

# Emotional Rescue

Flying in the face of cold-hearted modernism, a Sydney terrace transformed by the human touch.



PHOTOGRAPHY: SIMON KENY



HOUSE OF THE YEAR AWARD



*Opposite: storage has been shoe-horned into every conceivable space. Laminex Craftwood cupboards and the wall oven have been tucked beneath a staircase which was built in two halves with alternating steps – a Japanese tradition. The curved wall in the living room, below, is finished in hoop pine ply, while an Indian cloth from Joan Bowers Interiors, Surry Hills, NSW, covers the banquette. Bagged concrete walls display contemporary artworks.*







**P**eter Lonergan and Julie Cracknell's renovations have aroused curiosity in Sydney. Long before they moved in, they welcomed to their site a constant stream of Saturday visitors: architects, designers and critics, all interested in assessing the much talked-about terrace house with the acid-yellow windows.

Some of the architects went away shaking their heads. For those who embrace the modernist philosophy fostered by Mies and Le Corbusier, this scheme is too complex, too fashion-conscious, too cluttered with detail – and even worse – too decorative.

There is no more damning code word in the vocabulary of 20th century architecture than 'decorative'.

Why is decoration despised? Because it fuzzes structure and detracts (supposedly) from the single-minded, heroic vision of the architect. But Peter Lonergan and Julie Cracknell belong to a new breed of architecture-trained designers who don't conform to the modernist hard-line. They support a less cold and brutal approach, sensitive to human emotion in incorporating the neglected traditions of hand craftsmanship, intricate detail and yes – decoration.

In the context of current Australian architectural discussion, their house is a brave and highly idiosyncratic statement.

Peter and Julie found the property five years ago. It was a two-storey, bald-faced

corner terrace house opposite a small park in a less than salubrious inner-city suburb. Although an extended family had been living there for 20 years, internal space was so cramped that "you could stand in the shower and wash up".

When they took over, the house had lost almost all of its Victorian features. "It had no redeeming architectural qualities at all," claims Peter. "The staircase was made from old packing crates and a Santell's drink sign. The floorboards had rotted and were resting on dirt. The walls were so damp you could hardly breathe."

It had never been an impressive residence. Built in 1845 for a family of modest means, it conjured images for Peter of Victorian tyranny of the lower classes. "This is what terrace houses have always represented to me – repressive boxes to keep workers in their place," he says. "We're workers too – but in the 20th century, we shouldn't be living in dark rooms with high skirting boards and elaborate ceiling roses."

For 18 months before construction of the renovations began, Julie and Peter schemed obsessively to adapt the terrace to their late 20th century, urbane style of living. Two friends – architecture lecturer Michael Tawa and design lecturer Tim Laurence – often participated in those early planning sessions. Another friend, interior designer Iain Halliday, later advised on finishes.



*Preceding pages: kitchen cupboards faced with a floral laminate from Abet Pty Ltd, North Sydney, NSW, and chairs designed by Arne Jacobsen hark back to the 1950s. This page: Philippine lattice screens of wood and shell slide away to reveal the bathroom, top left. Sauna slatting has been used as flooring, opposite, and the claw-foot bath is finished with gold leaf. Window louvres are from Architectural Timber Products, Alexandria, NSW.*





Their first scheme was refused by the council; it was said to occupy too much of the site. Their eccentric dream of an outside bathroom was also considered unacceptable. After jettisoning a bedroom and tweaking tighter spaces on the floor plan, a revised proposal was finally approved. The outside bathroom became a laundry with (legal) shower and lavatory.

It is obvious, even from the street, that this is no ordinary house. The dilapidated front facade is punctured with windows framed in yellow. The front door has been replaced by a curious insert, also acid yellow, which houses the mailbox, milk crate and electricity meter. The view above a high wall along the side boundary is a collage of louveres, mosaic-tiled walls and chic copper rainheads and downpipes. A jaunty Rajasthani patchwork canopy flutters above a sundeck on the laundry roof. In a neighbourhood characterised by drab walls and graffiti daubs, the brilliant colours are both arresting and incongruous.

The interior, comments one architect who has been there, is "a collection of thoughtful moments". "It's about making places, not specifically architecture," declares a critic.

The plan is simple and logical – downstairs living, dining and kitchen; upstairs bedroom, bathroom, sun-den and balcony. But the execution is remarkably

elaborate – both in construction detail and choice of materials.

The house has been lovingly rebuilt by a designer/cabinet-maker, Craig Watson, assisted by Ross Turnbull. Every square centimetre has been meticulously conceived and crafted. (To inspire him to think about how to build the staircase, Watson drove around for months with a cardboard model of it on his dashboard).

Furniture is a selection of compatible classics by the best 20th century designers: Mies, Arne Jacobsen, Eero Saarinen, Isamu Noguchi. Peter and Julie also have some lucky junk-shop finds: porcelain teacups from the 1950s, a print of Le Corbusier's *Open Hand* sketches and other well-chosen artworks and remarkable handmade textiles.

There is a faint sense of femininity in this house, although it certainly is not expressed with delicate broderie curtains and cuddly bears on the bed. Julie and Peter believe human concerns were "fundamental" to the original philosophy of modernism, but claim that architects have since fostered "the adoration of the mechanical process instead of being genuinely interested in the soft use of the building".

This house challenges that perception. Because they are trained in architecture, the designers can expect to be shot down, in certain circles, for treason. □

DAVINA JACKSON

*In an inner-city Sydney suburb characterised by drab walls and graffiti, a Rajasthani patchwork canopy covering the sundeck, opposite, provides a welcome splash of colour. The exterior, this page, is a collage of bright yellow louveres, blue and green mosaic-tiled walls and copper rainheads and downpipes. Carved wooden angels from Joan Bowers Interiors, Surry Hills, NSW, peering from beneath the eaves, are unusual points of interest.*

