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Inside story

When architects design their own homes

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THE BIG READ

By SUE WILLIAMS | Photos by CHRIS WARNES



STYLING ANNA DELPRAT / ARCHITECT AND INTERIOR DESIGNER STUDIO PRINEAS

A real labour of love

As an architect there is nothing like designing your own home. For some it provides an opportunity to workshop ideas and spend real time to create a masterpiece, for others there is the challenge of not having the outside force of a client budget and deadlines. Some of the best tell their stories.

Ever been to a plumber's house? So many dripping taps! An electrician's? Full of faulty power points. But how about architects? One of Australia's most celebrated architects, Luigi Rosselli, laughs.

"It's like dentists having the worst teeth," he says. "And in my case, it's true."

"It was done 30 years ago with a small budget and in dribs and drabs for a growing family. I have both Italian and Swiss heritage so it's very Calvinist, and one of the Calvinist beliefs is that you treat everybody well but neglect yourself. And I think that's true in my case."

Whereas Luigi's work is known for its clean, elegant, minimalist lines, his home in Clovelly is overflowing with Renaissance furniture, pieces he's designed, paintings, sculptures and precious memories. An extra floor and bedrooms were added as his children came along.

He loves it but, naturally, would never dream of designing anything like it for a client.

"There's not an inch of wall left uncovered from my wife's art and my children's pictures," he says.

Other architects, however, treat their homes as prime projects on which they can try out innovative ideas and which – if they pan out –

can ultimately help create splendid showcases of their skill and acumen.

Eva-Marie Prineas of Studio Prineas is one. The first home of her own she designed was an apartment in an old warehouse, and in the execution, she learnt many things she's used since, including cleverer and more cost-effective solutions to problems. Her second home, Elia House in Stanmore, bought nine years ago, became a similar success.

A detached 1890s Victorian Italianate terrace, it's undergone a complete transformation to reveal the character and features of the original house and reconfigure the layout for a contemporary lifestyle.

"We had a clear idea of what we wanted to do, but we took our time and made it a real labour of love," says Eva-Marie. "A lot of the detail took a long time, which we could do as it was our own house."

"We had a lot of fun moving things around, too. The kitchen, for instance, we moved to five different locations. We knew the goal of the masterplan, but we created little pop-up restaurant scenes in different places so we could see the wonderful opportunities that came up."

The boarded-up facade was stripped down and restored, the iron lace was revealed, a new indoor-outdoor space was connected to the sunken, walled garden, and the original kitchen ended up outside by an outdoor fireplace. Meanwhile, the tallow-wood floorboards were exposed and now run the whole length of the house.

It helps too that Eva-Marie's husband is also an architect, BVN principal Peter Titmuss.



Architect Eva-Marie Prineas and her husband Peter Titmuss in her transformed home, Ella House in Stanmore.



“Working for ourselves means we can test ideas and try things without necessarily knowing how they’re going to end up,” says Eva-Marie, who’s now put up the three-level, four-bedroom house for sale, planning to move on to her next home project.

“But I still think it’s easier to work for a client. It’s always easier to solve other people’s problems, without the emotional connection to your own.”

Domenic Alvaro, design director of Woods Bagot, is another architect

limited, which is wonderful, but that’s also difficult,” Domenic says. “You can plan forever and end up doing nothing. Having a client with a real brief and deliverables is a piece of the puzzle that’s very important ... you can get in and make decisions.”

The biggest problem for architects with their own homes is time, he believes. It’s too tempting to try fit in a project between clients’ work, so it ends up dragging on and on. And on.

“I do like to go on the journey of exploration and do the research and

But the pressure on Andrew to succeed for the sake of his family had put even more strain on him.

“When you’re working for yourself, you’re often grappling with the unrealistic expectations you set on yourself,” he says.

“A client in the process can often be the voice of reason, as well as providing deadlines. But if the project’s your own, you get emotionally attached to it and you become so highly invested, I found it difficult to make decisions. It was a period in my career when I was able to spend vast amounts of time on it, which just wouldn’t be a commercial possibility now.”

Another headline-grabbing architect is Clinton Cole of CplusC Architecture who’s been acclaimed for his award-winning Welcome to the Jungle House, a warehouse conversion in inner-city Darlington. The house generates its own electricity, warms and cools itself, recycles its own waste and provides

water and food, including fish, vegetables, honey and eggs.

As an eloquent statement that sustainability is attainable and can work well, it was designed to attract attention.

“But it’s difficult to reel yourself in and, in the end, the only thing that does that is budget and costs,” says Clinton, who admits he missed the first Christmas deadline, and the second, his birthday, and only just met the third, the birth of a child.

“That didn’t help my relationship. I was running four other contracts at the same time, so they were the priority. But I tried to push boundaries but my partner isn’t an architect so there was some push back. There were a couple of battles, but we got there in the end, and it’s been a big success.”

For when an architect’s house doesn’t turn out well, we generally don’t hear anything of it. But when it emerges as a dazzling testament to their talent, it tends to generate a huge amount of interest.

It’s likely that Eva-Marie Prineas’ house will be the same when it opens for inspection on the way to its sale.

“It is such a beautiful house and quite unique,” she says. “It has a lovely elevation because the living area is on one level and the garden is below, so it’s like the best thing about apartment living, seeing a lot of the sky, but also connect to the garden.”

“I’ve actually found a lot of architects’ homes are particularly well-resolved as they come from an inherent understanding of site and place and what’s best for the context ...”

“It’s always easier to solve other people’s problems, without the emotional connection to your own.” – EVA-MARIE PRINEAS

who makes a habit of designing his own homes in order to learn the kind of lessons that’ll stand him in good stead for fashioning his clients’ homes in the future.

His famous Small House, an urban consolidation in Surry Hills, was the winner of the 2011 World Architectural Festival’s World House of the Year. On the site of three car spaces on an unassuming street corner, inside, it became a Tardis-like, 200-square-metre, flowing three-level house.

His next home was the Two Wall House in Lilyfield, an infill project next to a Victorian terrace as a subdivision for a family. Now he’s planning his third, a garden pavilion-style house in Haberfield, importing stone from his ancestral home, Italy.

“I find it incredibly challenging to design for yourself because you’re not

push boundaries really hard to get an outcome,” he says. “And showing my wife the computer-generated images of what the house might look like proved the best way of getting her agreement to do it ...”

Sometimes tension with their family can be a huge problem for architects experimenting with their own houses. Andrew Benn of Benn+Penna knows that well.

He lives in Balmain in a semi-detached house he renovated to reconnect it to the semi next door – owned by his mother. The two houses are known as A Balmain Pair, an experiment in multigenerational living, with a small flat built at the front as a means of generating extra income. In 2014, it won the Australian Institute of Architects NSW architecture award for residential alterations and additions.



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