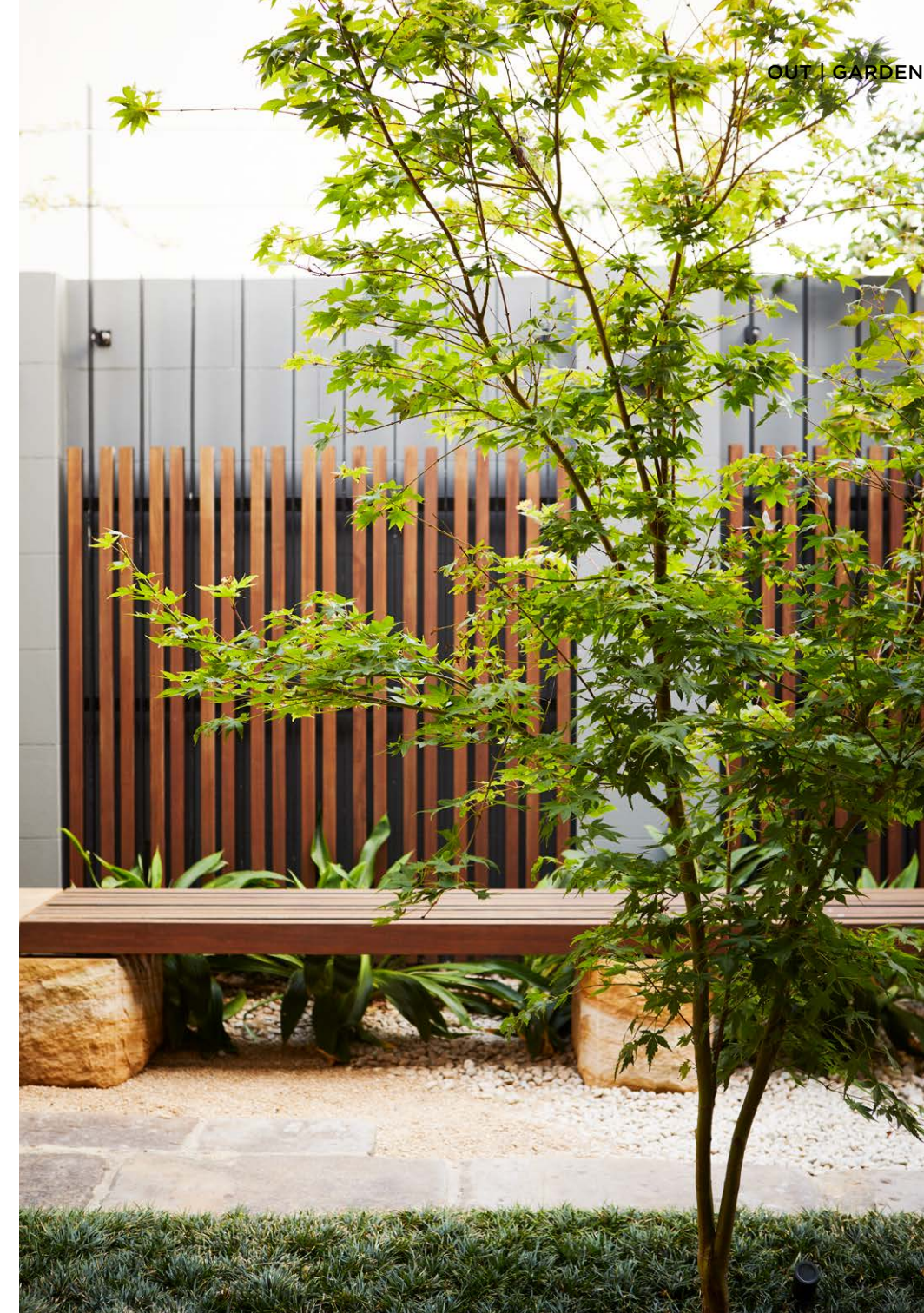


BOTH PAGES A custom bench in spotted gum echoes the slatted spotted-gum screen on the boundary fence and is a place to pause and reflect. Coral bark maples and white flowering bougainvillea lend verticality, while renga renga lilies and prickly rasp fern add eye-level interest.



ESCAPE PLAN

A small courtyard garden in Sydney has become a quiet refuge for its owners, who love being behind their high walls and chilling out in the leafy east-meets-west design

WORDS **CHRIS PEARSON** PHOTOGRAPHY **NATALIE HUNFALVAY**



Hidden behind a rendered brick wall in Sydney's inner south, this is a small garden that's had a big impact, both visually and in the lives of its owners. Created by landscape designer Katy Svalbe of Svalbe & Co, the lush green oasis with offshoots of minimalist Zen has proven its restorative powers during the pandemic. "Compact spaces demand design solutions that engage with every nook and cranny, for an immersive experience," says Katy of a haven that does exactly that, in spades.

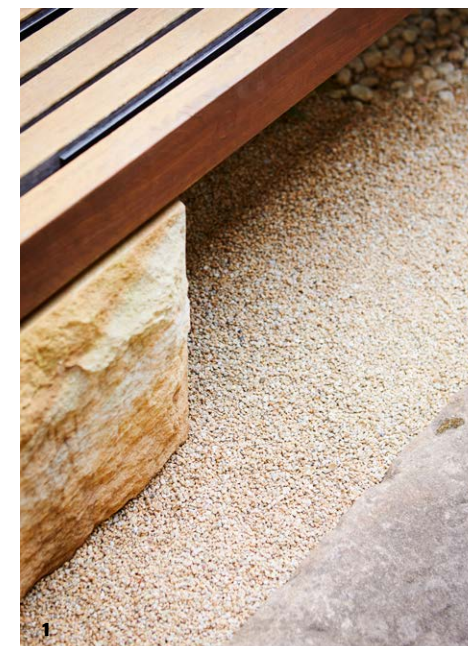
The garden's journey began in 2016, when the owners asked architect Genevieve Murray of Future Method Studio to design a minimalist, Japanese-inspired two-storey addition to their Victorian sandstone worker's cottage, with a wing bridging the two. Realising the importance of the courtyard at its core, they hired Katy to work her magic on it. "The brief was to design a garden connecting the old and the new, and east with west – a quiet outdoor space in a busy part of the city," says the owner.

ABOVE An external steel spiral staircase by All Metal Design connects a generous covered balcony to the garden. Lucky lady ferns fan out beneath.

OPPOSITE Bendigo Pebbles aggregate from Eco Outdoor contrasts with sandstone pavers recycled from the former garden and the chunky bench base in sandstone from Gosford Quarries. The tall planter from Garden Life is painted Resene Chicago, while the smaller planter has belonged to the client for some time. Hardy dwarf mondo grass provides the ground cover.



OPPOSITE The inside of the boundary wall was previously rendered, with grooves added to make it resemble tiling. Landscape designer Katy Svalbe and architect Genevieve Murray repainted it Resene Chicago and added spotted-gum timber battens. The Studio Italia 'Orsay' up-and-down light is from Monduluce.



“The client sought a simple refuge that could be enjoyed from within, above, and from the rooms opening onto the courtyard,” adds Katy. “Our vision was to create a walled garden escape.”

Her design had to speak to the old and new parts of the house on three sides, and a brick wall abutting the street on the fourth. But there was another, more unusual, parameter that Katy had to accommodate. The ho-hum existing garden was paved in sandstone with a sliver of tropical-style planting along the northern boundary. Jasmine vines also crept over a makeshift climbing structure atop that wall to provide privacy from the cottage’s upper floor.

Spiritually, the courtyard was no blank canvas either. “Genevieve handed us a map of the courtyard, with X marking the spot where the former owners (also her clients) had buried a cherished deceased dog,” says Katy of the no-go zone.

Simplicity was the key to the transformation, which began in April 2017 and was completed that Christmas. “We lifted the existing heritage sandstone and intermingled it with garden beds, so they formed a layered composition,” says Katy. “This brought immediate interest and texture to the ground plane.”

Meanwhile, she and Genevieve tied in the balustrades and steel detailing with slatted timber screens that divide the garage from the garden and relieve the expanse of the masonry wall.

DESIGN DETAILS

1 Big meets small in a study of contrast, with Bendigo Pebbles aggregate from Eco Outdoor flowing around the monolithic sandstone support of a custom cantilevered bench.

2 The inner side of the original brick wall had been rendered, with grooves added, to soften a plane that could otherwise have looked monumental. Genevieve and Katy further relieved it with battens similar to those in the home’s extension.

3 Two coral bark maples lend verticality to the plantings and soften the lines of such a high-walled space. Their leaves change colour seasonally and, being deciduous, offer shade in summer and sun through the bare branches in winter.

4 Sandstone slabs have been recycled from the old garden and intermingled with a dwarf mondo grass carpet to add softness and visual interest on the ground plane.

PLANT PALETTE
A variety of plantings can add
interest to any suburban setting



Coral bark maple (*Acer palmatum* 'Sango Kaku')



Renga renga lily (*Arthropodium cirratum*)



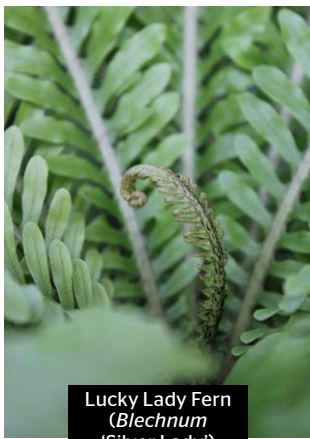
Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*)



White bougainvillea (*Bougainvillea* 'White Cascade')



Dwarf mondo grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus* 'Nana')



Lucky Lady Fern (*Blechnum* 'Silver Lady')

“I am blown away by how
such a small space, far
removed from the hubbub
beyond, engulfs me in green”

KATY SVALBE, LANDSCAPE DESIGNER

A slatted timber bench, sitting on monumental sandstone blocks, visually unifies diverse elements such as the paving, the cottage foundations and the vertical timber battens. And, tucked neatly under its cantilever, lies the precious pooch’s resting place. A chunky water feature complements the bench and counters any sounds that may creep over the wall.

For the canopy, two Japanese maples were introduced as a nod to the new addition. Being deciduous, they offer seasonal interest, ensuring generous shade in summer and sunlight in winter after they’ve shed their leaves. At ground level, a rich combination of mondo grass, rasp ferns and renga renga lilies results in a textural green carpet. “Their compact, upright forms were a key consideration with such a limited space,” explains Katy. Meanwhile, fuller deer ferns sit beneath a spiral staircase connecting the courtyard to the home’s upper level.

White bougainvillea climbs the boundary wall, up the timber-and-steel screens and onto a climbing structure, to ensure privacy from the street and from the old house’s first floor. “Hardscape elements are intertwined with green, meaning that, whichever way you look, you are greeted with a visual feast,” says Katy. “I am blown away by how such a small space, far removed from the hubbub beyond, engulfs me in green.”

“With the COVID-19 emergency, we have taken great respite in our small, balanced, simple, perfect space,” enthuses the owner. “It’s a place of peace and calmness, and keeps us centred. We couldn’t be happier.” ¹⁰

For more on Svalbe & Co, visit svalbe.co. This project’s architect was Future Method Studio; futuremethod.com.au. The landscape construction was done by Outdoor Establishments; outdooreestablishments.com

A water feature from Gather Co is a soothing accompaniment for the owners’ tranquil moments. Behind it is white bougainvillea.

PHOTOGRAPHY: FLORAPI (RENGA RENG LILY); B. CHRISTOPHER (ROSEMARY); JOHN KEATES (WHITE BOUGAINVILLEA); CHOCOHOLIC (LUCKY LADY FERN); ALL ALAMY