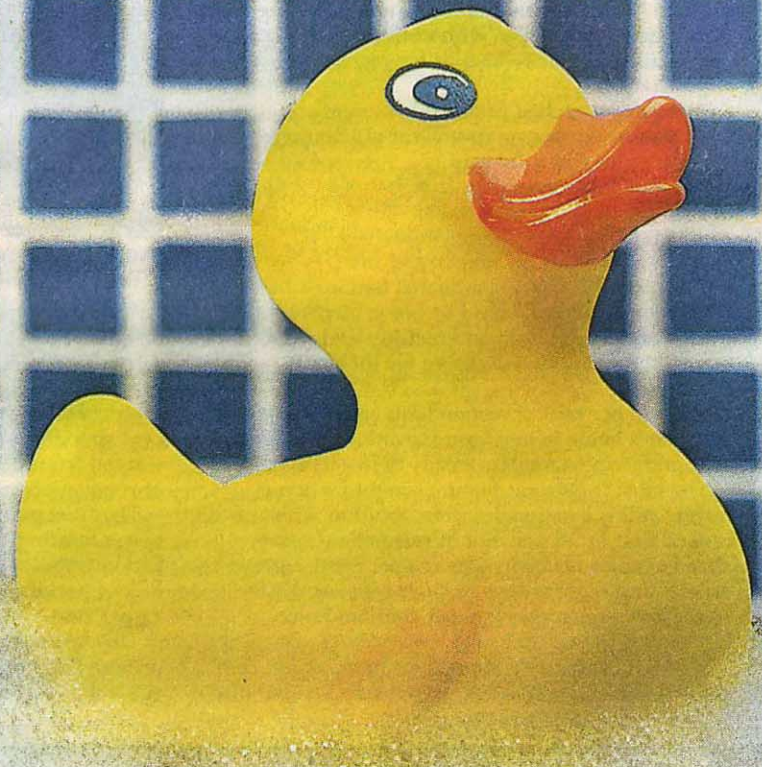


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Let the sun shine

*With competition for tradesmen on an Olympic scale and a tough council, this architect overcame the odds to successfully subdivide a block, writes **Juan-Carlo Tomas**.*

FIGHTING a war on two fronts is tough work. Faced with a tight site and hesitant council on this Balmain development, architect Steve Kennedy also had to battle with builders and tradesmen gone fishin' during the Olympics.

But if there's nothing an architect likes more than a challenge, it's a challenge with an open brief.

The owner bought the original droopy weatherboard house in 1996, as it was close to

Balmain village and on a quiet side street with good elevation.

For a location like this, though, there had to be a trade-off. The site was surrounded: bordered on the left by a standard two-storey Victorian terrace, on the right by a single-storey weatherboard semi, and behind by a heritage-listed timber-and-brick cottage. The front opened out to an awkward bend in the road.

The brief was to subdivide the site into two without losing light from the semi and in keeping with the character of neighbouring buildings. Beyond this the owner left him to do what he liked.

The result is two houses on a total of 281 square metres. The design is crisp and unobtrusive, modern without being too out of sync with the rest of the street, and there is abundant natural light inside, as well as generous living and courtyard spaces.

"We hadn't set out to model this on either of the adjoining buildings, but rather to create a new model that speaks to both and integrates between them," Kennedy says.

So, on the streetfront, both houses were treated as one, befitting a street of wide, single structures. "We're building a large mass, but the balconies reduce its volume at the street. After that, we've gone for a simple box with long horizontals," he says.

"This ended up placing five bedrooms and two living areas on the site, without taking away any sun from the neighbours. We designed from that position."

But getting council approval wasn't as simple. "We ran into a specific hurdle with the approvals and that was the view that we should be doing something which looked more like a Victorian terrace.

"But the problem with a lot of buildings which are designed to look like something else is that they can never do that," he adds, recalling a number of attempts he has seen around town that, he says, come across as more try-hard than true-to-form.

Ready for a fight, the owner was prepared to take the issue to the Land and Environment Court, but council agreed to reconsider their plans.

"What was interesting was that there was a long process of negotiation. We went back to the council and then had the mayor and other councillors come to the site," Kennedy says.

"At the council meeting, the plans were passed unanimously without discussion. In the end, the issue was that we were building a non-traditional building."

1. The hallway leads down to the bathroom, kitchen and living areas. A sliding door allows the home office at the front to be sealed off from the rest of the house. Wall lights from The Light Shop, Drummoyne, 9819 6999.

2. The bathroom is designed to maximise reflected light. Fittings from Just Bathroomware, Drummoyne, 9719 3000; vanity by Regency Wardrobes, Rozelle, 9555 5956; mosaic feature tiles from Tiles and More, Croydon, 9745 6988.

Photos: Elspeth Collier

One factor working in their favour was Kennedy's integration of environmental principles modelled on the local green plan.

Both houses are fully insulated, can be opened for ventilation, minimise dead space and can be closed off for heating efficiency. Even rainwater is recycled for the garden.

"We kept trees on the site and achieved large courtyard areas and there are no internalised bathrooms or anything. There's excellent cross ventilation and good light to all the bedrooms," he says.

Lighting was also an important consideration in the plan, he adds.

"In urban infill work you can't choose your orientation, so you have to set about to find ways to maximise light in the dwelling.

"So we introduced two devices: one is the skylight, which breaks the volume and casts light into the living room, while the lightwell in the centre of the site means the kitchen opens out to it, so you're getting windows at either end of the living space. "It makes the room more comfortable to be in."

As he sits in the sun on the courtyard, he says this job presented him with a unique opportunity to design a functional, humane space within a crowded environment.

"You forget the pain of the process if the end result is good. I'd do it again."

THE AIM
To construct two houses in the most effective configuration for an awkward site with good internal amenities.

HOW LONG DID IT TAKE?
The site was bought in October 1996; building started in December 1999 and took 16 months.

WHAT THE OWNERS WOULD DO DIFFERENTLY
Not underestimate the council approval process, and not build during an Olympic Games.

INSIDER TIPS
Hire a local architect with whom you are in tune, and who knows local planning regulations with contacts in the council to help ease development applications.

ARCHITECTS
Kennedy Associates,
9564 6548.





3. The tiled floor of the back courtyard reflects light inside; a brick dividing wall preserves privacy. The rainwater tank in the corner is by City Rainwater Tanks, St Marys, 9623 2414. Tiles from Amber, Five Dock, 9716 6214; landscaping by Ian Donaldson, Balmain, 0412 977 833.

4. When opened out, the living room integrates with the courtyard making it a 'garden room'. All furniture, artworks and removable fixtures are rented from Leveson's Hired Interiors, Summer Hill, 9571 9766.

5. From the outside, the houses meld.

6. A direct line of sight passes through the house. Pendant lights from the Light Shop; kitchen counter and cupboards by Groedel Kitchens, Sefton, 9645 3000; Blanco appliances from International Appliance Specialists, Newcastle, (02) 4926 3636.



"You forget the pain of the process if the end result is good. I'd do it again."

Steve Kennedy, architect