



original finish

When a Sydney client commissioned Bruce Stafford to design a new home with a "grand peasant" feel, the South African architect used old European rough plaster and antiqued floorboards to create a truly relaxed ambience.

Text: Leta Keens | Producer: Jean Wright | Photography: Anson Smart



Hallmark of success

this page The family dogs, Rosie and Mia, pose on stone floor tiles imported by Pazzoli. A portrait of the Duchess of Grimaldi hangs on the wall, while the chandelier was specially commissioned in South Africa to include references to surrealist sculptor Alberto Giacometti, with whippets, eucalyptus leaves and nectar-feeding birds.

opposite page Antique beams from Sydney's Blackwattle Bay wharf are used in the living area. Louis Vuitton trunks are used as side tables, while a 19th-century Spanish chest stands behind the sofa.

"This adorable house is an amalgamation of both our styles and is richer and more interesting as a result – rather like our marriage," says owner Serena Crawford.

Rising high

this page The sculptural lines of the staircase form the house's spine, connecting all three stories.

opposite page The mirror above the fireplace is from Martyn Cook Antiques and features the Danish royal insignia. Portrait of the owner's daughter Tenique by South African artist Neil Rodger. Comfortable family furniture was reupholstered in linen and cottons by Blue Mountains-based upholsterer Wendy Lang.



IN A CITY IN WHICH NEW LIKES TO LOOK BRAND NEW, SERENA Crawford's house at Sydney's Parity Bay stands out. Or rather, it blends right into its rainforest and beachside surroundings, looking as if it's been there forever. It's inspired by old colonial houses in the Cape of South Africa, the houses illustrated in *Gilt Soul* magazine, American furniture, interior designer Rose Tarlow's house in Los Angeles and a floor in legendary collector Axel Verwoerd's castle in Belgium. Yet, despite all that, it's an absolute one-off.

The house came about when Crawford's two daughters left home and, from the word go, she had very definite ideas about how it should be. "I had a specific house in mind," she says. "I wanted a house that was 'on holiday', enticing enough to bring my otherworldly children home. But it was also going to be all about the grown-ups, and the spaces I had longed for all my adult life – namely that my husband and I ended up with our own individual bathrooms and dressing rooms, and our own separate home offices."

And so they have. Award-winning South African architect Bruce Stafford, now based in Sydney and best known for his work at the renowned safari lodge Singita, was commissioned to design the house, his first project in this country. "He's very clever at working out how you move through spaces – he has a very good feeling for macro and micro design," says Crawford. Also enlisted was builder Ella Cuthbert and designer Christopher Neve who, says Crawford, "is a multi-talented designer of everything, including furniture, metalwork, reconstructed stone, antique flooring – he has an extraordinary

knowledge of historical construction. This is the second time I've worked with him on a house, and his incredible eye proved invaluable again."

The three-storey house features home offices and an outdoor room in the basement, living room, kitchen and bedrooms on the ground floor; two bedrooms upstairs; and a triple-volume hall with skylights and sculptural staircase. Its design started with nine gigantic 100-year-old beams found by Crawford's husband, Murray, and reclaimed from Sydney's Blackwattle Bay Wharf.

"The big issue in the house was to make it feel handmade, and those beams set the whole atmosphere," says Crawford. The lived-in look is also achieved by all the inside walls being plastered 'peasant style' by hand, with lime-wash and Purcell wash custom-mixed by Porter's Paints. "Plasterers are taught to do immaculate work, which loses something of the organic warmth – I had to keep saying 'pretend you've never learnt how to do it'." Crawford's decorating brief to herself, meanwhile, "was to create a very casual peasant house, contrasting with the quite grand antique furniture – you could call it 'grand peasant'."

The beams were used in the one main living area. It's not enormous but, connected to a glass-roofed outdoor room with a fireplace, feels incredibly spacious. An antique pair American oak floor, cut into random widths and fixed with handmade nails, flows between the two areas, without a change in level. "The outside deck is magically part indoor room, part outdoor and also part of the main living room. With the glass roof, you feel as if you're



Design notebook

upholstery Wendy Laing, tel (02) 4784 2171, dining chairs Ross Palmer Interiors, tel (02) 9362 3062, paint Linacash and French wash contemporary by Parin's Design Parks, tel 990559 664, www.parinsdesignparks.com.au garden design Portno Garden, tel (02) 9363 3834, interior Marilyn Cook Architects, tel (02) 9228 1801, Blank Panels, tel (02) 9227 1100, artwork Ned Rodger is represented by Everett Head Gallery, Johannesburg, www.everetthead.co.za

Outdoor sanctuary

This page in the glass-roofed outdoor room, used year-round, a double bed lounge faces a fireplace, while a wall of plantation shutters screens out the neighbours

opposite page, clockwise from top left a view from the husband's dressing room and a bedroom beyond, classic French furniture at one of the bedrooms; chairs from Ross Palmer Interiors are covered in Indian cotton



in a forest, and because it's shaded by trees, you can sit out at any time." The only new furniture is in the outdoor room - a double-bed sized wicker leather lounge, a present from a friend who commissioned a leading designer in the Philippines to make it. "I love lying in it, looking up at the sky and angophora and banana trees," says Crawford.

All existing family furniture was given new loose covers by Sydney upholsterers Bill and Wendy Laing in Indian cottons and linens from Russia. Capboards throughout are lined with hand-dyed natural linen curtains from Russia. "This adds to the summer light, colonial feel," says Crawford. Many of the fittings - the solid oak doors, the metalwork, door handles and light fittings, including the Guiseppe-inspired hallway chandelier - were sourced and brought over from Alicia Crawford's favourite room in her captain's bathroom. "It's like being on holidays, with the bath looking out onto the angophora tree."

For the garden, the brief to Anne Wilkes of Pastore Garden was to blend and continue the theme of the subtropical aesthetic of Fawley Bay Reserve right up to the house, to incorporate games and ponds "so there's always the sound of water. When the wind blows, there's a lot of lovely movement. I didn't want it to be stashed-up - I made sure I had a sink or swim garden, absolutely maintenance-free."

Apart from the enjoyment of living in the house, Serena Crawford says her greatest pleasure was working with the team. "This especially means my husband, whose incredible patience, style and generosity of spirit allows me to take all the credit when in fact he did all the dirty work - the administration and finance. This adorable house is an amalgamation of both our styles and is richer and more interesting as a result - rather like our marriage!"

Bruce Staffell Architects, tel (02) 9327 7888, C & E Co-Operative Builders, tel (02) 355 518, Christopher Noone (interior designer), tel (02) 8338 9425.

