



## LIGHT FANTASTIC

*An inspired transformation of a dark and cramped semi in North Bondi has given a family room to breathe*

It's relatively easy to build a house with delight and drama when little expense needs to be spared on the dimensions, interior surfaces, external materials, or architectural and engineering solutions. But how to create a house with a unique spirit from a more limited budget and a tight building footprint? That's the challenge Sydney practice LiteraTrotta set itself with a slender north-south oriented property at North Bondi.

LiteraTrotta's founding partners, Bronwyn Litera and Chris Trotta, cut their teeth at the boutique Sydney practice of Sydney architect Bruce Stafford. The South African-born Stafford focuses, as his website proudly declares, on homes and high-end hotels that are "luxurious and bespoke architectural statements".

Bronwyn Litera and Chris Trotta have clearly learnt some important lessons from Stafford. But their design philosophy, in keeping with their clients' needs and more limited means, is best expressed with a sartorial metaphor: rather than a \$2000 suit, they prefer a casual look with a classy jacket and shoes.

The clients for what would become SemiBold House at North Bondi approached the young practice – only two years old and with four in the team – with a desire to transform a semi-detached dwelling into a home that could accommodate their family now and into the foreseeable future. They are a couple in their late 30s with two young children, and they wanted the home, in which they had lived for a few years, to adapt to their evolving needs.

"On first inspection, the house came with all the usual problems of a long skinny semi," offers Bronwyn Litera. "It had limited space to entertain, narrow hallways to dead ends, zero storage and a very uninviting entry."

"The couple had two growing children in a single-storey dwelling with three bedrooms. But there wasn't really a rumpus room for the kids; it was all getting a bit cramped. Naturally they were keen to get the house reconfigured and functioning a bit better for them. Working from home became more of a priority, too. The children, they were acutely aware, would in no time become teenagers, and teenagers generally need bigger rooms and bathrooms. So, it was all about these changing needs."

Not only was the house cramped, it was dark. In one of their first conversations with the clients, the architects learned that the time of day could barely be told from the central kitchen. "The upshot of all this is that we needed to double the internal floorplan," explains Trotta. The addition of a second storey created space for a dramatic skylit entrance in the core of the house, an open north-facing kitchen-living-dining area flooded with light from the big north-facing windows, and at the rear, an outdoor deck, lawn and plunge pool.

"We fundamentally sliced the home in two by introducing a striking double-height window and skylight over the new entry and stair," Trotta continues. "A previously dark and awkward entry was transformed into a light

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*SemiBold House, designed by LiteraTrotta  
for a narrow site in North Bondi*



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filled foyer, with a sculptural stair with a solid balustrade leading up to the private spaces above. The opening brings much needed light into the centre of the home, while celebrating the narrow, tall architecture.”

Adds Litera, “The downstairs reconfiguration was to be reasonably minor in nature in relation to the existing rooms. The original master bedroom and ensuite were to be turned into a rumpus room for the kids, or a possible spare bedroom for the in-laws. Beside it stands a study – originally one of the kids’ bedrooms. The third downstairs bedroom was lost entirely – it became the new entry foyer and staircase to the new first floor.”

This upper floor was to be a procession of bedrooms with an ensuite, walk-in robe and Juliette balcony off the north-facing master bedroom. “The entirely new upper level was designed to be a sanctuary for the family members,” she says. “The two large kids’ bedrooms with a shared bathroom are upstairs at the [south-facing] front.”

The old ground-level bathroom – quite squishy as it had served the entire family – was converted into a generous powder room off the side entry.

The original house, sandwiched between the narrow semis in the street, was rendered in a dark shade of grey. Aiming to maintain its dark-hued drama, the architects opted for an Abodo timber cladding in a rich oil stain.

“Many of the existing openings were retained downstairs, however a sharp angle was cut in the long side of the upper level to allow for a new window and skylight above the kitchen,” says Litera. “The shape also allowed for a large north-facing window to the master ensuite, bringing a little extra luxury upstairs.”

The area in the house that’s experienced the most transformation is definitely the centre, says

Chris Trotta. “It was previously really compressed and tight and dark, with crappy skylights; and now it’s become a beautiful voluminous light space with a dramatic skylight that splits the house in two. The space is now defined by a sinuous staircase.”

When I congratulate him on this “Staffordish” touch he takes the compliment. “Well, we were working there for seven years.”

“We aimed to put a multi-million dollar home’s staircase into a modest semi,” chimes Litera. “We obviously had a much tighter budget than a Stafford budget. With the stair we had strong functional reasons to bring light into the house at this point, and so we said, ‘Let’s make this the real feature piece that sets the tone for the rest of the house.’”

A key structural principal, she says, was “not decorating for the sake of decorating”. We needed to focus on specific areas, make smaller moves. The new ground-floor powder room is a good example. It’s a beautiful jewel box with a mosaic marble and stucco finish. And to think it was once the main bathroom for the whole house.

“The internal palette was kept clean and simple; warm timber floorboards run throughout, with knotted carpet to the bedrooms. Clean, white rendered and plastered walls keep rooms feeling bright and airy, while a moody grey kitchen and concrete benchtops define the heart of the home.

“Impossibly tall pitched ceilings to the upper level make the rooms feel exceptionally large and spacious, and clever lighting keeps these ceilings completely clean of the usual ceiling clutter – and as a result, a little ethereal.”

The stairwell is made from a lightweight steel frame, as is the first floor. The stairs are timber, the sculptural form is clad in white plasterboard.

Says Litera: “We’ve used fairly economical products cleverly in a sculptural way to make the most of the light and create a space that we hope is beautifully uplifting.”

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