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PERSONAL SPACE

Making a home 'just right' is the aim of interior designers who tailor their ideas to suit individual personalities

Story by LUKE SLATTERY Photography by ANSON SMART

Interior designer Alexandra Donohoe Church would rather that married couples, on reaching a relatively unburdened age, seek to remodel the look and feel of their domestic lives rather than their entire lives. "It's a lot more affordable," she adds with a laugh. "And much more fun."

Her clients at Corner House, a sinuous four-storey dwelling on a rise with views overlooking Tamarama Beach and a grand sweep of the Pacific Ocean, fall into this category. The building, designed by Sydney architect Alex Porebski, is stepped back from the street, poised above a private courtyard, and moulded around an L-shaped corner bend. It's a playful medley of glass, stone, curved white Mediterranean-style render and vertical timber battens. The hero is the upper living area, where kitchen and dining room flow onto a large covered terrace to create a sensation of boundless space. The backyard captures and distils the view from the front in the form of a discrete rectangular pool.

Donohoe Church designed all of the interiors and decoration of the original Porebski-designed home in 2015 and she was recently asked by the new owners, when the building changed hands, to refresh and reimagine the interior.

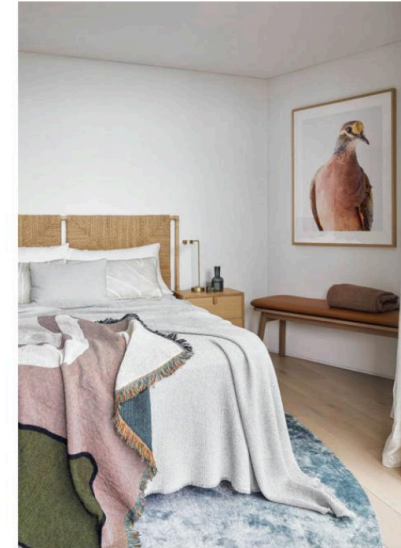
The building was already well known to her, but she had to get to know the new owners. "Same bones, same spaces, different personalities," she says. "It was a privilege to work for quite different people in different circumstances, with different tastes in life and art. Like trying on different outfits."

It's not the first time, she adds, that she's been brought on by the original architects to recreate the interiors for second owners a few years apart. "We really enjoy that reinvention process, particularly as we want all our projects to reflect our clients and their personalities – two projects should never look the same. This Tamarama project was a really juicy one in that regard."

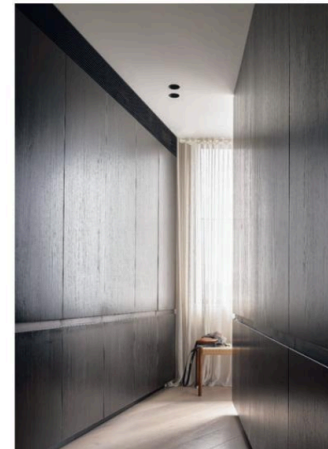
As the founder and managing director of Sydney-based interior design practice Decus tells it, the Tamarama clients didn't only relocate to a new house when they shifted to this breezy beachside suburb from a "more traditional home" in which they'd raised their children, and seen their children raise children – they changed their approach to life. "It was a really big shift in their lives," she says. "A



The exterior of Corner House, left.
The interior of the stylish beach house is layered in terms of colours and textures, but also mood and tone



The monochrome interior of Corner House, Tamarama, is sleek, sophisticated and dramatic



reinvention. They were moving on from one phase to another. It's as if they said to themselves, 'This can be anything we want it to be.' They're fit, active, always doing the coastal walk, swimming laps. They've flourished in this different context."

The new owners were happy with the form and structure of the building, and wanted only minimal interior intervention. But they wanted a change of mood. The result is a material palette that is less beige and blonde, more monochrome – at once sleek and dramatic. Some of the new bathroom walls are clad in shimmering liquorice-coloured tiles. The elegant hand basin has a classical white formality and the whole space is beautifully lit.

Japanese black timber boards feature in the upper-floor bedrooms. In fact black and grey threads through the kitchen tables and cupboards and the minimalist wainscoting around the fireplace, adding depth and gravity and intrigue.

In his essay *In Praise of Shadows* – a book much loved by architects and designers – Japanese author Junichiro Tanizaki wrote: "Were it not for shadows, there would be no beauty... We find beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness..." The new interior of Corner House seems to note this human need for a sensitive balance of shadow and light.

Says Donohoe Church: "We didn't want it to feel like a conventional beach house. We wanted it to feel more – apologies if it's a cheesy word – sophisticated. And a little more striking. Importantly, it's not all light. It's nice to have feelings of compression – of cosiness, seclusion – alternating with openness, rather than just focusing on big open spaces and big panes of glass everywhere. It's possible to create some intimacy and some depth in an interior by purposefully creating darkness and moodiness through choice of materials."

Thanks to the size of the house and the generational span of the permanent occupants and their guests, who include children and grandchildren, the darker notes are merely the backbone for a great variety of textures, tones and colours. Donohoe Church speaks of the need for layers, depth and subtlety: "With a house in that location, it could have all been white on white on white on white – and maybe some blue."

She was never going to be happy with that, and nor were her clients. A carpet in a room with a stunning landscape is pomegranate; elsewhere there is timber, stone, glossy ceramic and matt ceramic. Downstairs, on the pool view, they are more restrained. Ultimately, it was a question of judgement – of unique spaces.

"For us it's important that the interior feels layered in terms of colours and textures, but also mood and tone, says Donohoe Church. "So that it should at all times feel personal and, well, just so. Just right."