Dwell+ Exclusive

A Sydney Couple Polish Up Their Heirloom Midcentury With Industrial Details

Alaina and Geraldine love to hang by the pool, host dinners, and throw dance parties—so they asked Studio Prineas to refine their home for entertaining.

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Photos by
Chris Warnes

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When Eva-Marie Prineas, founder and principal of Studio Prineas, first visited this midcentury house in West Sydney, she noted its flat, pared-down aesthetic, and its strict geometry of horizontal and vertical lines in striking black timber. She thought immediately of Rietveld's Schröder House in The Netherlands, one of the few architectural examples of De Stijl, the 1920s art movement most recognized through artist Piet Mondrian's *Composition* series.

For the renovation of Alaina and Geraldine's midcentury residence, built by Alaina's parents in the '50s, Studio Prineas stayed true to distinctive black lines that characterized the original design.

Photo: Chris Warnes

But in choosing the name "Composition House," Prineas references more than those classic Mondrians. "We were playing with the idea of the home being a family compound," she explains. Which it absolutely is. Homeowners Alaina and Geraldine bought the long-loved home from Alaina's parents, who built the home in the 1950s on a block owned by her dad's parents. Today, Alaina's brother lives in one of the adjoining dwellings and one of her sisters is in another.

"We feel lucky to have been part of the same neighborhood that our family has lived in since the '50s," says Geraldine. "Living in side-by-side homes continues the family tradition that Alaina's mum and dad, and his dad's family before them, started."

Intent on preserving the charm and deeply-rooted personal stories of the original home, Alaina and Geraldine hired Studio Prineas to gently make updates, but also to create a more open, social arrangement for its indoor and outdoor spaces. "They absolutely love to entertain," says Prineas, "so much so that when we discussed the brief, Alaina and Geraldine mentioned that the integrity of the floor needed to be addressed so they could enjoy dance parties with friends." Adds Alaina, "sometimes we just call it the clubhouse."

The home's minimalistic, geometric architecture stands out in a neighborhood of mostly Victorian-style homes from the late 1800s. Built before strict heritage guidelines were in place for the area, the home is not set back from the street and has a two-story façade with minimal articulation.

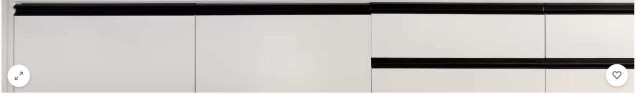
When it was built, the home added to a family compound on property originally purchased by Alaina's grandparents.

Chris Warnes

Prineas revitalized the home's De Stijl–style geometries, both in the architecture and interior design, using thick black edges for cabinetry, door frames, and window frames against an all-white background and minimal primary color.

With its black steel beams, white walls, and concrete floors, the lower level guest suite captures the De Stijl look.

Photo: Chris Warnes



The simple kitchen countertops and cabinets provide a gallery-esque backdrop for the couple's extensive collection of vintage pottery.

Photo: Chris Warnes

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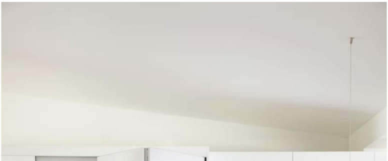
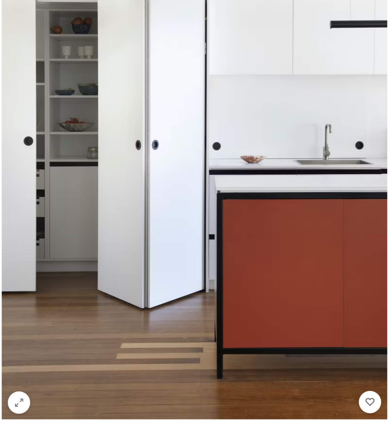




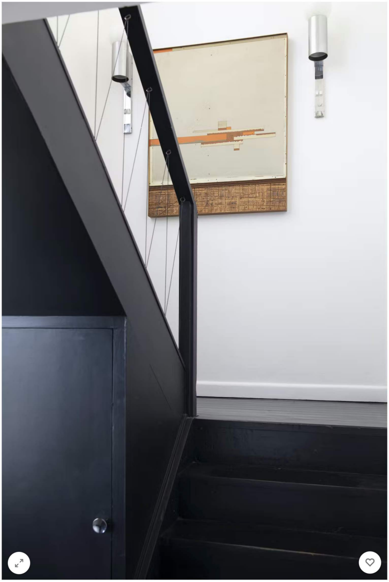
The crisp white cabinets have a tidy look when closed, but reveal spacious storage areas when open.

Photo: Chris Warnes

The large ceramic bowl is a 1960s Italian Bitossi by Aldo Londi. The smaller enamel bowl, of the same vintage, is from Rudi Rocket.

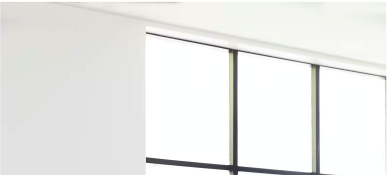
Photo: Chris Warnes

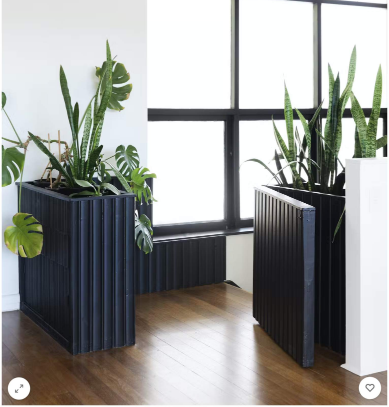
The look is particularly distinctive in the renovated kitchen with its simple white cabinetry and an island with red facing. But the team also took inspiration from some of the home's other original details. The sleek and modern stair balustrade, the built-in planters, and the sculptural wall lights all provided points of reference for driving what Prineas calls "minimalist expression with midcentury inflections." She expanded on the look in the home's new features and details, such as the guest suite's slatted wooden screens and the retro bathroom tile that's freshened up with red grout.



The stair's balustrade is original to the home.

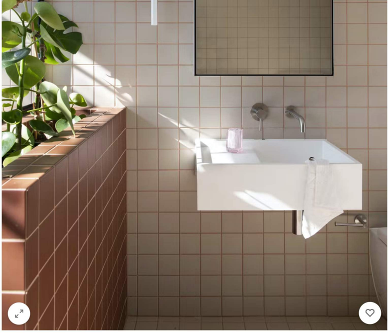
Photo: Chris Warnes





Original planters were painted black to suit the minimalist color scheme.

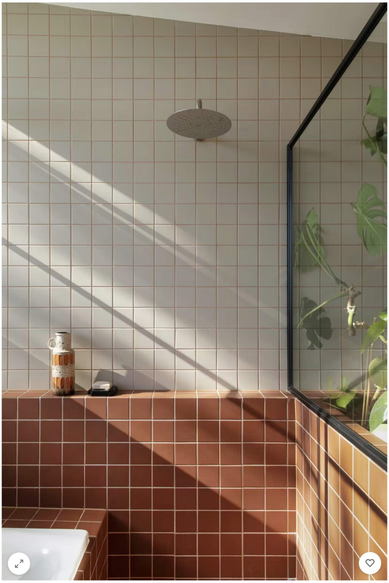
Photo: Chris Warnes



The tile looks vintage, but was selected and installed as part of the renovation. On the wall-mount sink is a Kristall Tumbler in Blush by Decor Walther.

Photo: Chris Warnes

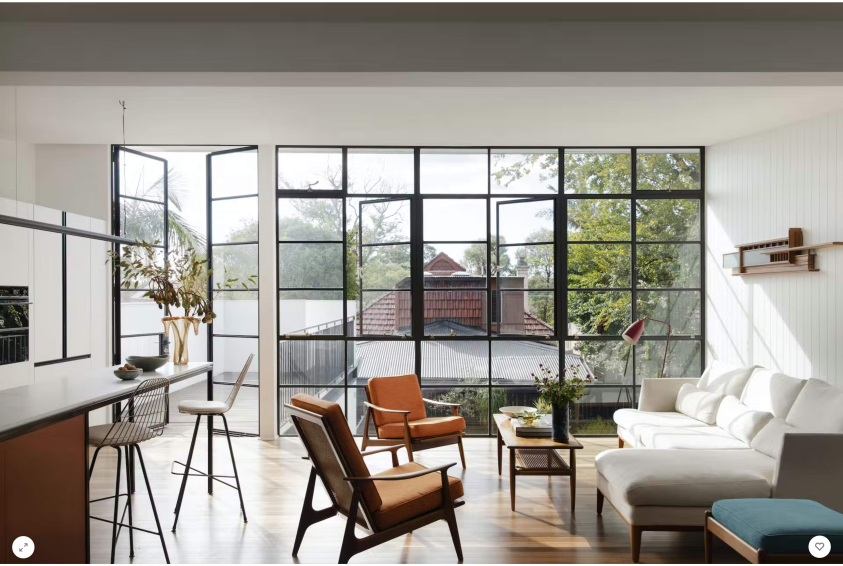
Photo Categories: bath room, wall mount sinks, porcelain tile floors, porcelain tile walls, wall lighting



The pitcher is a 1960s West German Vessel from Rudi Rocket, and the Kristall Soap Dish is by Walther.

Photo: Chris Warnes

While the original plan of the modest home had a fairly good flow between internal spaces, Studio Prineas made a few significant changes. On the main floor the firm opened the kitchen, living, and dining areas to create a generous shared space that facilitates entertaining. Alaina and Geraldine also wanted a more complete visual and physical connection between these living areas and the rear courtyard. To improve access, Prineas reimagined the original rear roofline, which, like the front section of the roof, sloped down toward the back of the house, reaching its lowest point at the windows over the garden. "We redesigned this back section of the roof to slant upward toward the sun to form a butterfly configuration," she explains. "Then we enhanced the new, larger openings with expansive glazing and screens."



Much of the balcony was removed, but the team preserved and renovated the part over the studio, extending the living area out from the kitchen over the pool and garden.

Photo: Chris Warnes

The original balcony was also removed so the room was right on top of the garden. With the windows open, the whole living area feels like a covered veranda. The changes not only improve the flow of sunlight and cooling breezes entering from the northern-facing courtyard, but actually increase the interior volume of the space with its new, soaring ceiling and upper-deck access.

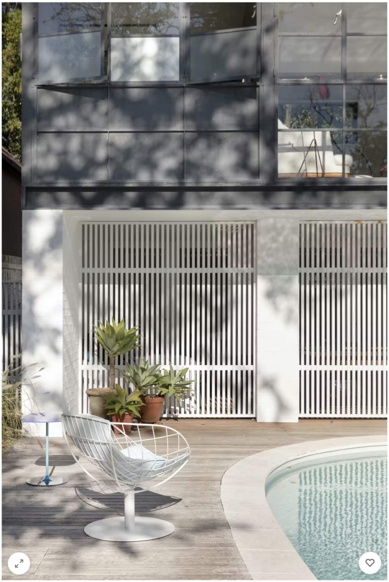
On the ground floor, the firm decided to replace the existing garage and third bedroom with a large single bedroom and kitchenette, which would be comfortable and convenient for a long-term guest. Where the ground floor overlooks the pool, Prineas created a simple vertical slat screen, which contrasts with the darkly outlined glass panes on the floor above. While both the screen below and the open windows above permit the flow of air and light, the screen provides a visual separation between the private areas of the guest suite’s outdoor spaces and the public area around the pool.

The downstairs guest suite has its own indoor/outdoor patio, protected by a slatted timber screen. The vintage Alky chair provides a comfortable spot to catch an afternoon breeze. The Paloma Sun pool towel is by Baina.

Photo: Chris Warnes

Light touches make the minimal guest bedroom welcoming.

Photo: Chris Warnes



Decking was installed to raise the level of the outdoor area so that it would meet the top of the pool coping. A Thiery side table by Kartell pairs with a swivel chair by Grazia and Co.

Photo: Chris Warnes

The new kitchenette in the downstairs guest suite makes for easy outdoor dining and entertaining.

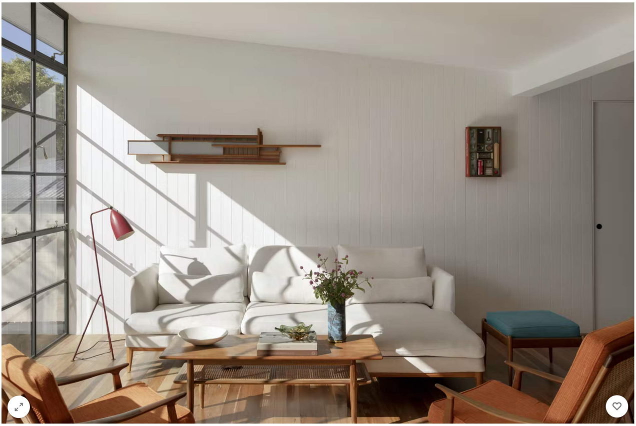
Chris Warnes

The study wing, which flanks the garden, had deteriorated and required a complete reconstruction, so Prineas took the opportunity to rethink poolside access and amenities. Her team added a second study entrance so guests can directly access its bathroom from the pool area. And, with the addition of the guest-suite kitchenette, Geraldine and Alaina can easily provide meals from the ground floor directly to its new outdoor dining area.

Studio Prineas and Alaina and Geraldine agreed to keep interior decoration to a minimum, letting the architectural aspects of the home take center stage. All of the art and furniture were part of the couple's collection, and for the most part, it suits the home's simple color scheme, mostly shades of red or blue. "We've bought things that we both love over the years, all from artist friends of ours," says Geraldine.

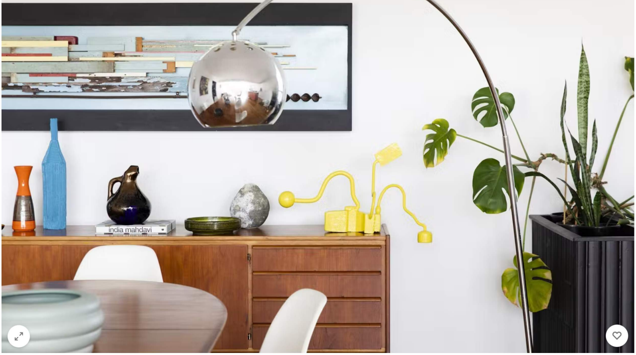
"They have a beautiful collection of art and furniture," says Prineas. "It was acquired slowly over time."

Chris Warnes



The couple's vintage Parker Knoll armchairs were re-upholstered after the renovation.

Photo: Chris Warnes



The orange 1960s West German ceramic vase is from Rudi Rocket, the Paper Clay Vase is by Paola Paronetto, and the enameled steel sculpture is by Rudi Loveapple.

Photo: Chris Warnes

"We really love flexible, unfussy spaces," says Geraldine.

Photo: Chris Warnes

Photo Categories: dining room, floor lighting, table, lamps, storage, light hardwood floors, wall lighting, chair

As Geraldine and Alaina are very mindful of their carbon footprint, the team discussed sustainability throughout the process. "We focused on renovating only the dilapidated parts of the home to celebrate character and reduce environmental impact," says Prineas. She adds that the new glazing on the rear, north-facing façade provides the perfect opportunity for passive solar temperature control. The deep eaves draw in the winter sun and provide shading in summer, while deliberately positioned openings allow for cooling cross breezes. Rainwater tanks and strategic solar panels reduce water and energy consumption. The environmentally conscious couple don't own a car, and just needed a small area for bicycle storage, which, conveniently, allowed the garage space to be used for other purposes.

The couple's favorite spots in the renovated home? For Alaina, it's soaking in the midcentury bathtub and looking out through the high windows. For Geraldine, it's sitting in the living room lounge chair looking out through the wall of windows. Together, the love sitting by the pool, where family will often visit by entering through a secret back gate.

"We're pretty sure our nieces think the pool is theirs," laughs Geraldine.

On coffee table is a Greg Natale "Niemeyer Bowl" in travertine, a 1960s Italian glass bowl from Rudi Rocket, and "Anachronistic 2021", a sculpture by Sian Watson.

Photo: Chris Warnes

The bathroom's large windows brighten the room while encouraging long, lazy soaks in the bathtub. The 1960s enamel bowl is by Rudi Rocket, and the towel is by Baina.

Photo: Chris Warnes

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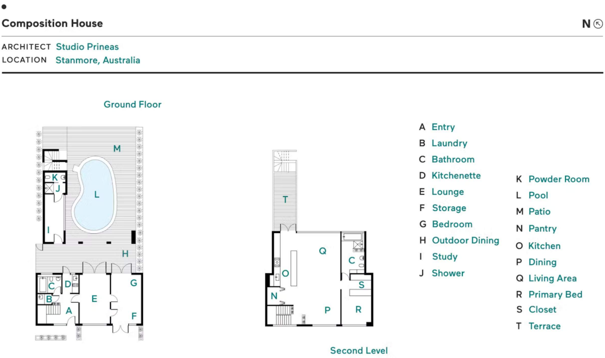

A	Entry
B	Laundry
C	Bathroom
D	Kitchenette
E	Lounge
F	Storage
G	Bedroom
H	Outdoor Dining
I	Study
J	Shower
K	Powder Room
L	Pool
M	Patio
N	Pantry
O	Kitchen
P	Dining
Q	Living Area
R	Primary Bed
S	Closet
T	Terrace

Illustration by Tim Lohnes

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Project Details:

Architect of Record: Eva-Marie Prineas, Studio Prineas; @studioprineas

Builder: Sheeth; @sheeth.project

Interior Design: Studio Prineas ; @studioprineas

Joinery: Finch Projects; @finchprojects

Photographer: Chris Warnes; @chriswarnes

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