

Making light work of dark and crowded spaces



Trisha Croaker

From the Drawing Board

Husband and wife architects Carol Marra and Ken Yeh, of Marra + Yeh Architects in Darlington, had an unconventional and wonderful early brief from clients hoping to revamp a 19th-century terrace in Sydney's inner west.

It was a poem that started like this:
*Dear Architect, Builder of Cities,
Spice Merchant of Homes:*

*Build me a room to read and brood;
Make me a space to think in majestic
solitude.*

*Give some thoughts to the summer
heat,*

*Which would lift me dreamily up
from my books ...*

The clients – an artist and anthropologist/writer – go on to speak of the desire for delightful and purposeful architecture, and of the need for any alterations and additions to be grounded in practical, sustainable principles.

Marra says: “The poem began as a sort of joke, but became the filter, the lens through which we looked at this project.”

The initial view was one of chal-

lenges. Built between 1870 and 1890, the single-storey, three-bedroom terrace was damp, dark and full of internal rooms – with the living room effectively “a cave”, and the whole lot either too hot or too cold depending on the season, with no ventilation. It was housing “uncomfortably” an artist working from home with daytime assistants coming and going, a writer drafting non-fiction, and two children at university.

The clients needed space to work separately and a photographic dark-room – and, basically, a house that more effectively allowed them to breathe, live and work with a sense of community and privacy. And all on a “minuscule” budget.

“Our architectural approach was a series of subtle but transforming interventions – a careful deconstruction of the existing residence to incorporate new working spaces and reconstruct living areas within the existing footprint,” Marra says. “The painting of St Jerome in his study, by Antonello da Messina, provided the inspiration – the idea of one’s own intimate space within a larger com-



Delicate touch ... a series of small alterations has transformed this 19th-century terrace. Photo: Katherine Lu

munal room, which creates both a sense of privacy and outlook.”

Rather than tearing up the space internally, or adding an expensive second storey, Marra + Yeh focused on rearranging the way the family used spaces. They cut out the existing back wall and a side section of the house, replacing them with glass and immediately creating two new indoor/outdoor areas. These simple “fine incisions” simultaneously

flooded the house with light and air and reinvigorated dead, transit-lounge spaces.

They then designed a compact but efficient studio along the property's rear boundary, divided unevenly in two to accommodate working areas for the artist and writer separately – allowing them to work within the restrictive budget, and meet the clients' brief for much-needed privacy and space. This approach also

allowed them to block out a neighbour's house previously overlooking the backyard, and create a private central courtyard garden that now works as an outdoor room.

“Individually, each intervention seems minor, but when put together as an ‘ecosystem’ of architectural spaces, the transformation has significantly impacted on the way the clients use the house, without significant environmental impact,” Marra says.