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Dream Home

Right out of the box

In one Earlwood home, dynamic design is simplicity itself, writes **Judy Barouch**.



Wide-open spaces ... (clockwise from left) lack of clutter gives the downstairs area a calm feel; the cubic facade; the living room extends towards the kitchen. Photos: Roger D'Souza

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There wouldn't be too many families with three children and an exuberant labrador who could live in a minimalist house complete with white walls and surfaces. However, Gayle and Darren Macbeth with Montana, 13, Callan, 10, and Darci, 8, do so with serenity in their new Earlwood house, built to replace a failing 1920s cottage.

"A lot of people are scared of a minimalist environment and offer suggestions about what we could do with our bare walls," Gayle says of their home. "But close friends walk in and comment, 'Gosh, this is so you and Darren.' It works for us and we live better without the chaos of clutter."

When they first approached architect Neil Mackenzie, the couple requested "a big white box". "Neil used this as a starting point but modified our ideas so that the house would be sympathetic to its neighbours," Darren says.

Mackenzie adds that the resultant cubic design is simple yet dynamic. "With its abstract elements, the house sits comfortably - albeit slightly defiantly - in its suburban streetscape," he says.

The front elevation features fibre-cement panels treated to a light, warm-grey Murobond cement paint. This contrasts with the dramatic, darker roof of charcoal-



stained, lightweight plywood cladding. "The roof wraps down and brackets the living spaces, holding and cantilevering them above the cedar-clad base," the architect says.

The different exterior surfaces are temptingly tactile. Walking to the back of the house, Darren runs his hands over the plywood walls. "The feel is grainy and sand-like," he says before moving to the building's southern side, where an expanse of grooved plywood wall is, unexpectedly, rough-sawn rather than smooth finished.

Being close to its neighbours, the house has been designed to look inward in order to enclose its private spaces. With a sunken garage below, the open-plan kitchen and living-dining areas on the ground floor directly access a loggia, garden and pool

path leading to front door] and used the old house's sandstone base in landscaping.

GREEN POINTS

- ▶ Passive solar design with both cross and stack ventilation as the home's only cooling system.
- ▶ Well insulated, lightweight construction.
- ▶ Concrete floor for thermal mass.
- ▶ 4400-litre water tank linked to water closets/laundry and for garden/pool use.
- ▶ ModWood (recycled wood and plastic timber-look product) used as retaining walls.
- ▶ Solely native garden.

ARCHITECT

Neil Mackenzie and Timmy Lum, Mackenzie Pronk Architects, (02) 9559 4595.

BUILDER

Sydney Building Corporation, (02) 9560 0809

AIM

A contemporary, open plan, family home featuring strong cubic architecture.

TIME FRAME

Design and council: one year. Construction: one year.

FAVOURITE FEATURE

Gayle: The stunning kitchen, which works on every level. It's functional, is part of the entertaining space and is the connection for all visiting family and friends.

Darren: The outer skin of the house, which gives an amazing appearance and the different surfaces that are great to touch and feel.

INSIDER'S TIP

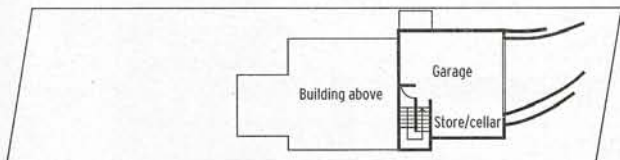
Think of ways to recycle material from a demolished house. We cut up an old concrete driveway to make pavers [seen on



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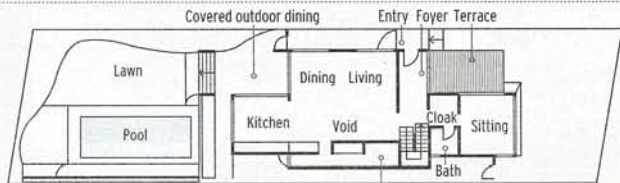


In step ... Gayle and Darren Macbeth with (from left) Callan, Montana and Darci in a favoured meeting spot on the blackbutt stairs; Gayle in the backyard with labrador Gina. Photos: Greg McBean

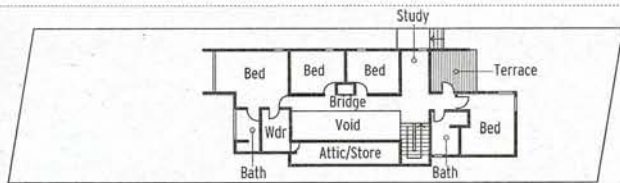


North

LOWER GROUND FLOOR



GROUND FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR

through glass sliders. Up the blackbutt stairs – a favourite impromptu family gathering spot – a walkway on the first level opens to four bedrooms, two bathrooms and a breakaway kids' music/study area next to the landing. From the western end of the passage is a sight line right through to the window in Montana's front bedroom and out across district views.

On the grey day Domain visited, the house was infused with light. A bank of highlight louvre windows – dubbed "the snorkel" by the couple – faces north and funnels light down into the ground floor living spaces while also providing ventilation. This elevation also has slot and highlight windows to ensure privacy while maximising northern light. The south has few windows while the eastern street frontage features a composition of smaller aluminium-framed windows.

"In the old house, we had to have lights on 24/7. Now we almost need sunnies on inside," Gayle quips. The old house did, however, provide inspiration for some of the new abode's features. "We often used to sit out on its front balcony so a replacement balcony at the front was important."

Darren adds that they were also mindful the house should be designed not only for now but also for their children's teenage years. "We didn't only want to have one single big living space, rather separate areas for the kids to retreat to," he says. "For instance, there's a room at the front of the ground floor that can be closed off with a translucent door to let light through but contain sound."

One of the secrets to the design's success is effective storage. "It has all been considered, nothing is by chance," Darren says, nominating the kitchen's working wall where

COSTS

▶ Preliminaries	\$85,000
▶ Demolition and excavation	\$38,000
▶ Plumbing and drainage	\$42,000
▶ Concrete	\$78,000
▶ Blockwork and rendering	\$34,000
▶ Structural steel	\$34,000
▶ Doors and windows	\$50,000
▶ Carpentry	\$132,000
▶ Joinery	\$25,000
▶ Roofing	\$22,000
▶ Electrical	\$30,000
▶ Plasterboard and insulation	\$55,000
▶ Waterproofing	\$12,000
▶ Tiling and paving	\$26,000
▶ Painting	\$46,000
▶ Glazing and balustrades	\$12,000
▶ Pool	\$42,000
▶ Landscaping	\$17,000
▶ Architect	\$70,000
▶ Builder's fee	\$140,000
TOTAL (includes GST)	\$990,000

appliances are neatly integrated and a door in the joinery opens to a butler's pantry and laundry behind.

There's also storage space under the garage stairs plus a large area inside the attic that's complete with a laundry chute. Having lived in the house for just six months, the couple says it is already proving perfect for gatherings of their large extended family. "And even though our minimalist white walls are a magnet for small hand prints, these can be easily wiped off," Gayle says, laughing.



Avoid half-baked sales campaigns

We plan to sell an investment house, currently tenanted. We're told we could sell for more if we vacate it and get a few maintenance issues fixed first, then sell it empty but styled. Is this good advice?
Andrew, Baulkham Hills
I'd love to offer a definitive yes or no but the best short answer is to weigh up the costs and loss of income against any potentially higher sales result for a more-polished property. In long, the sales campaign is like a cake. Things such as finishes, photos and styling are the icing but the real food is in the actual house, land size, location and asking price. Overdo one without the other and you'll end up with Christmas cake – an unappealing, stodgy dump with sickly sweet icing. Better to go for pavlova. Whipped cream and fruit are good but it's the melt-in-your-mouth pav that brings us back more than once a year. Or cheesecake, which, like any waterfront mansion close to the city, needs no icing at all. Bear in mind, without a decent financial reward the only beneficiary from such a bake-off is the agent, who gets to sell something well-presented and conveniently vacant.

My neighbour has planted lantana along our fence. Granted, it is a fast-growing screen for his purposes with pretty flowers but it is also regarded as a noxious weed. It is most likely I will now spend the rest of my days weeding its offshoots from my own garden. What should I do?
Margie, Ashfield

Pretty flowers my hat. That *Lantana camara* is considered one of the worst weeds in Australia. Thanks to the Noxious Weeds Act 1993 it is banned from sale in Australia, although, closer to home, Sydney councils order it "be managed in a manner that reduces its spread and incidence". That's your cue to ask him to remove it. Then, in the interests of community harmony and getting your own way, perhaps follow up with a plan: "It'd be a pity to lose the pretty screen, though. Lucky for us, I just so happen to have an equally fast-growing lilly-pilly in my back pocket." If that doesn't work, report it to the council. An inspector will need to confirm what it is, then give them 28 days to remove it. In a worst-case scenario, spreading this weed can lead to an \$11,000 fine.

What are the chances of someone taking our offer over another buyer's even if ours isn't the higher one? Or are vendors obliged to take the highest offer?
Caitlin, Port Macquarie
Vendors are not obliged to take the highest offer but there is a fairly consistent trend among them to do that. If you think an emotional appeal might override any financial interest given you're a certain type of buyer (someone with kids, someone without, a dog lover, cat person, anti-developer ...) then go for it. Just don't bank on it.

Send your questions to Lucy at macken.lucy@gmail.com.

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