



Model architect

During the course of designing her first house, architect Philippa Randall discovered the motivation she needed to launch her own practice. Since then, she's overseen many projects in her own right, but she still experiences the same thrill upon completion.

PHOTOGRAPHY MARCUS CLINTON

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Like many young architects, Philippa Randall had always nurtured the idea of leaving the relative safety of employment in an established firm to strike out on her own. When she was approached by Helen Adam, a family friend, to design a new house, she was both excited by the prospect and apprehensive about the responsibility. Accepting the commission while she kept her day job allowed Randall to seek her colleagues' advice while she built up her confidence.

From her client's perspective, it made sense to engage a young architect. Helen Adam was acting on advice she'd received before the birth of her first child. "My father-in-law told me to get a young obstetrician, saying that a young doctor would probably have children and therefore be more *simpatico*, and his youth would mean he was up to date with the latest technology," she explains. "It's a philosophy I've used many times since then, and I've found it to be the case in many things I've done in my life."

Before commissioning her house, Adam had spent weekends and holidays in temporary accommodation on her rural block at the aptly named Hill of Peace, near Jamberoo in the NSW Southern Highlands. Over a period of 10 years, she'd watched where the sun fell on the landscape through changing seasons, and observed the prevailing wind patterns. She'd also selected a favourite aspect from the 360 degree view, which takes in the nearby sandstone escarpment and the distant ocean.

Adam saw examples of Randall's work before the two women met to discuss the possibility of collaborating. They formed a strong connection from the outset, sharing similar objectives for the site and the proposed building. "I wanted a design idiom that was Australian," Adam says. "I didn't want anything pretentious: I was brought up on a station in western Queensland, so I wanted something like a homestead. The house also had to be compatible with the existing barn, which is quite a large building, and it had to be angled in a certain way to cater for the site imperatives."

Both architect and client were happy for the project to evolve over several years, and during that time Randall developed her ideas as concept drawings to show Adam, before building a model of the proposed design. "It occurred to me at one point that the client was having trouble reading the drawings," she says. "It was a huge revelation for me: as an architect, how do you understand and talk to a lay client, who might be too embarrassed to let on that he or she doesn't understand what you mean? Now I build a model for most projects I take on, and I find it amazing the way clients react to them."

The final design for Adam's house is misleadingly simple. Randall worked hard to achieve balance between conflicting objectives including: achieving protection from bitter winds in winter, opening up the house to magnificent views and bringing in light and sun for warmth in all seasons.

She managed all that, and also imbued the house with a sense of



Randall struck a balance between cosy and spacious, for the Adam house near Jamberoo (see also opening page). High ceilings soar above the main living areas, while the bedrooms are in capsule-like spaces on the mezzanine level. Using a design idiom that is distinctly Australian, timber meets Colorbond and living spaces flow effortlessly from indoors to outside.

discovery, both for new visitors and her client. "It has the sense of a journey, similar to the one you've experienced on a bigger scale as you pass through the landscape on the way to the house from Jamberoo," Randall explains. "The approach to the front door provides a sheltered entry point with limited views to the west. Then you enter the house, coming in under a low ceiling, before the living space opens up to a double-height void, where your focus is drawn to the dramatic outlook."

Randall also aimed to distinguish between private and public spaces within an efficient plan; striking a balance between cosy, for when Adam is home alone, and spacious, for when visitors come to stay. The house boasts two private cores at either end of the double-height central living area, which spills out onto the external deck that acts as a platform for the view. Another platform juts out from the western end: it houses Adam's bedroom nook, so that, "she can lie in bed and look out through

the trees to an island off the coast that she has always been very fond of," Randall explains.

"It's a very simple design, in fact, it's a little bit deceptive when you see a picture of it," Adam concludes. "It looks like a basic Australian cottage, but when you get inside it is quite amazing in its economical use of space. Friends have suggested that Philippa should make a kit out of it because it works so well!"

Adam has lived in the house for five years, but she still experiences a sense of wonder there. "I love the way it opens up, it's an inside-out type of house," she says. "At any time of the day, there's a window that looks on to something that gives you a totally new perspective of the place. It's constantly giving me surprises."

During the course of the project, Adam and Randall became firm friends, and the architect is now a regular visitor to the idyllic retreat she created for her first client. The success of the project also provided her with the impetus she needed to launch her own practice, Philippa Randall Architects.

Since launching the firm, Randall has designed a number of office fitouts,

including the new Readers Digest building in Sydney's Pyrmont, and a new HQ for The Ark Group, a Sydney-based financial services company. While Randall works alone, she has employed students and young architects on a casual basis in the past when her workload demanded it, and she collaborates closely with builders and project management companies to win and then deliver new work.

At the time she took on a project to overhaul a Paddington terrace for a Sydney family in 2003, Randall had four other jobs on the drawing board. Ironically, Randall says, the Paddington job was relinquished by another architect who couldn't finish it. Clients Karen and Colin Twitchett wanted a contemporary modern home that rationalised a disjointed plan. "Karen had been living in the house for about 20 years, and had divorced and remarried in that time," Randall said. "When I met the couple, they shared the house, with its one tiny bathroom,



with her two teenage sons, so they wanted to revamp it to provide a better family home."

The project was complicated by the steeply sloping site, which meant that the existing house involved five changes of level from the front door to the rear garden. "There were lots of small tiered platforms that were not really working," Randall explains. "There were no real rooms, as such, everything was a corridor or a platform. Of course, cost and budget concerns governed how far we could go in terms of levelling it out to make more useable spaces."

"We tried to rationalise the family living area at the back to provide a larger open space, where the kids could do homework near the kitchen, and also to link to outdoor living areas," Randall continues. "At the front of the house, we opened up the wall between the formal dining and living room to modernise the space."

The clients arranged new furniture and artworks to complement their contemporary renovation. "We love the flow of space, and the modern, clean lines," says Colin. "And it's very easy to

live in," Karen adds. "For example, there's a soundproof door between the kitchen and front rooms, so we can sit up the front and not hear the boys when they are in the family room."

On the first floor, Randall used the existing envelope to create two new bathrooms, and to expand the second bedroom, while moving the third bedroom into a surprisingly spacious attic space. The master bedroom suite, with its wide balcony, French doors and muted colour tones, feels like a private refuge. "We love having two bathrooms now, and we can shut the pivot door at the entrance to our room, and it's like being in a hotel," Karen says. "It's completely private and removed from the rest of the house."

"In some ways this job was easier than a typical renovation, because it was all internal work," Randall observes. "Also, I had incredibly decisive clients on this job, which made it a breeze."

Having set up her solo practice five years ago, Randall has no regrets. "I think there's an element of social conscience required in architecture," she says. "You should be able to help all sorts of people: it doesn't have to be elitist. I like to think we can cater to champagne

tastes on beer budgets, when need be.

"It's unfortunate that, because of a lot of reality TV shows, people think things can happen easily, and they don't necessarily realise what architecture is, or what good design is. I've inherited clients in the past that have only worked with builders before, and they often conclude that you need an architect to bring poetry to a project."

It's clear from these two projects that Randall has done just that. "The best part of every job is seeing the project at completion," she says. "Walking through Helen's house with her, one on one, was much better than I thought it could be. It was an absolute joy to share that experience – she was like a child with all her Christmas wishes come true."

"That was partly what spurred me on to go out on my own – the thought that you could change people's environments that much," she adds. "In the case of the Twitchett house, seeing it finished and made into a fantastic home for them was such a pleasure. We achieved what they wanted within the budget they specified, and they are really happy with the result." ●

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Phillippa Randall

For the Twitchett house, Randall had to contend with five changes of level through the steeply sloping site. "We tried to rationalise the family living area at the back to provide a larger open space, where the kids could do homework near the kitchen, and also to link to outdoor living areas," says architect Phillippa Randall. Above the red leather lounge hangs *Untitled* by Yosi Messiah.

"We love the flow of space, and the modern, clean lines," says Colin Twitchett. "And it's very easy to live in," Karen adds. From the existing first floor, Randall created two new bathrooms, extended the second bedroom, and moved the third bedroom into a spacious attic space, creating a private refuge for the parents.

