

Tree of *change*

A six-metre-high fiddle leaf fig is a dramatic focal point inside this renovated cottage in Sydney's Annandale, an organic, contemporary space awash with light and alive with nature.

By Joanne Gambale Photographed by Anson Smart
Styled by Claire Delmar



THIS PAGE in the living area, Tactile sofa by Baxter from Criteria; Ten10 travertine table from Spence & Lyda; custom cowhide ottoman; Cassina LC4 chaise longue from Space Furniture; Noguchi Akari Horn lamp from Living Edge; vintage rug from Robyn Cosgrove; *Lines of Confluence (2)* artwork by Judith Wright, from Sophie Gannon gallery. **OPPOSITE PAGE** in the dining area, potted gum Splayed Leg Elliptical dining table from Planet; Gubi Beetle chairs from Cult; Christian Thompson artwork, *Untitled (Banksia Leaf)* (2007), from Michael Reid gallery. *Details, last pages.*







LEFT in the living area, Tactile sofa by Baxter from Criteria; built-in sofa base in smoked oak by Welsh + Major, upholstered in Belgian linen by Arent & Pyke; Sika rattan chair from Domo; Ten10 table from Spence & Lyda; bagged brick wall with custom shelves in Tasmanian blackwood, steel and brass by Welsh + Major; vintage rug from Robyn Cosgrove; *Lines of Confluence (2)* artwork by Judith Wright from Sophie Gannon gallery.

Jack's beanstalk was an overnight success, the product of an opportunist and his magic beans, but the giant fiddle-leaf fig that shoots for the roof from the lightwell in a renovated cottage in Sydney's Annandale tells a whimsical fairytale of its own.

Now reaching six metres, the fiddle-leaf represents a nostalgia shared by the home's South African owners, Natalie and Keiron Devlin. "Where we grew up, lots of things would happen under a tree," explains Natalie Devlin. "School meetings, family gatherings... disputes were solved, stories told. Now we share meals and have family debates under our tree."

The centrepiece of the renovation is also a perfect metaphor for what became an unusually organic project, which grew and branched out over a six-year period just as the family evolved from pre-school to pre-teen. "We feel that taking our time and feeling our way is what has made [the project] sing," says Devlin. "We probably didn't work in the normal way... we were quite green."

Architects Welsh + Major had a concise brief for a 'robust' home — and that word kept cropping up as they were taken through reams of collected images of steel-and-concrete buildings. A skinny single-storey Federation cottage that had all but lost its original features, with various brick and weatherboard additions crammed in behind, "the house was well and truly penned in", says architect David Welsh.

Skip to the end of the boundary-pushing build and the family decided the requested 'edge' needed some softening, so they brought in interior design studio Arent & Pyke. "I needed help working out the personality and soul of the house," says Devlin.

At the architecture's core is the lightwell, which houses the fig and gives the central living hub breathing space, along with a retractable glazed roof. It is flanked by the original, now black-stained timber cottage at the front and three new brick volumes decreasing in width like a telescope tube towards the back, so that every inch of the long site is exploited for light and outdoor >>

"We feel that taking our time and feeling our way is what has made [the project] sing"

NATALIE DEVLIN



THIS PAGE at the stairwell, the six-metre-high fiddle-leaf fig grows towards the retractable glazed roof. **OPPOSITE PAGE** Keiron and Natalie Devlin; Natalie wears Lee Mathews Elise **shirt**, Scanlan Theodore **pants** and Tibi velvet **pumps** from The Outnet; African cactus **sculpture** set in Den Holm stone.







LEFT in the dining area, spotted gum Splayed Leg Elliptical table from Planet; olive velvet covered Gubi Beetle chairs from Cult; Noguchi pendant light; Christian Thompson artwork, *Untitled (Banksia Leaf)* (2007), from Michael Reid gallery.

« contact, with a galley kitchen opening onto a Sue Barnsley-designed courtyard. Sandstock bricked neighbours at the now-favoured back entrance highlight the design's contextual influence. "The architectural scale was so huge," says Juliette Arent. "We were brought in to consider the minutiae, to create atmospheres."

"Natalie kept saying: 'Challenge me. Don't be soft with me.' She would choose something by saying: 'This feels right.' She's very similar to us in that way"

JULIETTE ARENT

While refuting the 'industrial' tag, Welsh agreed the palette of sandstock bricks and polished concrete would respond well to Arent & Pyke's soft touch. "There was some parallel play and it was quite a lovely overlay to what is a pretty robust palette of materials," he says. "There's that word again!"

'Robust' could also describe Devlin's involvement in the creative process. "She kept saying: 'Challenge me. Don't be soft with me,'" says Arent. "She would choose something by saying: 'This feels right.' She's very similar to us in that way. There were lots of these conversations: should we paint the bagged brick? What should we do with the opposite wall? It was much slower in unfolding than we're used to."

One ongoing debate was had over a white powder-coated table Devlin had lined up for the dining room. "We knew a space like that needed the timber," says Arent, "and the sumptuousness of the Gubi Beetle velvet chairs." She came round in the end.

Along with the word 'robust' on the brief was 'playful', and Indigo, 13, and Guinness, 10, were considered and consulted throughout. Their need for "lots of sprawling and reading" resulted in various little nooks; their self-portraits are engraved in the concrete bas-relief tiles of the new entry; and climbing handles beckon them up a wall to the rooftop aloe garden above the kitchen.

"It's their party trick," says Devlin. "Whenever they have friends over they like to climb up and hang out." There's even a plan to fix a rope from Guinness's bedroom window so he can climb up and down the fig tree. Just like Jack. **VL**

arentpyke.com; welshmajor.com

THIS PAGE Indigo and Guinness in the stairwell; bespoke **step** in evergreen marble from Artedomus. **OPPOSITE PAGE** in the courtyard adjacent to the galley kitchen, floating concrete **bench** by Sue Barnsley; custom cafe-style terrazzo **table** by Arent & Pyke; Hay Palissade **stools** in olive; **vessels** from Planet and Sophie Nolan.







THIS PAGE in Indigo's bedroom, custom Arent & Pyke corner **bedhead** in Lee Jofa Graffito Teal/Pearl fabric from Elliott Clarke; Moroso **table** from Hub. **OPPOSITE PAGE** in the main bedroom, Herman Miller Crosshatch **chair** from Living Edge, covered in cream bouclé; **bed linen** by Society Limonta, from Ondene; *I Had Searched Everywhere for My Love Except the Other Side of Death* **artwork** by Leah Fraser. *Details, last pages.*

