

Designing the new TERRACE for our time?

A long, narrow site occupied by a single-storey weatherboard cottage in an inner-city suburb doesn't immediately suggest the potential for three new houses, but architect Nikki South of Southmarc envisaged exactly that when she took on the design for 19 Beaconsfield Street.

The plots either side had already been re-developed when South commenced her project. To the east, six two-bedroom townhouses are crammed along the length of the block, using the adjacent street frontage for access, while on the western side, two new terraces occupy a similar sized block (approximately 10 wide x 28 metres deep). The council and neighbours expected South to follow suit and produce two new dwellings in place of the single storey weatherboard cottage. But she rotated her plan 90°, inserted a pedestrian walkway on the eastern boundary and designed three courtyard homes that offer their occupants plenty of amenity without impinging on the neighbours.

Each of the new homes boasts identical lay-outs, although No.1 boasts a large picture window in the living room that overlooks the street. It also has a

fourth bedroom on the lower ground floor, taking advantage of the development's elevation above street level.

The L-shaped plan means that, on the ground floor, the combined kitchen and living space, dining room and third bedroom all open to an internal courtyard. An abundance of natural light from the north-facing courtyards and double-height living areas helps to accentuate the sense of space in what is essentially a diminutive footprint.

The living areas are separated from the entry and hall by two floor-to-ceiling joinery pods – one contains kitchen cabinetry, the other linen and storage cupboards – that provide privacy from the access way. Internal stairs from the basement carpark provide direct access to each home.

The main staircases are bathed in natural light thanks to large skylights in the roof, which are sawtooth shaped in units two and three. These have the dual purpose of allowing northern light to penetrate dwellings to the south and east, and reflecting the area's semi-industrial character. The rear two units also have sloping roofs above the living room voids to maximise sunlight penetration into neighbouring courtyards.

Upstairs, two bedrooms overlook the courtyard and are shielded from western sun by external Vental blinds, while the ensuite and main bathroom are naturally lit by generous skylights.

In contrast to traditional terraces, which are characterised by boxy rooms connected by dingy hallways overlooking cold and damp external alleys, South's Beaconsfield Street design uses courtyards and roofscape cutaways to great effect, bringing light and air into each of the houses and adjoining properties. The clever approach garnered an Architecture Award for Residential

Architecture – Multiple Housing from the RAIA NSW Chapter in 2008.

The jury citation said: "This is an extremely successful example of infill housing built on a reasonably tight budget in a semi-industrial area of the city... Each of the townhouses enjoys light, privacy and usable outdoor space."

Despite that accolade and South's considered approach, her proposal ran into some initial hurdles. Although the development complied with the now-defunct South Sydney Council planning guidelines, it was rejected by councillors who responded to opposition from the neighbours. A successful appeal at the Land and Environment Court enabled the project to proceed, setting a new precedent for medium-density living.

"We're now working with another client, who has a site nearby with three cottages on it, and he wants to build courtyard houses there," South says. "It's great to be able to bring planners to this project to demonstrate that this type of solution can really work."

South's experience in the re-invigoration of this particular neighbourhood was bolstered by her Isar apartment project across the street. Taking its cues from the trend in Europe towards green roofs and the 'Greening Sydney' movement inspired by former NSW Government Architect, Chris Johnson, the four-storey L-shaped plan is sited around an internal courtyard, and many of the one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments boast outdoor space, either at ground level or on the upper floors.



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LOCATION SYDNEY | AUS



TOP LEFT Beaconsfield Street pedestrian walkway entry TOP CENTRE Natural light is brought in with skylights TOP RIGHT An upstairs deck connects interior and exterior BOTTOM LEFT The entry to the building is from the side walkway BOTTOM CENTRE Double height living areas give a sense of space BOTTOM RIGHT Bathrooms are light and airy



TOP Isar's L-shaped building is shaped around an external courtyard
BOTTOM From the street, Isar mimics the terrace houses in the vicinity

At ground level and facing Beaconsfield Lane, a series of two-storey, two-bedroom 'terraces', with front and rear external courtyards, mimics the housing stock of the vicinity. On the second and third floors, three-bedroom terrace-style apartments boast grassy courtyards with potted trees, which form an olive grove in the sky when viewed from the street. The apartments re-purpose the terrace typology to provide contemporary infill accommodation which makes the most of existing infrastructure and services, and offers a short commute to Sydney's CBD, Eastern beaches and local amenities.

Isar references the work of German architects known for their use of bold external hues. "The architecture and the use of colour and various materials were inspired by Berlin-based architects Sauerbruch Hutton who use a lot

of colour, and there's humour in it," South says. "There's a meaning behind the colours – one-bedroom apartments are red and were aimed at singles, while two-bedroom terraces are in a more restrained grey, and the three-bedroom garden apartments are marked with green and are more likely to be occupied by settled families who are more environmentally aware."

As Isar's architect and developer, South hoped to "change the world" with this project, but learned first-hand how hard it can be to combine those roles. "It's much harder than any architect would believe," she says. "We picked a bad time because the market dropped, so when we went to tender we had to decrease the cost of the building by 10% by rationalising structure and finishes, which was very hard. Also, it was a relatively expensive building because it has

large façades, plenty of windows and variegated cladding materials."

Despite the market downturn, most of the units were sold either off-the-plan or during construction. "The buyers responded to the design and the building set a new sales record for price-per-metre-square in Alexandria, even during the worst residential property downturn in recent history," South says. "That just proves that good design implemented in a practical way works and sells."

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