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COVER STORY Jane Burton Taylor

Extreme makeover

Live in an ugly apartment building? Don't move, renovate.

Just because you buy into an dated, unattractive apartment building, doesn't mean you have to stay in one. More and more Sydney apartment dwellers are opting to make over their buildings, rendering garish red brick, adding verandas and installing gardens to create a private enclave.

Renovating a single dwelling may be simpler in many ways, but the makeover of an apartment building also has benefits. The changes can dramatically improve residents' quality of life, adding more light and cross-ventilation and creating a far more pleasant living environment.

A makeover can significantly increase the value of an apartment, too. Another big plus is that renovating collectively is generally cheaper than a one-off job; you achieve economies of scale by having everyone renovate with the same builder, at the same time.

For ugly blocks, a revamp might be as simple as rendering the building with a colour-cast concrete (painted render is appealing but more costly to maintain); adding external louvre screening on west-facing windows, redecorating a grim foyer and adding a garden to make the entrance more inviting.

More significant renovation work could include enlarging existing windows or adding new ones; installing open or enclosed balconies to take advantage of orientation or outlook; creating a secure entrance; and, if there is enough space on-site or the potential to excavate, introducing off-street parking or garaging for all or some of the apartments.

Typical areas being targeted for makeovers are beach suburbs such as Bondi, where many postwar and inter-war apartment blocks were built on spec (meaning they were built to sell with little interest in quality of design or finish). Today, the value of these apartments has rocketed because of their location, but they are basically cheap, lacking the aesthetic elegance of their art deco counterparts



New look... Lawrence Flanbaum and his partner, Erica Hacker, in their Bondi apartment, which now has a balcony and garage.
Photo: Quentin Jones

BEFORE YOU START

- Find** someone to initiate the project
- Get** agreement from all the owners
- Consider** the cost of services upgrade
- Hire** a skilled architect
- Establish** a sub-committee to run the project

and with none of the trappings of their often better-designed contemporary neighbours.

Walking along Ramsgate Avenue on Ben Buckler Point at North Bondi, the designer Allan Nicholls points out a few possible candidates. "There's one crying out for a makeover," he says, pointing to a bland, liver-coloured block with tiny windows. "There's another," he says looking at a blond-brick '50s block which, to a layperson, has a certain charm.

Revamping the likes of these seems only logical. But it isn't straightforward in terms of either logistics or aesthetics. To start with, you need all the owners to agree to the work and the aesthetic direction, which is generally easier in a smaller block.

In practical terms, Nicholls has an early warning. When a development application is submitted, councils require that a building be updated to meet modern building codes.

"This often means deficiencies have to be addressed. Typically it's fire-safety issues; this may include fire services [and] replacement of unit doors and ceilings in some cases," he says. "You need to calculate this cost from the beginning."

Architect Bruce Eeles provides some aesthetic guidance. Eeles won the Premier's Award in 2002 for his U-shaped Newington apartments. The units were inspired by the stepped Wyldefel Gardens apartments built in Potts Point in 1936, so he is accustomed to looking at the old with a discerning eye.

If they are not design classics but appealing period apartments, "the idea is to create a modern intervention which dovetails and complements the original", Eeles says.

"If they are ugly ducklings, then in the hands of a skilled architect they will be improved, they can come to life."

And if they are "halfway houses" - apartments with some redeeming features - he recommends owners identify the positives and only address the drawbacks. "Look at the building and retain the nice elements and work with them rather than masking or enclosing them."

Eeles says there are no definitive rules for makeovers. But designers do need to be skilful in handling materials, detailing and the relationship between the proportions of new and old.



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