

## DESIGN ARCHITECTURE

## Little wonder

A tiny jewel of an apartment has caught the eye of the Australian Institute of Architects, writes **Stephen Todd**.



**I'm sitting in an 'Apartment for an Older Man'** and feeling right at home. While the single owner-occupant may be a tad more venerable than me, his defiantly multi-hued nest suggests we are birds of a feather.

Occupying a corner of the second floor in a 1920s building in Sydney's Elizabeth Bay, the airy lair is entered via a capacious vestibule entirely painted a deep, flat green reminiscent of a school blackboard. A transition from the dour art deco hallway, it announces an interior that is vibrantly alive.

Once inside, along the left wall, bright red shelving houses books accumulated over a lifetime. To the right, raw-edged concrete supporting walls have been exposed and delineated in planes of orange and yellow, demarcating a dining and cooking zone; ahead, the living area segues to a sunroom that, even bathed in mid-afternoon rays, pales in comparison with the interior.

Despite the joyous jewel colours, the one-bedroom dwelling of 90 square metres is anything but precious.

The "older man" in question, former *Sydney Morning Herald* food critic Michael Dowe, "spends a lot of time reading, watching films and entertaining", notes architect Phillip Arnold. "And cooking, he's an excellent cook."

The kitchen is formed around an extra-wide work surface-cum-serverly made from aluminium sheeting, which, as the architect points out, is less expensive than stainless steel and acquires a lived-in patina quickly.

Explains Dowe: "I wanted to have a space that not only feels lived in but actually facilitates the life I want to lead at this stage of my existence."

The interior resonated deeply with the jury of the NSW chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects, which last month gave it a top gong in its Interiors category.

After deep discussions with his client, Arnold, the principal and sole operator of Plus Minus Design, took inspiration for the design from the 16th-century painting of *Saint Jerome in His Study*, by Antonello da Messina. In it, the patron saint of librarians is portrayed in profile seated at an elaborate raised desk with built-in bookshelves, surrounded by household objects and a raggle-taggle menagerie of beasts.

In Dowe's apartment, Jerome's desk is reincarnated as a rudimentary raw-timber model hand-built along plans devised by the cult Italian designer Enzo Mari in his 1974 manual *Autoprogettazione*. The saint's elevated study is invoked by a slender green platform atop which Dowe's upholstered sofa is perched ("I have long legs," he explains); the beasts are represented by Bica, the household's curly-furred labradoodle.

The bookshelves are formed of standard-issue library kit, readily available from Raeco. (The wall-wide fitout came in at around \$3000.)

"The desk is the centre of the apartment, and the shelving is a major component of the room," says the architect. "It visually as well as practically anchors the space."

But it's the colours that create the most "bang for your buck", he admits.

To devise the colour scheme, Arnold called on Canberra-based colour designer Sonia van de Haar, with whom he worked on the now-defunct Potts Point eatery Paper Bird.

"The initial idea was to evoke postmodern Memphis design," explains Van de Haar, referencing the iconoclastic Italian movement launched by Ettore Sottsass in 1980. "It's something dear to the client's heart because it was his heyday, a time when he was so intrinsic to the cultural conversation. It's not just decorative, it's part of his personal story."

From there, the colourist and the architect deconstructed the volumes, analysed surfaces as planes, effectively turning the interior into a kind of kaleidoscopic Rubik's Cube.

"We'd imagined there would be nice clean edges once all the plasterboard and other finishes were removed, but we found very jagged, raw concrete," says Haar. "At first we were kind of dismayed, but then we realised how beautiful it actually is."

During my visit, Arnold proudly points out the way differently coloured planes trace the snagged edges of concrete, at once delineating spaces and highlighting



Architect Phillip Arnold has also received recognition for his Stealth Pavilion, above left, as has architect Adam Haddow's home on a 90-square metre site in Surry Hills. PHOTOS: PRUE RUSCOE, ANSON SMART



Former food critic Michael Dowe, left, cooks up a storm in his award-winning apartment. PHOTOS: ANTHONY BROWELL

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Michael Dowe, owner

the essence of the 1920s construction. For his part, Dowe recalls the overabundance of cornices "which were stuck to any available surface, and then some. It was a joy to see the interior stripped back to essentials, and to watch its renaissance as an entirely new entity. It is a delight to spend my days and nights, watching as light shifts throughout the space."

Seated at the eastern corner of the

generously dimensioned square dining table, the view back into the kitchen, living and sunroom reads as a cornucopia of colour: the eye seems to experience them in motion, which means the space, while modest, is incredibly dynamic.

"If you ask me to tell you how many pinks there are in the interior, I'd be stumped," says Dowe. "Because each colour exists in symbiosis with one or more others. They seem to constantly mutate."

Phillip Arnold grew up in Coffs Harbour and "went to an ordinary high school" before enrolling to study architecture at the University of NSW.

"I had no connections, so after I graduated I thought there was no way I'd be able to sustain a practice on my own; I would have to work for other companies."

He did 15 years in a renowned Sydney studio, then a brief stint in another, working on the refurbishment of the heritage building on George Street, Sydney, where the Apple store is now located.

"Then I got fed up with working for other people, so I finally went out on my own, with not a single client, which nobody with any sense does. It's been great. It has worked out."

So well that along with being recognised last month by the Australian Institute of Architects for the Apartment for an Older Man, he received a commendation for his mirrored Stealth Pavilion, nestled among towering bunya-bunya and kauri trees in the grounds of a heritage-listed Queen Anne mansion in Bellevue Hill.

At 40 square metres, the pavilion currently houses a private gymnasium, but it is designed to be easily converted into a super-slick granny flat. (The reflective, transparent walls are lined with one-way film to ensure future grannies are protected from prying eyes.)

The conspicuous presence of these and other small but perfectly formed dwellings in the Australian Institute of Architects awards is perhaps a reaction to what the president of the NSW chapter, SJB principal Adam Haddow, called in his opening speech "a toxic relationship with housing".

"We have lost consciousness of our collective need to see housing as a human right. We have been educated to understand housing as an investment that would grow to secure our future, rather than seeing housing as a right that gives us a future."

The home Haddow designed to share with his husband Michael and their dog Eric in Sydney's Surry Hills, built on a site of just 90 square metres and with a mere 69 square-metres of interior space, took out the (independently judged) prestigious Wilkinson Award for Residential Architecture. Like the other winners, it would "deliver beauty, delight and joy", Haddow said in his speech.

Seen from these kinds of dwellings, the future looks bright indeed. **L&L**

