

**Renovate**

**The brief**

To expand a former granny flat into a separate residence with studio on a reclaimed laneway



**ARCHITECT**  
Stephen Rofail  
stephenrofailarchitect.com.au

**BUILDER**  
Redwood Projects  
redwoodprojects.com.au

**THE SOURCE**  
Custom made cedar framed doors and windows Redwood Projects redwoodprojects.com.au

Kitchen joinery A Plan Kitchens aplan.com.au  
Kitchen pendant lights Replica 571 Lucretia pendant lamps Wayfair wayfair.com.au

Splashback tiles Vetro Metalli Cobalto Venetian glass mosaic tiles Di Lorenzo dilorenzo.net.au

Timber flooring 190mm wide engineered flooring in Oak Rustic Aged Havwoods, havwoods.com.au



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**Show stopper**  
All the doors and windows in this project were custom made from cedar in keeping with the natural setting of the dwelling. A traditional Japanese courtyard was the original inspiration for the design of this eco-friendly home.

# Green light to change lanes

A small parcel of land provides an unexpected solution, writes **Robyn Willis**

As more Sydneysiders feel the strain of housing affordability, others are coming up with their own creative solutions.

For the owner of this house, the answer came in the form of a disused laneway at the back of her home in inner-city Forest Lodge.

The original cottage at the front of the property had been home since 1995 but when her daughter was looking for somewhere to live independently, the options were limited. Her initial plan was to buy a one-bedroom apartment for her daughter close to the city.

However, at the same time, the owner found she had the opportunity to buy from council part of the laneway at the rear of her property behind her existing, rundown granny flat, a parcel of land 17.5m by 5.5m.

A new solution began to emerge and she called in architect Stephen Rofail. Stephen found the existing site already had its own unique features that the owner understandably wanted to preserve.

"The existing weatherboard cottage at the front of the block had an amazing quality about it," he says. "You step off the footpath on to a 1.5m-wide deck but once inside, it felt more like a country lodge in the forest."

Key to this sense of a rural idyll in the city was a lush, but artfully cultivated, garden which was the owner's pride and joy.

It soon became obvious that the best option would be an extensive renovation of the granny flat, resulting in a virtually new dwelling positioned in the former laneway.

This would offer independence from the existing cottage while allowing both residences equal access to the garden.

**Lock it in**

With a four-storey apartment block to one side and a two-storey townhouse to the other,



Stephen decided to direct all the attention towards the garden.

"To keep that serene feel, the answer was to build up to the boundary and use the Japanese courtyard model that looks inward," he says.

He proposed a two-bedroom L-shaped home against the boundary with an open-plan living and dining area facing the garden and an additional artist's studio on the other side of a small swimming pool and deck.

While the bedrooms would stack one on top of the other, the living area and studio would be single level, with raked ceilings and highlight louvred windows to allow hot air to escape and stabilise temperatures.

As two of the walls of the old granny flat were retained, it met council's criteria for a renovation.

**Private pavilion**

Stephen says the owner was delighted with the pavilion-style building and the plan to leave the existing garden alone.

"The client wanted the house to be as private as possible and that helped to have the

rooms looking inward," he says. "It gives the house a real sense of calm as a retreat from the busy outside world."

While the living room had a less-than-ideal southern orientation, Stephen used the tree canopies to bounce light back into the house.

Council, however, were not initially keen on the overall scheme.

"The initial planner did not like our proposal," Stephen says. "He thought we should add on to the original house which would have taken out some of the garden."

To help with negotiations, Stephen hired a town planner who highlighted the merits of the project and approval was granted.

**Budget blues**

Given the nature of the tight site, Stephen opted for a builder with experience in accessing difficult sites to complete the work.

While maintaining the garden was obviously a high priority, Stephen says two trees were lost.

Working with the old laneway proved to be the bigger problem.

"We knew there was a stormwater drain running down it but when we started excavating, we found it was not where we thought it was," says Stephen.

"We had to underpin the wall of the granny flat as well as the wall of the adjacent townhouse during excavation."

"Then some of the soil in the laneway was contaminated with asbestos, so dealing with that soaked up some of the budget as well."

The budget of \$600,000 was based on the owner's initial idea of buying a one-bedroom apartment but thanks to the remediation work in the laneway and the addition of a swimming pool, airconditioner and combustion stove heater to the plans, it blew out to \$691,000.

However, Stephen says the owner was aware of budget constraints throughout the course of the building process.

"This was her first construction and she relied on me to make sure costs were reasonable," he says. "But she was in the driver's seat when it came to spending."

**Home and housed**

The owner moved into the new residence at the end of last year, leaving the original cottage for her daughter to live in.

Having spent her first summer in the house, she is pleased with the way the house is performing.

"Since the client moved in mid December, she has never needed any cooling and she's happy about that," he says.

For someone who has never undertaken a renovation of this size, Stephen says the owner understood the importance of hiring professionals.

"Not too many clients understand the financial benefit of hiring an architect," he says. "Without an architect, it short-circuits the whole intention of the project."

"There is a waste of money because of mismanagement and it ends up costing a lot more."

Working with the old laneway proved to be the bigger problem.  
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Pictures Katherine Lu



The pool is great for swimming but also acts to cool the air that passes over its surface.