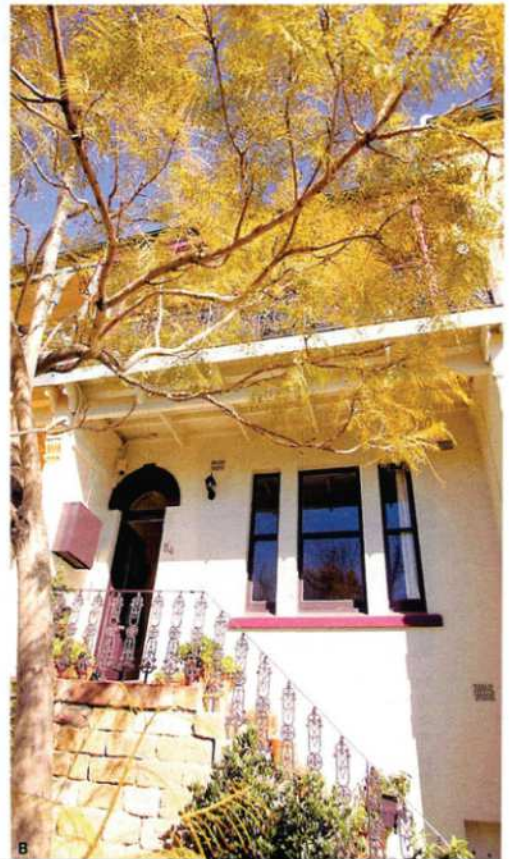
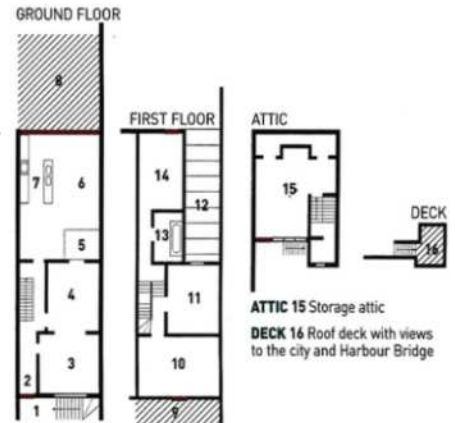


Never terrace apart

Robyn Willis speaks with a Sydney architect whose latest project took him back to his roots – literally. Photos **Bob Barker**.





GROUND FLOOR 1 Porch 2 Entry 3 Dining room
4 Living room 5 Pond 6 Family room 7 Kitchen 8 Garden
FIRST FLOOR 9 Balcony 10 Bedroom one 11 Bedroom two
12 Glass roof 13 Bathroom 14 Bedroom three



RENOVATE

For most architects, their relationships with the houses they build or renovate and the people who live in them are short-lived. If everything goes well, the architect or builder might be invited over for dinner but that's about it. But when architect Oliver Steele took on a project in picturesque Birchgrove, he knew his connection to this house would be more enduring.

The terrace house in Birchgrove in Sydney's inner west is in the street where Oliver grew up and where his family has lived since the 1970s.

So when he was asked to convert the damp and dark three-bedroom home into a light-filled, four-bedroom house for a family of four, he decided on a consultative approach.

Part of a row of heritage terraces (which were once "cheap boarding houses", says Oliver's dad, Jeremy), the house is overlooked on all sides by equally tight blocks. Keeping everyone happy was a natural part of the process. "It is a really friendly community here," says Oliver.

Though Leichhardt Council isn't known for its quick approval process, Oliver says it could see no real reason to delay the development application once he submitted it.

"Council wasn't too bad at all," he says. "We had no objections from neighbours because I approached them before submitting to council. We showed them the plans and amended the roof-deck designs beforehand."

As it turned out, however, ensuring the neighbours were happy was a relatively small issue for this project.

"The house is bounded on all sides," says Oliver. "There is a two-storey brick wall to the north so solar access, which is one of the things we strive to achieve, is not possible here. It was potentially going to be a claustrophobic, closed-in, dark, awkward addition."

To add to their woes, the original house had a nasty kitchen and laundry downstairs, with a bedroom above it that suffered from mould because of a leaky bathroom.

The challenge for Oliver was to create a large living and dining space at the rear of the house without losing the modest but light-filled living rooms at the front.

"What often happens is you have a perfectly decent living area, and by making another →26

A Structural "ribs" support a row of windows across the roof above the dining room table **B** Front of the Birchgrove house **C** Architect Oliver Steele **D** The slick new kitchen features plenty of storage **E** The view from on high of the windows above the dining room table **F** The hideaway deck on the rooftop **G** An outdoor pond between the living room and family room offers an ideal area for relaxing

GET THE LOOK

MATCH POINT

Maintaining the original features in an old house is one thing, but matching new work can prove impossible. Budget Stairs matched the new staircase in the Birchgrove house, including the balusters and fretwork, using laser-cut technology. By programming the design into a computer, it can match any existing timber staircase with accuracy. It also has a wide range of contemporary stair styles to choose from.

■ **More information** Budget Stairs
9774 2066 or www.budgetstairs.com.au



Have you renovated a home? Tell us about it at home@dailytelegraph.com.au

A WINNING TILE

The vitrified or porcelain-tiled floor in the Birchgrove house reflects light back into the space and provides the ideal surface for underfloor heating. And the larger the tile, the less grout to show family wear and tear. Amber stocks a range of large tiles in a variety of colours to suit your decor.

The Travertine range is made from natural stone, with prices starting from \$95 per sq m for square tiles 406mm wide.

■ **More information** www.ambertiles.com.au



DOOR TO DOOR

Bi-fold doors have become the entrance of choice for homeowners for good reason. Advances in technology have made these doors easier to use, able to withstand exterior weather conditions and secure. Stegbar has a range of bi-fold styles for doors and windows in cedar, aluminium or a combination of both. Prices between timber and aluminium have become comparable in recent years, though aluminium is still the most popular choice.

■ **More information** www.stegbar.com.au



you block off the light and lose it in the first living space," he says. With the add-ons demolished, Oliver looked at ways of capturing and reflecting light into the rear living space.

He decided on a row of windows across part of the roof, supported by structural "ribs" to bring in the light. "Because the light spills right down (into the room), these ribs give the impression of lifting above us rather than bearing down on us," he says.

Up for a challenge

Though the kitchen and dining space offers extensive storage, white cupboards and floors give it a light, streamlined effect.

Kickboards have been heavily recessed, says Oliver, to give the impression the island bench "floats" in the room. However, this also meant the integrated dishwasher at one end of the island needed steel supports to prevent sagging.

An old spa was removed from the otherwise unloved backyard, and bi-fold doors were installed to make the transition from indoors to outdoors seamless.

"When we use bi-folds we always make sure there is an odd number of doors because that way you can operate it as a normal (single) door," says Oliver. "If there is an even number, you have to open top and bottom."

The exposed rock at the rear of the property now makes an appealing backdrop for a small tropical garden and sculpture made by one of the owners. But the rock also proved to be something of a headache, with a natural shelf running under almost the entire length of the house. The rock was partially excavated to provide subfloor access and ventilation, with the next-door neighbours contributing to the cost.

"They had installed an internal waterproofing membrane, which cost them \$5000, but we improved on that by putting in a ventilation space," says Oliver.

To say it proved a challenge for the builder, Sam Kapoulas of Impact Design & Construct, is something of an understatement.

Oliver says: "The first thing any good builder asks is, 'What is the access like? Is there a rear lane or side access?' The builders took out the front window and set up a ramp."

With all the new work done, attention turned to the all-important heritage considerations.

■ Bi-fold doors make for an easy transition from indoors to outdoors | The new timber staircase was matched to the existing kauri timber stairs



A new timber staircase built to match the existing kauri timber stairs was installed to give access to the new bedrooms, the attic and deck beyond. "The fretwork (on the side of the stairs) was matched using laser-cut technology through Budget Stairs," says Oliver.

The new stairs made room for a second bathroom on the mezzanine level, while storage space was tucked in underneath.

Getting the heritage details right was an important consideration for council.

Louvred windows face the back of the house, letting hot air escape and drawing cool air in from the small deck in summer.

A little hideaway, the deck is the perfect spot to enjoy the best Sydney has to offer, with views across the harbour to the bridge as well as some of the best-looking rooftops in the area.

The transformation from ugly duckling to Sydney swan has been little short of astounding. And neighbourly relations couldn't be better. ■

MORE INFORMATION

■ **Steele Associates** 9319 0333;
www.steeleassociates.com.au

■ **Impact Design & Construct** P/L 0412 448 475