

Concrete pleasures

For the owners of this home in Sydney's eastern suburbs, keeping out harsh sunlight was an essential part of the plan to enjoy opulent interiors and a European sensibility in terms of design

Story **Janne Ryan** | Architectural photography **Brett Boardman** | Portrait photography **Adam Knott**

The architect

Alec Tzannes, director, Tzannes Associates, Sydney Professor and dean of UNSW Built Environment

The client

Robyn Cosgrove, Robyn Cosgrove Rugs, Sydney

The house

Woollahra, Sydney

What they are reading

Alec Tzannes *Remarks on 21 Works* by Rafael Moneo; *Triumph of the City* by Edward Glaeser; and *The Life and Death of Democracy* by John Keane.

Robyn Cosgrove *Behind Closed Doors* by Hugo Vickers.

What they are thinking about:

Alec Tzannes We are at a time that is really significantly going to change us. For example, the way we treat the environment, the way we treat animals. I am interested in what skills my generation [architects born in the mid-20th century] can bring to lay the foundation for the future. The narcissism of our time worries me.

Robyn Cosgrove I am wanting to create a very European restrained-light effect in the house so I am always looking for things that will work on the wall here, particularly small pieces of [European] art from the 1920s to 1960s.

The architect's story

Alec Tzannes It is a long relationship with Robyn and Trevor Cosgrove. They first approached me to work with them in the late 1980s, on their showroom and house in Sydney's Double Bay, and we did a really beautiful job together. They approached me again for this job. I advised them it would be a very difficult project but there was a way through the planning process to get a house on the site, [although] with some risks.

I am very interested in clients who are interested in architecture and in design and, in Robyn's case, she is passionate about design and decoration. I am very keen to assess whether there is something I can do which has an integrity from a design perspective, from my design perspective, and which, if you like, really is a fit for the client. When I meet with someone, whether I know them or I don't, it takes a while to settle things down; there is a bit of work to do to get a client/architect agreement signed. My main objective, absolutely main objective, is to try and see what the best thing is for that particular client and it may not be my services. We say no a lot.

All projects are a new beginning and I could see challenges in this project that, if successful, would be an example of a new building type, a fine home that was distinctive but still fitted into the area. At the time, the legislation simply did not permit this building – it is basically a house built over a garage. Because it is a confined site there were very limited options. In many respects, and this is an important point, its urban architecture had to come from a deep understanding of the urban situation – headlights, noise, overhead wires, a very busy street, heritage concerns, the northwest direction of the sun. When you really analyse that, the form of the house evolves. Then there is the spirit of what will it feel like, what will you experience and think about it when you are in it, living in it, watching visitors be part of it, what sort of messages do you want to give the world?

I feel every architect has a responsibility to see their building as part of the greater environment. It will be there a very long time, it has taken a huge amount of energy – literally a lot of carbon emission to build it – and as well as having bedrooms and living spaces, there needs to be a public contribution in that the street must be better, the place must be better and the people around it must feel good about it. I wanted to show that this building could be built and in doing so would act as a catalyst to re-examine assumptions about what could

be built. Now, have we technically changed the law yet? No, but we have set a precedent and I think that precedent will eventually change the law.

Public interest is my principle

The best way to avoid a battle [with councils] is to prepare a case as thoroughly as possible that explains the proposition from the public interest perspective, the very interest the council is there to defend. They are the stewards of public interest. You have to broker the relationships. You have to listen carefully.

Good buildings change things and I'd like to think of my architectural practice as being one that has consistently challenged society to make buildings better from a public interest perspective. If the end product is against the public interest I will turn a commission down. It is a principle, a guiding line that I won't cross.

Yes, there is an apparent contradiction in that I take on [private, high-end] projects/clients such as Jamie Packer's house in Sydney's Vaucluse and John Symond's house in Sydney's Point Piper. But, as I have said publicly before, we will always continue to serve people of all types. It is not a question of how much money they have or whether they have a lack of money, it is the project.

I am interested in buildings that are going to last a long time, that can be adapted in the future. They are really important culturally. I am going to be audacious and say that if you could imagine being in Point Piper in 100 years' time, the Symond house would still be there. The rest of the houses will have been built and re-built three or four times, which is environmentally disastrous.

Greatest frustration

Robyn and I robustly discussed the amount of light a building should have inside. I am the sort of person who doesn't want to switch on the lights in the day time, I want the building able to be lit through natural means. Robyn wanted a more subdued European-feel environment and





it is a reasonable proposition to have a darker modern house, it's the kind of house we don't often produce in Australia. Robyn will say, "Alec's houses are too light."

So that is an acknowledged point of difference in our aesthetic, in our way of living. It is a big one and it was one of the most challenging parts of the design process, but I accepted the commission knowing that this is what she wanted and that it was reasonable to do a house like this. It was the client's choice and I respect not only Robyn and Trevor but their right to ask for a different type of building [even though] it was a challenge to work in a way that is not my preferred instinctive. In the future, when the house is no longer occupied by Robyn and Trevor, it could be changed to be light again very easily.

Greatest achievement

The relationship with Robyn and Trevor is a lifelong friendship, not one where we have dinner with each other all the time but a friendship that through this process has been consolidated. So that is a real achievement. The other achievement is that the building did turn out well. It could have been a disaster and my reputation could have been a mess as a result of it, but it isn't. I imagine that the building will just get better and better in time. We are all custodians of this little house and that is the way I like to think of what architects should be doing. We are also custodians of a city [and] I don't want to see this city expand in size by taking away good farmland and killing off wildlife to build more streets and so on. We already have enough space to do five times the density, and this house is a good example of how we can do it.

“Alec’s buildings have a sense of longevity, they are here to stay, rather than having a use-by date”

The client's story

Robyn Cosgrove We had Alec design our previous apartment [in Double Bay] above our showroom and the relationship has worked wonderfully. I love Alec's style, I love the solidity and dimension of his buildings and I love that they are monumental to a point. His buildings have a sense of longevity, they are here to stay, rather than having a use-by date. With this property we wanted to do the same again. This time, though, we are in a different time of life, wanting to scale down, we didn't need a big house. These things shift when your children leave and you have grandchildren; other thought processes enter. I felt I was going into a new busy phase of working and we go out a lot. It's a more urban life. Here in Woollahra we had a showroom with a backyard, where we had parking, but it was an empty space really and we wanted to build something small [two bedrooms, essentially] and live here.

I had very definite ideas about what I wanted and it was an Alec building made of concrete. We love concrete. We also wanted a private space and had to consider the noise factor of the site, it's right on a busy street, and we also had to consider the orientation of the house, which is more west than north. We also wanted a separate kitchen. I know people like open kitchens nowadays but I do like the separation of the workspace. I think an open-space kitchen is fine for young people, when you have loads of friends and you are entertaining, but I still like the separation and establishing an individual identity for the living room. I like rooms. It was part of the brief.

Darkness rather than light

Another very important part of the brief was working with darkness rather than light. In Australia we have so much light, really strong light. We have a long summer so we

are always in this bright, glaring light and with an interior it just drains the colour out of everything and diminishes the effect. I wanted this very rich European-ised interior. This was a challenge here with the western sun, especially in summer. Alec understood this as we had worked together before. He understood we had different opinions about natural light but I think he probably didn't really have a handle on what I wanted to do to the interiors. I wanted to focus on the finishes more – silk and velvet on the walls, and wood. And I wanted to put a lot of furniture in the house. From the very first drawings, I knew where every piece of furniture was going to fit. I have far too much furniture in Alec's mind. We locked horns in the other place [Double Bay] when I told him about the furniture so I thought, I am not going to tell him about it this time! But he knows ...

I think there are a lot of people who want an architect and love their style but when the house is finished get a big surprise in that they have no idea about what furniture to use and where to put it. I was always thinking, "How can I furnish this space."

Getting good advice

We were nearly two years in council and Alec was so important during this time. He listened a lot, he's had a lot of experience with councils and, in particular, working in Woollahra. We spent a lot of money with two town planners. The first said: 'You will never get it through; there is no way you will get it through.' Then we changed town planners and were advised that we would get it through council. We also had a barrister and were prepared to go to the Land and Environment Court. Our town planner had researched the land and found that there was a church originally on the site, and a doctor's surgery, too, so we had a very, very good case for our plans.

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would be a great improvement to this site. We were hellbent on putting our residence here, confident that Alec was going to give us this wonderful concrete building, but we were naive about the parameters the council was setting for us. Alec was pushing the boundaries here, though. He was extremely clever getting the right words said, and the council could see this.


Greatest frustration

The biggest challenge was the council, initially. Dealing with them was a nightmare really. They just couldn't see what we wanted to do; councils are not innovators. We were constantly handing out money and that was challenging, too, although Trevor looked after this side of the project. We had a budget – and came in on it, marginally – because we knew what we wanted.

But the greatest frustration was bringing the ideas to life through the concrete. The concrete was the hardest to get right and this was something we didn't want compromised at all. I think Alec was pleased with our commitment but the quality we were envisaging with the concrete was a challenge for everyone. It was such a frustration – at times

we thought that we should have used brick – but we kept going and we are pleased we did because it has paid off. Now we can see how the building has matured and I can't see the problems any more.

Greatest achievement

Getting what we have ... looking at a plan and me with my tape measure out and thinking the furniture would fit. The spaces are actually bigger than we thought we could have. I had to keep checking my tape measure. I do like clutter and I will probably fit more in as I get older. I have great visualisation skills to make things fit. Trevor isn't convinced about a lot of my plans but I just wait for him to go to bed and then move everything around. It is a good space for my artwork and for expanding into my new phase. I don't feel at all hemmed in. We just love coming up the stairs and walking into this place. 

Janne Ryan is an ideas curator. She is executive producer of TEDxSydney2012, one of Australia's leading cultural events, and a member of the ABC Radio National By Design team. She is on Twitter @JanneRyan.