Living outside

Reviving the Australian modernist garden

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and Diana Snape

Photography by
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Thames
&Hudson

Escarpment Garden

West End, Brisbane, QLD
Traditional lands of the
Turrbal/Yuggera

Project name:
Whynot Street Garden

Landscape design:
Dan Young Landscape Architect

Architecture:
Kieron Gait Architects

Dimensions:
Site: 405 m²
House: 217 m²
Garden: 188 m²

Climate zone:
Subtropical

Perched high on a sloping block in Brisbane's West End, this home appears to have grown out of the rocky outcrop it sits upon. The site features the same ancient geology as Mount Coot-tha, visible in the far distance across the valley formed by the Brisbane River below. What might first appear to be a bold design move – creating a garden using only rock, concrete and hardy native plants in lieu of a typical suburban patch of lawn – makes sense when you consider the property as part of a larger environment and ecosystem.

Designed in collaboration with landscape architect Dan Young, the project is described by architect Kieron Gait as 'trying to repair the site to a pre-existing condition, occupying it in a more sensitive way and recognising the previous stories of the place'. Where a typical suburban house might be demolished and rebuilt on a freshly benched block, this renovation and garden has taken its cues from what already exists. 'As designers, you're trying to design to what your context is. Rather than see everything as a commodity, you can add to the story of the city,' says Kieron.

This project started with wanting to make something that belongs to the landscape, but it has become a gesture and statement about the future of suburban gardens and how they might contribute more than they take away. Combined with pragmatic and practical considerations of climate and a constrained site, this garden is a unique and sustainable space, grounded in its place.

The home was designed for a young family relocating from Melbourne. Their ambition was simply to be able to live well and spend time outdoors in the Brisbane climate. Although it wasn't a prescriptive brief, it's a tough site. With access to the rear yard likely to be limited in the future, the client was keen to build the garden first and renovate the house later. 'The investment has not been from a real estate perspective, but to make a beautiful space that they enjoy coming home to,' says Kieron.

The entry stairs are carved into the rock face, and the escarpment has been planted with grasses and ferns in every available pocket. This helps to slow the water that flows over the top before making its way to the road. 'You get a sense from the street that you are somewhere special,' says Kieron. The owners recognise that their entry garden has a life of its own, contributing far beyond the boundaries of their property. Kieron says that the owners' favourite part of the house is when they are 'coming back home at night, walking up through the stairs, with the plants cascading on the sides'.

Dichondra 'Silver Falls' (*Dichondra argentea* 'Silver Falls') forms a delicate curtain over the cavernous undercroft carport, and the garden bed has been supplemented to create a productive garden filled with herbs and vegetables.

The decision to not have lawn in the rear garden was led by the client and purposefully avoids the more typical suburban backyard they previously owned. It is also a response to the sloping site, echoing the broader landscape of hills and valleys. Rocks and river stones ensure that the garden 'copes with the Brisbane rainfall and holds itself to the slope', says Dan.

Most of the native planting palette has been inspired by the wider landscape, and requires little maintenance beyond an occasional prune. The grey-green foliage of native rosemary (*Westringia fruticosa*) and wild iris (*Dietes grandiflora*) contrasts with the dark blue hues of the pool. The pool is overlooked by a small seating area at the highest point of the garden, where you can relax and enjoy the bush setting. This borrowed view of the surrounding landscape is framed by stepped concrete boundary walls that also provide privacy from the immediate neighbours.

From this vantage point, whether contemplating a connection to place and the environment or simply watching the kids enjoying the pool, you would be forgiven for thinking that this wild garden has always been here.

The Illawarra flame tree will grow to provide shade to the pool and garden.

The borrowed landscape provides privacy from neighbouring apartments, and hardy natives edge the pool.

'You get a sense from the street that you are somewhere special.'
—Kieron Gait, architect

The north-facing verandah provides an outlook over Brisbane's West End as well as a private oasis above the street level.

Planting

Bougainvillea (*Bougainvillea glabra*)

Cardboard palm (*Zamia furfuracea*)

Dichondra 'Silver Falls' (*Dichondra argentea* 'Silver Falls')

Heliconia 'Hot Rio Nights' (*Heliconia bihai* x *caribaea* 'Hot Rio Nights')

Illawarra flame tree (*Brachychiton acerifolius*)

Native rosemary (*Westringia fruticosa*)

Wild iris (*Dietes grandiflora*)

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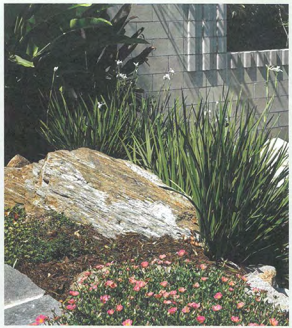

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1. The weeping form of dichondra 'Silver Falls' curtains over the undercroft carpark.

2. The cardboard palm thrives in tough environments and forms a unique silhouette.

3. This hardy, low-maintenance wild iris lines the pool edge.