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Studio Prineas principal Eva-Marie on the site of one of her current projects in Sydney's East Ryde.

Portrait JEM CRESSWELL Edited by KAREN McCARTNEY

HAPPY MEDIUM

For Studio Prineas context counts and coalesces in clever space planning, sensitive landscaping and consideration of the client's social milieu.



This page, clockwise from top left Bona Vista extends the original Federation aesthetic with terrazzo thresholds and vitrified tiles, red stack-bond and warm stone paired with Tasmanian oak. A Federation home, Cnr Virginia, is extended to accommodate large family gatherings and a pool. The 19th-century cottage given new contemporary life at Fisherman's House. Demarcations on the floor and the beams indicate the original rooms. Composition House was revitalised to preserve the qualities of modesty, endurance and craft. A vertical extension linked to a 1920s home, Pranayama, includes a study, library and teen retreat.

MY FIRST DIRECT EXPERIENCE of the work of Eva-Marie Prineas, and her team at Studio Prineas, is at a celebratory drinks party to mark the completion of Fisherman's House in Sydney's Birchgrove. These are rare events, as even with the most collaborative of projects client and architect are often tired of one another due to the years of intense decision-making that take in not only aesthetics but financial, emotional and practical factors. It can be exhausting. This is not the case with Studio Prineas. The clients offered up their home for sunset drinks, inviting media, other clients – past present and future – and collaborators on the project itself. It felt like a party. "I loved bringing all these people together and watching them get along with one another independent of me," says Eva-Marie.

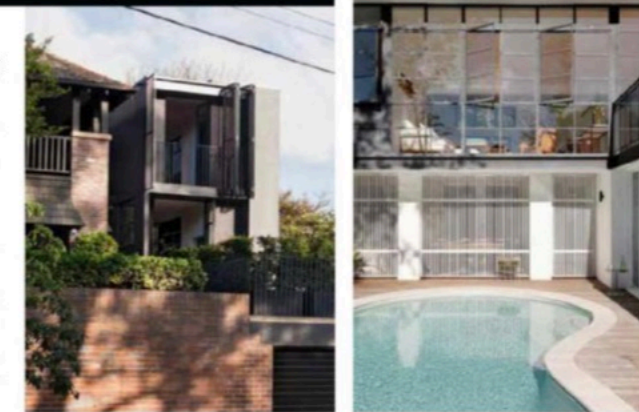
Fisherman's House is an important one to visit if writing about the studio's work as it crystallises the practice's preoccupations with regeneration and rehabilitation married with contemporary liveability and a sustainable, solution-oriented approach. "Post university I had worked for two practices," says Eva-Marie. "One was very focused on environmental sustainability and the other on heritage projects. So they were the two things that really bookended the way our current practice was formed in 2004."

In a world where it is often easier for an architect to recommend a complete knockdown to give them a creative blank slate, Eva-Marie seeks to find the inherent value in what already exists from which she edits and reimagine. She understands the intrinsic beauty in something that's already had a life and the characterful marks of its history in any new iteration. "The client at Fisherman's House was open to (but not set on) the idea of demolishing and we really pushed to keep the existing 19th-century cottage," she says. "There is a certain layering of memories and stories, which marries context, landscape and the new social layer of how the client wants to live. All these things need to coalesce in the design."

As a practice that undertakes the whole project from the macro to the micro – from the broad sweep of the design concept to the detailing of a leather-wrapped handrail, Studio Prineas aims to get into the heads of their clients. "It is important to deeply understand their lifestyle and routines, their passions and preoccupations," she says, explaining that this leads to creative decisions that best serve, not only the day-to-day, but embeds ephemeral moments of appreciation – of landscape, light, the water, a breeze, the view – into the experience of the house.

The feeling of Fisherman's House, which is an important aspect beyond the visual, is poetically described by the practice as, "a theatrical journey from dark to light, private to communal, static sandstone rock face to fluid and reflective water – and a complete immersion of the senses".

Some of these moments are generated by the rigour of the process and the relationships established with all the collaborators. "Our success is built on the trust of our clients, builders, joiners



and tradespeople because at some point during construction I will change my mind about something. A beautiful, but unforeseen, opportunity will be uncovered and we will have the time, and the goodwill, to alter course to accommodate it," says Eva-Marie.

In Fisherman's House one such moment was the introduction of a small desk positioned by a glazed panel looking onto a massive sandstone rock face that came into focus quite late in the piece. While in Heliotropian House in McMahons Point (another steep, site with a water view) they excavated into the cliff to extend the footprint of the house and create a sky-lit room which is used as a gym. "These things often deliver way beyond expectation and become defining, joyful aspects of the space," says Eva-Marie.

The clever planning of these houses often ekes out every centimetre of a site's usable space while balancing the importance of a landscaped surround that settles the house into a context of greenery. Initially, the clients at Fisherman's House weren't keen on the idea of native species. Undaunted, Eva-Marie took them on a guided bush walk to see the sheer variety of what native plants can offer and they now love their garden. "So much in architecture is negotiation – leading and educating – not dictating," she says.

The studio is increasingly finding clients drawn to their ethos. The practice is small with Eva-Marie connected to every project but with a healthy attitude of mentorship aimed at growing the skills of her team. "We recently transformed a tiny one-bedroom apartment in Chippendale as a testing ground in planning (we turned it into a two-bedroom apartment) and added skylights. I invest a lot of time in finding ways for the team to expand their thinking in practical and theoretical ways," she says.

Recently the practice was approached by a Melbourne couple who had stayed in a tiny, cleverly designed bolthole in Darlinghurst created as short-term accommodation. "It gave them the opportunity to understand how we think," explains Eva-Marie, "even though their project is on a larger scale. Those tend to be the best of clients – where the thinking comes first and the outcome follows." studioprineas.com.au

PHOTOGRAPHY CHRIS MARIE (BONA VISTA, CNR VIRGINIA, COMPOSITION HOUSE), GAVIN GREEN (FISHERMAN'S HOUSE), BENJAMIN HOSKING (PRANAYAMA HOUSE)