

Different angles

An “idea of wonder” was behind the architectural plan that transformed an old hall into a contemporary home full of hills and dales, nooks, crannies and secret staircases

Story **Robert Bevan** Photography **Brett Boardman**

From the outside, the Masonic Hall in Sydney's inner west is an exercise in snooty classicism, its columned porch and front door staring imperiously down a flight of steps. Inside, the turn-of-the-last century hall has been transformed into one of the most intriguing new homes in Australia. Planning permission had been granted to turn the hall into six apartments but instead an adventurous couple has created a single home of a massive 800sqm.

It must have cost a mint. The painting bill alone was \$100,000. What you get for your money, however, is an internal topography of hills and dales, nooks and crannies created from angled walls, cupboards and “secret” staircases. “The concept was an interior landscape, a poetic overlay to the practical,” explains architect Gerard Reinmuth of Terroir.

Behind the front door, the home is initially conventional with little change from its former use; a small office and a broad iron-railinged staircase lead to what was a lower-floor theatre – complete with proscenium arch. Beyond the entrance hall, though, is a magical terrain.

The volume of the upper floor hall has been preserved pretty much intact. Its decorative ceilings are moulded with masonic devices such as set squares that would have

Dan (*Da Vinci Code*) Brown beside himself with excitement over the plaster symbolism. Within this space, a wooden landscape has been created.

Downstairs, the former auditorium has been gutted and its timber used to create the upper floor interior. “It is like the house has eaten itself,” says Reinmuth of the cannibalisation process. At this lower level, windows and the proscenium arch have been knocked out and the stage and floor removed, so there is no clear division between the interior and the garden outside. The theatre has become a giant concrete cabana for the couple, their dog and their cats to roam in. Grooved slots filled with pebbles are incised into the floor like contour lines. There is a titanic 20m-long concrete tank of a swimming pool as well as showers. A guest bedroom built out of sheets of riveted steel looks as if a cargo ship has crashed into a quay in Sydney Harbour and continued to grind its way a kilometre or so inland to end up here. It is altogether a rugged prospect.

Back upstairs, the topography is more gentle – a wooded, rolling vista. First you reach a timber-clad drum containing a staircase up to another mezzanine; angular wooden blades form bookshelves in a music room. In the main hall beyond, the existing timber floor had a low-raised platform around its edge (something to do with masonic ceremony? Perhaps the mutterings of grand poobahs can still be heard here). Now, with new



A staircase to the mezzanine encircles a timber-clad drum.



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- 01 A "music room" that leads on to the main hall.
- 02 The garden will be landscaped to include a court for petanque and a copse of fruit trees.
- 03 The dining area; the kitchen on the elevated platform that surrounds the hall is seen at the rear.
- 04 Concrete and steel dominate the more "rugged" downstairs, which houses a pool and guest room.
- 05 A bedroom on the mezzanine.



Giant plaster swags and corbels are at head height, which lend a giddy quality

insertions such as a lovely kitchen that meanders down one side, the platform leads you on a gentle journey to the corners of the huge room, each with its own character.

When WISH visited, a coachload of architects was having a sticky beak around the place and still it wasn't crowded, although somehow it is surprisingly cosy for such a vast space. This is achieved in part by creating small room sets within the overall space in the tradition of a New York loft (before that concept was bastardised into not much more than raw brick walls and steel appliances).

The mid-century Scandinavian furniture adds a softening effect. The owners had a few pieces, including a corner bar, and they set up a website for the architects to see the furnishings they bought during construction. Some of those pieces have a sense of fun bordering on the kitsch – a good humour pervades the project. At night, a pool of light from wooden standard lamps turns the sofa area into a room within a room.

A Nordic sensibility is present throughout the design – not just in the furniture choices – so perhaps it is no surprise that Reinmuth teaches in Copenhagen for part of the year. In his absence, the project was entrusted to the capable hands of architect Tamara Donnellan.

For those in the know, there are architectural references aplenty. Handrails and angles recall the great Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, who developed a softer lined modernism that drew on the natural world. Homage is paid to northern Italian architect Carlo Scarpa, renowned for his complex layering of new with old that allows the changing history of a building to speak down the years. Other influences are South American concrete architecture, Soviet-era design brutalism, Spaniard Enric Miralles and American Steven Holl (the only one in this list of inspirational architects still living).

The Scarpa-Aalto approach doesn't need logic to justify it. It allows for small delights such as a tight concave angle near the kitchen sink where the bench top narrows to just 30cm deep by a window so you can lean down into the canopy of next door's magnolia tree. It couldn't be more different from your usual high-end Australian kitchen fit-out stiff with white Corian benches. The idea in this home is that you live with furniture – in this case a kitchen like a giant Danish credenza – rather than being surrounded by equipment. The architects would have hidden the oven doors as well if they could.

More angles are introduced in the long, horizontal windows that wrap around the external corners of the hall. They introduce a determinedly contemporary note to the otherwise traditional vertical proportions and were difficult to get approved by council. They play an important role in breaking down the formality of a meeting hall to something more domestic. One window has an angle that projects to form a window seat. A hairy cushion on the seat is evidence that this is the perfect sunny spot for one of the household cats.

In the mezzanine bedrooms, you can just about touch the original, grandly moulded ceilings and the giant plaster swags and corbels are at head height, which can make for a giddy quality, like Alice down the rabbit hole. "We are really into the idea of 'wonder'," says Reinmuth. "You walk through the front door and open up your senses – your own psychological spaces."

To have created a home out of a meeting hall of this scale without it seeming pretentious is no mean feat. It seems a contradiction but using the wide-open concept of landscape has also delivered intimate areas. "It is the sort of stuff architects should get paid to do," says Reinmuth. "The owners understood that ideas were important. They were more like patrons. It was a great process." The only site still to get the landscape treatment is the sloping garden. This will come: a court for petanque, a knoll, a copse of fruit trees.

The couple originally contacted Terroir to build them a holiday home in Tasmania. While that project has yet to bear fruit, there is already poetry in these rolling inner-Sydney hills. 

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