

Sydney's inner-urban laneways, currently lined with garages and acting as service lanes, are undergoing change and diversification of use. Peter designed his studio as a model for how this transformation can be done well.

A better way up

This studio dwelling above a laneway garage in inner Sydney is both a comfortable, compact place to live and a benchmark for this type of development.





WORDS Anna Cumming

PHOTOGRAPHY Brett Boardman

IN THE INNER SYDNEY SUBURB OF

Redfern, terrace houses with small backyards and rear garages opening onto laneways are common. As the need for urban densification grows, many homeowners are building above their garages; this creates both design opportunities and significant challenges. Concerned by two laneway studio projects that gained council approval in his lane, resident and architect Peter McGregor decided to design and build an alternative model.

“The laneway studio is a small project in itself, however when seen as a type, multiplied across hundreds of lanes across the city it becomes a large urban project,” Peter explains. “Doubling the height of existing frontages and adding another

layer of use to a service lane transforms the lane, imbuing it with the qualities of a street.” He notes that issues include maximising internal amenity, minimising the impact of the studio to the main house (and neighbours) and ensuring a visual connection from the studio back to the lane.

Peter’s design is a masterpiece of small-space planning. The main bulk of the structure, featuring a metal-clad mansard roof punctured by three windows, is placed on the laneway. A smaller volume containing the bathroom and a bedroom ‘nook’ is on the garden side. “These more private spaces only need the minimum ceiling height of 2.1 metres, meaning that the main room ceiling sails over them by about 75 centimetres,” says Peter. “We were able to put in a high window



Peter designed the east windows carefully to achieve a balance between privacy and engagement with the public space of the laneway. “The idea is that you can overlook the lane – this kind of passive surveillance is good for the community. But thanks to the high sills and deep window reveals, you can do it in your underwear!” he smiles.



The bathroom and bed nook can be completely closed away from the living space with sliding doors. Peter says that the design of the bed space went through many iterations. “The finished space is very cosy to sleep in, but I have to admit that there’s an art to making the bed. You have to sit on the joinery at the back to tuck the sheets in!”



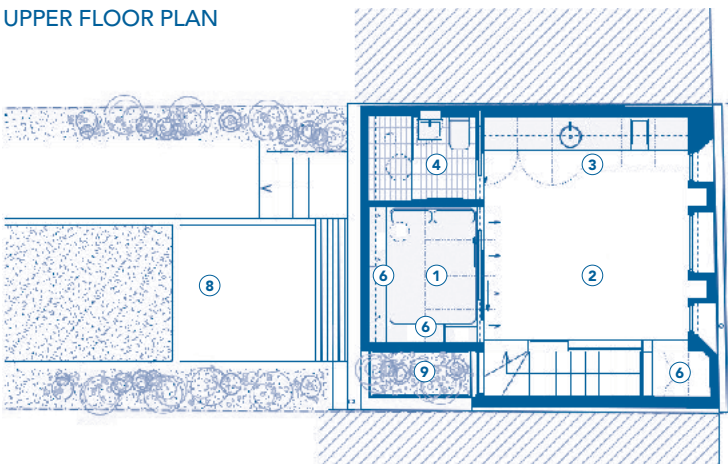
A window at the top of the stairs is set back two metres from the rear of the studio and is barely visible from the main house. “By doing this we’ve cut some bulk from the structure, minimising overshadowing to the southern neighbour. We integrated a planter box, whose greenery further screens the window and softens the boundary,” says Peter.





Materials were chosen for their simplicity, warmth and longevity. The floor is natural linoleum, made up largely of renewable linseed oil, and all timber is finished in zero-VOC Rubio Monocoat.

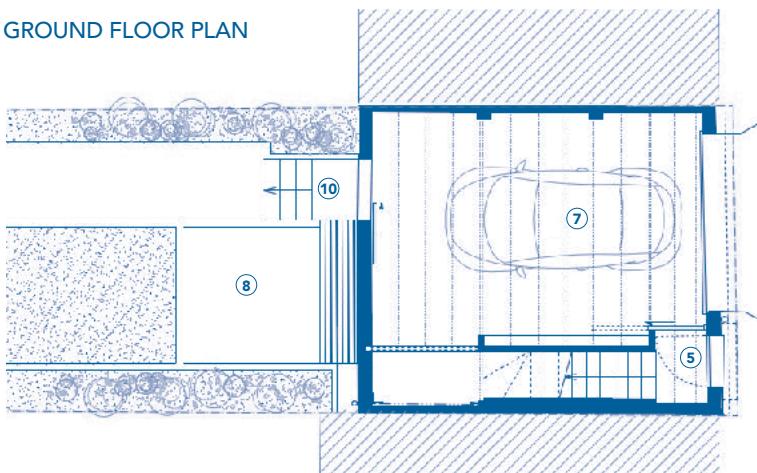
UPPER FLOOR PLAN



LEGEND

- ① Bed nook
- ② Living
- ③ Kitchen
- ④ Bathroom
- ⑤ Entry
- ⑥ Storage
- ⑦ Garage
- ⑧ Backyard of main house
- ⑨ Planter box
- ⑩ Pathway/access to main house

GROUND FLOOR PLAN



SOUTH ELEVATION





Architect Peter McGregor's garage-top studio sits harmoniously in its laneway context. "As the need for density and intensity of use grows, the 25-square-metre footprint is an increasingly important model for the fine-grained pedestrian city," he explains. The garage door was designed to show support for the local NRL team.

that lets in extra light, provides cross ventilation and offers a beautiful view of the 'chimneyscape' of the terraces." The design means that viewed from the backyard of the house, the eye is drawn to the smaller volume, whilst the larger volume of the main room recedes. "Breaking the form up into two parts makes the scale of the studio much finer."

On the lane side, Peter describes the relationship between the studio and the laneway as "at once both defensive and engaging, affording passive surveillance, whilst enabling privacy". The design of the windows as the interface between public and domestic is fundamental. High sills and deep reveals mean that passers-by can't see directly in, and external roller blinds help regulate privacy further, when needed. "Other studios have huge windows that mean an awkward juxtaposition between the public realm and the bedroom," Peter

notes. "So, they have their curtains and blinds permanently drawn and there's no engagement with the lane."

Inside, the design is considered and efficient: Peter has fitted a kitchen, living and sleeping space, a bathroom and storage into just 25 square metres. Inspired by traditional 'box beds' curtained off from living spaces, the bed nook has sliding doors that allow it and the bathroom to be completely closed off "so that you never feel like you're sitting in a bed-sit". Storage is tucked under, behind and around the bed, and skylights provide natural light in the bathroom and bed nook.

The studio is of well-insulated timber-frame construction, designed to be built atop Peter's "good solid brick garage" without the need for costly extra footings. Its east and west windows offer good cross ventilation and sunlight, and there is no air-conditioning. Peter chose pine for all of

the joinery, lower wall cladding and stairs, to keep the small space harmonious. "It's Australian plantation grown, and comes in veneer, plywood and solid timber, so it's really versatile," he explains.

Peter hopes his studio will provide inspiration to others. "It's easy now to get permission to build such a secondary dwelling," he says. "Thousands of these are going to be built, so it's important to do it better, have a better model." While structures along existing laneways are currently single storey, Peter believes many will soon be twice as high and become mixed use: cars plus residences, home offices and so on. "The lanes are all going to change – they can change in a good way or a really poor way. Our project is just one little project that has big implications for this emerging building type." ⑤

Laneway Studio

—Specifications

Credits

DESIGNER

Peter McGregor, McGregor
Westlake Architects

BUILDER

Ian Westlake

PROJECT TYPE

Addition

PROJECT LOCATION

Redfern, NSW

COST

\$150,000

SIZE

25 m²



The studio has been designed so it doesn't impose on the residents of the main house. "When you're in the backyard, you look at the smaller volume [containing bathroom and bed nook] and the larger volume recedes visually as well as actually," explains Peter. "It also means the yard gets morning sun earlier."



Sustainable Features

HOT WATER

– Instantaneous electric.

WATER SAVING

– 4-star WELS toilet, taps, shower head.

PASSIVE DESIGN / HEATING & COOLING

– Cross and convective ventilation, with windows on both sides, high and lower
– Exterior pull down blinds to the east and west
– Design maximises natural light.

ACTIVE HEATING & COOLING

– Small heater.

BUILDING MATERIALS

– Plantation timbers throughout
– Interior lining, joinery and stairs in hoop pine in plywood sheet, solid section and veneer (for the kitchen)
– Exterior standing seam cladding
– Insulation Knauf R2 in walls, R3.6 in ceiling.

WINDOWS & GLAZING

– Aluminium-framed Aneeta glazing, protected by exterior fabric blinds.

LIGHTING

– All LED; strips of LED lights integrated into the timber detailing.

PAINTS, FINISHES & FLOOR COVERINGS

– Rubio Monocoat zero-VOC durable finish
– Natural linoleum floors.

OTHER ESD FEATURES

– Small, 25m² area is very efficient with good amenity
– Building above an existing garage with no new footings enabled the reuse of materials
– Selection of Australian materials and fittings, including taps, mixers, Koala Mattress, Vitra panel splash back, all the timber linings, table and couch.



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