

Above the sand and the deep blue sea

A tight, overgrown site proved no barrier to creating a small, but flexible studio space among the treetops

Words **Robyn Willis** Photographer **Felix Mooneeram**

To borrow from Dennis Denuto in *The Castle*, this project in Sydney's Palm Beach is all about 'the vibe'. Rather than focus on a list of features, the owners of this property — a luxe studio behind the main house — were seeking a space that would provide a retreat for quiet study and relaxation in an idyllic beachside location.

But, as is so often the case with simple plans, delivery is another thing entirely.

Positioned between two roads, one of which offers access to the beach, the narrow site was covered in such dense vegetation that even the surveyors struggled to get an accurate take on what they were working with.

"You could trust (the survey) to a certain extent but the surveyors couldn't physically get in there," says Natasha Grice, project architect with Cadence & Co who were tasked with realising the brief from design concept through to completed construction.

But while it presented significant challenges for the building team, the steep, overgrown site offered the promise of something exceptional. First, however, Cadence & Co design principal

Michael Kilkeary says there were some practical matters to address.

"The brief was to create a studio space to make use of that little narrow pocket of land," he says. "It also gave them a connection from that upper road to the lower road with access to the beach."

Additionally, the roof would need to provide parking via the upper road, something that is always at a premium in the area.

While the site was partially cleared for construction, the team were careful to retain and protect significant trees. Kilkeary says they were an essential element in creating that feel of a retreat the owners desired.

"The first exercise was to get the site cleared so that we could fully understand it," he says.

"It was obvious from that point how special it was and how much we needed to work around it."

Kilkeary says attitudes towards trees in construction zones have changed quite markedly in recent years, from a position of frustration to one of celebration.

"For constrained sites they have been seen as obstacles to development and often >>

A mature gum tree, protected during construction, provides a sculptural element to the view.



The concrete roof provides valuable off street parking in popular Palm Beach, and breathtaking views of the ocean.

<< the first questions are 'how can we get rid of the trees'. But we very much take the approach of celebrating context and looking for those opportunities to frame views," Kilkeary says.

The studio design itself is simple, with a living/studio space facing onto the balcony towards the beach and an enclosed study and shower room tucked in behind it to the upper side of the block. Above, the concrete roof provides enough tandem parking for two cars.

Given the driveway is, indeed, the roof of the studio, concrete construction was the obvious choice. While it was not the original intention, the combination of concrete, timber and the treetop vista meant the project had more in common with Brazilian architecture than the traditional Australian beach shack typically built from weatherboard and commonly found in coastal areas.

"It wasn't an intended direction but I can see how that association could be made," Kilkeary says. "That treehouse approach, that genre I guess is more often seen in South America, with the houses perched on the hillside in the jungle.

"It's really nice, giving that sense of it possibly being elsewhere and a little unexpected for Palm Beach."

With neighbours to either side, windows facing the side boundaries are limited, with the exception of vertical louvred openings to capture sea breezes for cross ventilation. Slatted timber screens on the balcony further enhance the sense of privacy while still allowing air flow.

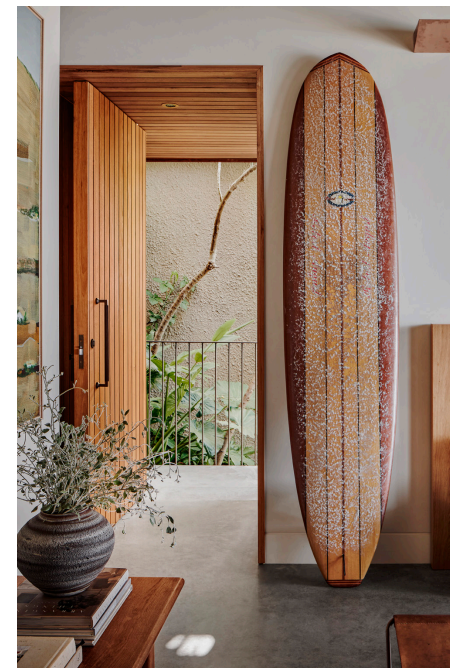
"Whilst it is a solid construction we have really focused on how it breathes as well," says Kilkeary. "It's a very flexible space so that when you're there you can open up those louvres and let the breeze through so it is quite cool.

"In terms of its sun shading, we've controlled that as well so that it's not getting a lot of heat load and passively we've made sure it's very comfortable."

Views to the north have been optimised and framed by the rolling roofline and mature tree, but Grice says that's not the only vista.

"There was a pleasantly surprising view corridor to the west," she says. "Everyone knew that the view to the north would be beautiful but over towards the west there's a lovely view, almost like a rainforest." >>





The site was heavily overgrown when the team arrived but they were careful to protect existing trees (left) to create an instant treehouse effect.

Easy care concrete was the obvious choice for the beachside studio (above).

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“ Given the nature of the steep site, construction was challenging and complex, from creating tree root protection zones to addressing council’s concerns about road stability at the top of the site.
“We had to start down low and get ourselves to a point where we needed to create a bench for ourselves at the bottom of the site and then work our way back up, one step at a time,” Grice says. “We ended up with a four-storey scaffold around the whole lot just to be able to get the guys up and down the site. And then the rain started.”

In the end, however, the results speak for themselves. Cadence & Co provide a fully integrated service, from design through to construction. Kilkeary says it gives homeowners confidence that their project will be built exactly as promised.

“It’s a matter of years between the first meetings when we’re scribbling on tracing paper to when we’re handing over the house and the occupation certificate,” he says. “That continuity allows us to build a really good working relationship — a personal relationship — with the clients which ultimately gives them trust and peace of mind.”

Those relationships extend across design and construction teams as well, says Grice.

“There’s a lot of cohesiveness and collaboration within the team which then forms the trust and the relationship with the clients because they see it happening on the spot,” she says.

“It alleviates a lot of the responsibility for the client. It was all on us to find a way to resolve it.”

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