

Interiors

Mansion
AUSTRALIA

Flight of fancy
Feathering the inner-city nest

Animal instinct
Taking inspiration from nature

Conceptual art
Marc Newson's iconic chair





URBAN LANDSCAPE

When its owners decided they were staying put, their inner-city Melbourne terrace became an opportunity to express some bold new ideas

Story by SAM DUNCAN
Photographs by SHARYN CAIRNS

*Every room in the house
is different, with the decor
not shying away from
the bold use of colour*



The kitchen-dining area features a photographic installation by Melbourne artist Valerie Sparks



I

nterior designer Kate Challis says her craft is a lot like Thai cooking: each dish should have a combination of sweet, sour, spicy and salty for the palate to be satisfied. The key, she says, is to create different ambiances to satisfy different parts of the human psyche. "If you have a meal that's all intense, strong flavours, it's too much for the palate. It's the same with a house."

Challis lived in her inner-city Melbourne terrace house for 10 years before deciding she could make the small space work as her "forever home". Her dwelling in Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, where she lives with her husband, son and two cats, was built as a retail shop in the 1890s. In the 1970s it became Melbourne's first feminist bookstore, a centre of activism, Challis says.

When she bought the property in the early 2000s, it had already been converted into a residence. But the family home would have another purpose: experimentation, as a laboratory for Challis' bold ideas.

"My husband was very patient and would come home and the bedroom or dining room would be another colour again," she says. "Experimenting requires not just ideas; ultimately, it's about implementation. You can theoretically think something might look good, but until you actually put some paint on the wall and see how it reacts... That's something that needs to be tested."

Experimentation is essential, she says, because clients pay for certainty. "When I say to them, 'this colour is going to look amazing', I need to know that it is going to look amazing."

When Challis and her husband decided location was more important than space, opting to stay put in their home, she devised a bold new design for the entire house.

Influenced by European living, Challis worked on the layout first, wanting to utilise "every single centimetre of space". She flipped it, moving the kitchen and dining area from the back of the house to the front. That meant she could enjoy the light from the floor-to-ceiling frosted old shopfront windows facing the street. And it also allowed for the living room to be at the back of the house, away from the noise and commotion of the footpath.

It's a layout that's virtually unheard of in homes in the area, says Challis, but it is in keeping with the style of cafes and restaurants along the street. Because the house is narrow, the kitchen and dining area function as a corridor of sorts, too. "The property is less than four metres in width, so you can't really have a room and a corridor; the room is the corridor."

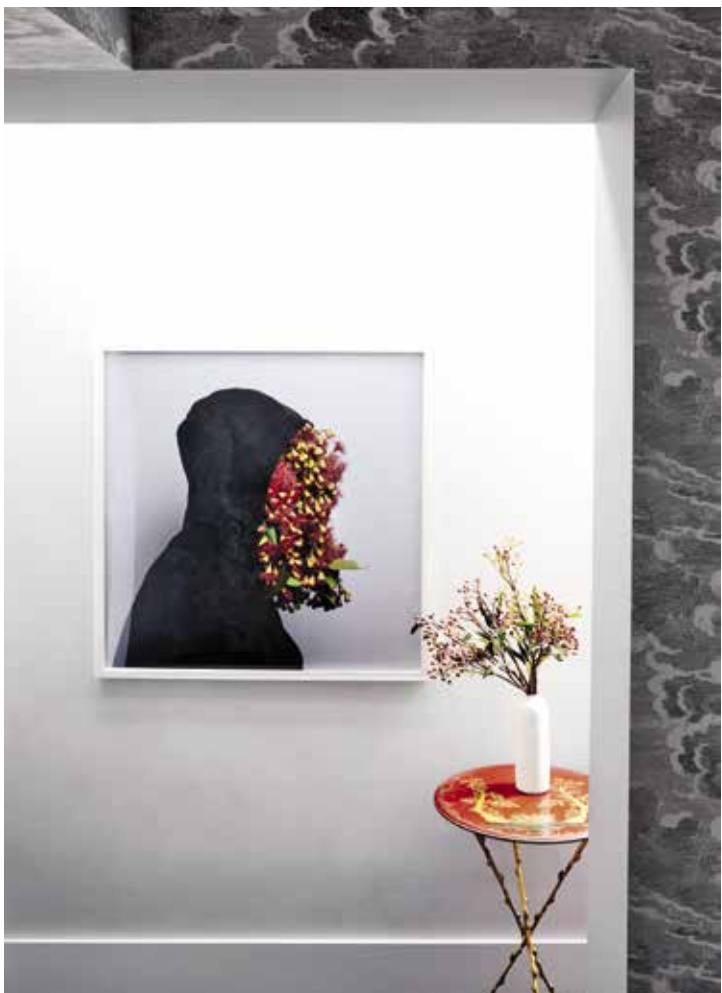
Challis has a PhD in art history, which is her primary source of inspiration. That's immediately evident when you enter off the street into the kitchen/dining area, where the walls are wrapped in a photographic installation by Melbourne artist Valerie Sparks. It's a customisation of her *Le Vol* series, which depicts a mythical landscape featuring taxidermied birds.

The palette for the living room at the back of the house is derived from the painting *Western Australian Gum Blossom*, by Australian modernist artist Margaret Preston, which hangs in the Art Gallery of NSW. It's her husband's favourite room, and where he spends "a lot of time" reading and listening to music.

On face value, every room in the house is dramatically different. But all the spaces are linked by a bigger theme: the Australian landscape. "Based on pictures of the house, people often say it doesn't look like the one property," Challis says. "But when you go into the house, it makes total sense. It's like moving through a landscape. You can transition from one type of ambience or feeling to another quite seamlessly. If you think about the Australian landscape, there are parts that are lush green and other parts that are more beachy and light, with more bleached colours."



*Clockwise from left:
Wallpaper clouds
around the staircase;
decorative tiles in the
ensuite; the rear of the
home; bedroom; an
artwork injects colour*



The walls around the building's original staircase are covered with wallpaper depicting clouds in the sky. It's another ambience to be enjoyed as you make your way to the first floor's bedrooms and bathrooms.

The master bedroom ensuite is finished with Tadelakt, a traditional Moroccan method of waterproofing the walls of wet areas. It's organic and made from mixing plaster, lime and soap to form a paste that is then applied to the walls in one go. It's also antibacterial and doesn't require much cleaning.

Against the dark charcoal colour of the ensuite's Tadelakt, Challis has added lightness and layering with a decorative feature constructed of Italian porcelain tiles. It speaks to her love of working with talented artists and artisans. The tiler was "old school", and told her "Don't give me anything in plans or on paper; I do not work like this".

Challis and her team laid the design out on the floor before the tiler transferred it to the wall, where it injects visual interest with the shape creating a waterfall-like effect.

Challis says that Australians generally are obsessed with house resale values, which constrains how bold they are with their interiors even when they're not planning to sell. "If a colour makes you feel really happy, then shouldn't you be living with the thing that inspires you and brings you joy?" she says. "You can always change it in years to come if you fall out of love with that colour."

Human beings are complex, she says, and we're made up of different needs and desires. "Sometimes we're sociable, sometimes we're quiet; sometimes we're reflective, sometimes we're cheeky. I think a house should do that as well, with different spaces. If a house is just one feeling, I don't think that's stimulating for the soul." **M**