min says.









The building pulls back from the consistent linear edge of the laneway to create expanded pockets of garden.

Within the upper volume, three bedrooms were kept deliberately modest in scale, in a move that also interrogates the balance between private and communal space. This was informed by the brief that the house could function as a holiday rental, rather than a permanent family home, which is felt in the pared-back aesthetic. Sculptural hanging rails taking the place of joinery and the purposefully small scale of the bedrooms and bathrooms places the focus on shared amenity over individual spaces, creating an experience of living that is not defined by the size of the home per se.

“I have always loved that modernism started with tiny bedrooms for children, acknowledging that they have shared spaces for play,” says Min. Andrew agrees: “I think it was quite a conscious brief from Will,” he says. “The scale of it is really beautiful. By carving out those [outdoor] spaces in the plan, we almost made it smaller to make it bigger through the connection to the garden, and there is now a sense of ‘rooms’ – it’s no longer one singular open space.”

This is enhanced, to a degree, by the internal material palette that emphasises a rawness of materiality. From the use of simple reinforcing mesh for the balustrade to the expression of the structure in the concrete

slab and soffit, the limewashed brickwork, natural timber and polished plaster finishes that resonate with the organic, sculptural quality of the spaces, the interior materiality manages to at once gesture to the urban laneway context and also evoke a relaxed, coastal sensibility. The result is a heightened experience of each space that draws one in while also continually offering a reminder of context.

The landscape design, which was created after the architecture, both responds to and emphasises these qualities. Just as the building hugs the garden and at times integrates the landscape into its folds, the arid plantings of succulents, cacti and palms create a distinctive natural environment that interacts profoundly and deliberately with both the architecture and the streetscape.

A dynamic and articulate building, the Bismarck House is firmly anchored by the fact that the ‘what’ could only be the result of the ‘where’ and the ‘who’ – where it is and who made it. Responding to the laneway on one side and the semi-detached cottage and extension on the other, and arising from the creativity and collaboration of the architects, the client-landscape designer and builder-neighbour, the project is singularly and successfully experimental.

