

Saturday
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home

LET THERE BE LIGHT

Giving dark
rooms a bright lift

IN GOOD TASTE

Peter Everett's
inner-city terrace

Steep impact

How one architect's project
turned into a cliffhanger

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Steep and meaningful



An old house on a difficult site proved a challenge for a novice architect, writes **Erica Watson**. Photos **Bob Barker**.



RENOVATE

Wind chimes sound as the breeze flows gently through the two-storey house perched on a leafy block in Thornleigh in Sydney's northwest. The "tree-house" is the brainchild of architect Oliver Steele, who took on the difficult project as one of his first jobs.

"It was basically my life for a whole year," Oliver says. "I was so conscious about getting it right, I was extremely passionate about this job."

The task was by no means easy, with site difficulties and budgetary constraints causing major dramas for all involved.

"I remember when Neil [the homeowner] said to me, 'Are you sure you can do it?'"

"I remember thinking to myself, 'Well, I don't know,'" says Oliver. "It was one of my first jobs and definitely the most difficult."

But this apprehension was superseded by his determination to transform a dark, old house in a bush setting, into an entertainer's utopia.

Jack of all trades

While most architects pass the plans to a builder, Oliver stayed on deck, and took on the role of builder as well as designer.

"I was here with a tool belt, nailing down the floorboards," Oliver says. He also installed windows, poured concrete and worked on just about every detail of the home.





"I have learnt a lot about architecture from building and building from architecture."

Taking on the role with gusto, Oliver's challenge was to transform the run-of-the-mill, early 1980s brick-veneer project home into a space where the family could enjoy the company of friends while taking advantage of their large bush block.

"I wanted to create a quiet and serene place to enjoy the beautiful surroundings as well as a lively place for entertaining," says Oliver.

The front section of the original house was retained, while the back was opened out to increase the living area. Another level was created underneath the house for the family to use as a multipurpose games room.

Apart from architectural concerns, the job

also needed to be completed within a stringent budget of \$120,000.

"The best value that they would get was to retain the front of the home and put the money into the large two-storey living area," says Oliver.

"They had adequate accommodation areas, but no living space."

So the front section of the house remained, while the living areas were extended to the back of the house by about 10m – 6m internally, plus a 4m-wide balcony – increasing the size of the house by 85sq m.

Financial constraints aside, the task at hand seemed relatively easy, until that is, the sloping bush block that cut away from the original house site, was factored into the equation.

A geotechnical engineer was brought in to assess the ground conditions to make sure the project could get off the ground.

"The first thing we had to do was to cut away the driveway and take core samples to make sure we could build on the site," says Oliver. After getting the all-clear, 4m-high piers were drilled into the bedrock to support the steel columns of the extension. A drilling rig was brought on to the site to do the job. Oliver recalls the day the rig was almost sent hurtling down the block, while he was preparing the ground for the last pier.

A-columns also had to be used to provide the structural support needed for the extension of the house.

Natural choice

Rather than work against the natural setting surrounding the house, Oliver wanted the design to be consistent with the sloping landscape. So he introduced a roof with a →26



A The exterior of the Thornleigh 'tree house'
B The clerestory in the roof extension **C** Sliding glass doors allow plenty of light into the interior
D Architect Oliver Steele **E** The deck is ideal for entertaining **F** The ceiling is 6m at its highest point
G There is lots of space for the extended family

GET THE LOOK



SPINNING AROUND

If you have high ceilings, it is a good idea to install ceiling fans to keep the air circulating. Beacon Lighting has a number of fantastic fans in store, ranging from traditional to contemporary styles, to suit your interior.

■ **More information**
beaconlighting.com.au

OUTDOORS IN

Make the most of your outdoor entertaining area by investing in some quality furnishings. A large table setting will get lots of use for parties and lazy Sunday brunches.

■ **More information** Outdoor Furniture Specialists, outdoorfurnspec.com.au



POTS TO DO

Embracing their bush surrounds, the owners of this Thornleigh house added life to their outdoor entertaining areas by introducing potted plants. Herbs, succulents and ferns are among the number of plants that thrive in pots and make great outdoor decorations. IKEA has a wide range of plant pots ranging from terracotta to galvanised steel.

■ **More information**
ikea.com.au



“They wanted something that would stand out and speak about their lifestyle”

stepped plane, which was used to tie the house into the surrounds of its bush location.

“The pitch of the upper roof is the same as the original house, to tie the new and the old together in terms of space and proportion,” says Oliver. He adds that spatially, the sloping roof line also gives contrast and definition to the separate living space.

“We built up with a steel and timber frame cutting into the old roof,” says Oliver. At the highest point, the ceiling reaches 6m, and the extension of the original roof line features a clerestory, or series of windows.

“From the street, you get an indication all is not what one would expect, then as you walk in the ceiling lifts above you,” he says.

Because of the height, motorised louvres were added to the heat-resistant glass panels.

“Previously there was no light coming in,” says Oliver. The large bank of windows now allows much more light to enter the house from the east, and the afternoon sun streams through the house from the west-facing entertaining area and balcony.

“Being in a valley, it gets very cold so the windows introduce heat and warmth. In summer it acts as ventilation,” explains Oliver.

Because of the west-facing orientation of the upstairs entertaining platform, shade devices are used to combat the summer heat.

In winter, removing the devices enables the afternoon sun to penetrate the house, allowing for natural heating.

The family had lived in the house for the best part of a decade before deciding on additions. Their intimate knowledge of the site gave them a great head start on getting the most from their renovation in terms of orientation.

“Because they had been living here for so long, they knew where the breezes and the best light comes from,” says Oliver.

“I designed it to fit in with the local environment and I tapped into that through the family’s knowledge of the site.”

The multipurpose games room on the lower level carries the theme of a graduated ceiling, in the same vein as the upstairs addition.

Storage was an important consideration and Oliver added flush-finished recessed cupboards for items to be neatly stacked away.

TIPS

- ✓ If building on a difficult site get a few quotes to avoid any nasty surprises.
- ✓ Work in harmony with the natural environment surrounding your house.



Blue tones pick up colours from the bush surrounding the house

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Financial constraints meant the family chose to keep the front of the home in the original face brick and used Colorbond for the extensions.

The blue tones of the Colorbond have been highlighted with cream detailing, and pick up the shades of the bush surrounds. Timber balustrades were used to close in the entertaining area and the balcony from the games room below.

“They wanted something that would stand out and speak about their lifestyle and personality and break free from the norm,” says Oliver.

Sliding doors were added to the side of the house, to give access to a small garden.

On the south side of the house, Oliver used styrofoam cladding, which acts as insulation, between the brick and Colorbond.

“I played a lot with the elevation – it is a good way of anchoring it back to the traditional house. Colorbond acts as an insulator and has a low-maintenance finish,” says Oliver.

Polished floorboards were used throughout the new rooms.

“Cypress pine is one of the cheaper types of floorboard timbers, but it is fast growing and naturally termite-resistant,” says Oliver.

“It has a very strong pine sap which termites don’t like the taste of.”

Ironically, the family waited until the children had left the nest before doubling the size of the house. But thanks to Oliver’s design, it is now a great space for the extended family and grandchildren to gather. ■

MORE INFORMATION

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