



BLOOMS WITH A VIEW

A SPECTACULAR OUTLOOK OVER SYDNEY HARBOUR PRESENTED THE CHALLENGE OF CREATING A GARDEN WORTHY OF ITS SETTING WORDS **BRENDAN MOAR** PHOTOGRAPHS **MICHAEL WEE**

Three years ago, architect **Murray Thomas** was asked by Jamie and Sue Hall to pare back the flamboyant '80s design of their home and tame the overbearing scale of its exterior, which loomed large over three levels. The project, albeit challenging, provided enormous potential, given its enviable location in the harbourside Sydney suburb of Vaucluse. Murray called on landscape design firm Spirit Level Designs to create a new garden that would hold its own against the backdrop of the world-famous waterway and the city skyline beyond.

Being so exposed, the designers chose to break up the garden into three manageable and intimate areas: the entry garden, the main garden and the rooftop. →

Originally built in the '80s, the home's rooftop area (above) had not been used as an outdoor living space. With jaw-dropping harbour and city views and a built-in spa, it's now the kind of playground that New Year's Eve revellers dream about. Limestone sculptures designed by Adam Jones and crafted by John Letham add a quiet beauty to the entry-level garden (opposite).





ENTRY LEVEL POSITION

Unlike the other two garden spaces, the entry garden has no view to compete with. The dark grey/olive colour chosen by architect Murray Thomas for the front barrier wall helps to ground the house, turning it into an effective background foil for the garden elements.

While they served to soften the scale of the home's very angular street-side facade, two mature jacaranda trees posed problems for landscape designer Hugh Main, who admits, "It was very difficult to get things to grow underneath them." Success was achieved, however, with the fine-leaved native grass *Lomandra longifolia* 'Tanika', which seems to have taken up the challenge of handling the dappled shade.

The simple planting treatment in the entry garden allows the numerous limestone sculptures, designed by Adam Jones and handcrafted by stonemason John Letham, to become the focus. "They have a quiet spirituality about them," says Hugh. "By day, they stand stoically like guardians of the house. By night, up-lighting enhances their ghostly quality."

"Though the limestone sculptures are up to two metres in height, they sit on the ground lightly," says garden designer Hugh Main. The grass trees and the *Yucca filamentosa* on the rooftop (above) are strong enough to hold their own against the spectacular view. The long central stalks of the *Yucca filamentosa* flower once a year in one spectacular burst, emulating the New Year's Eve fireworks display over the harbour - "An unintentional coincidence!" says Hugh. A steel fence (below left) designed by architect Murray Thomas appears to float through the main mid-level garden.



THE MAIN EVENT

The family of four spends a lot of time in the mid-level garden, which flows on from the main interior living spaces. "We wanted to make the lawn a simple graphic shape that matched the bold shapes of the house and the pool," explains Hugh. The lawn was 'framed' with a rectangular border of pebbles and a copper edge, but now the planting has thrived these elements seem to have receded into the background. Given its exposed position, tough, drought-tolerant plants were chosen to create a strong, form-based plant composition that looks equally as interesting when viewed from the upper levels of the house and the rooftop.

Clipped balls of coastal rosemary (*Westringia fruticosa*) are set among the hardy native grasses *Lomandra longifolia* 'Tanika' and swamp foxtail (*Pennisetum alopecuroides*). Succulents such as *Senecio mandraliscae*, with their blue fleshy 'fingers', and sculptural, purple-crested *Aeonium atropurpureum* 'Schwartzkopf' are partnered by the broader-leaved *Agave attenuata* and strappy-leaved purple flax (*Phormium tenax*), adding a structural element to the scheme. →

The colour and textures of the planting and the materials in the main garden (above), even the colour of the pool, have been chosen to harmonise with the native bushland of nearby Neilsen Park. Clipped balls of coastal rosemary (*Westringia fruticosa*) are surrounded by succulents including blue *Senecio mandraliscae*, *Agave attenuata* and *Aeonium atropurpureum* 'Schwartzkopf'. "The rectangular shape of the lawn is counterbalanced by the curved shape of the pool," explains Hugh.



THROUGH THE ROOF

Previously, the rooftop consisted of little more than a black water-proof membrane and some built-in planters. All parties concerned agreed that a space like this was made for entertaining. "It has a big sense of glamour," says Hugh, "but in reality it's a harsh environment. It's dry and windy, so whatever is up there has to be tough but striking enough to compete with the view."

Along the edge of the rooftop, creating a foreground, is a row of *Yucca filamentosa*. "Although exotic, the *Yucca filamentosa*'s leaf colour and texture blends well with the native plant palette," says Hugh, which includes the grass tree (*Xanthorrhoea australis*). Planted in large, custom-made copper planters, the grass trees 'puncture' the terraced timber deck surrounding the spa, which sits at the highest point of the rooftop. With Aussie icons such as the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge taking centre stage on the horizon, it seemed only fitting to feature an icon of Australian flora in the garden's design. ❖

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Round copper planters (far left) echo the circular motif that occurs throughout the home's architecture. "There are a few circular details among all of those straight lines of the house. Instead of trying to conceal the graphic '80s elements, we've tried to subtly reference them," says Hugh. The copper for the planters and the hardwood for the timber deck will weather and thereby soften what could otherwise be a harsh space, while the flowers of a felt plant (*Kalanchoe beharensis*) (top) and the spiky stalks of the grass tree (*Xanthorrhoea australis*) (above) create layers of interest.