

# SPA TREATMENT



A small, challenging site has been transformed into a wondrous pocket garden complete with a 'plant bathing' experience in the heart of the city.

STORY *Elizabeth Wilson* | PHOTOGRAPHY *Kristina Soljo*



Designed by Steve Warner of Outhouse Design Landscapes & Gardens, this city courtyard is miraculously multifaceted, accommodating a dining area, barbecue, daybed, spa and outdoor shower within the 49m<sup>2</sup> space. A focal point is the integrated barbecue bench/recliner seat formed from lightweight concrete. A tree fern (*Cyathea cooperi*) creates a canopy layer while Madagascan jasmine (*Stephanotis floribunda*) grows up the wall. B&B Italia outdoor setting and Serralunga 'New Wave' pot, both Space. Barbecue, BeefEater. Outdoor shower, Robert Plumb.

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**ABOVE** The daybed, spa and outdoor shower are all located in the reclaimed space, where Steve elevated elements of the design to accommodate the services underneath. The daybed is encircled by lady palms (*Rhapis excelsa*) and *Philodendron 'Xanadu'*. A tree fern (*Cyathea cooperi*) stands sentinel in the corner. Outdoor shower, Robert Plumb. Towels, Hotel Luxury Collection. **BELOW LEFT** Travertine steppers and tree ferns in the side passage. **BELOW RIGHT** The tree fern canopy sends dappled light into the space. Spa from Spa World.



After 17 years of living in a high-rise apartment, Sydney couple Derek Raney and David Delaney were keen for a change of altitude. They wanted to stay in their inner-city neighbourhood, but they were ready to swap their views for the opportunity to step outdoors and entertain alfresco.

They bought a nearby garden apartment off-the-plan, excited by the promise of 49 square metres of outdoor space. But shortly before the pair moved in, they were dismayed to discover a change to the layout meant a large portion of the space would be taken up with plumbing and services. The new plan featured a retaining wall and massed plantings of ornamental gingers designed to hide the plumbing. "It was basically a 40-square-metre planter box," says Derek.

The couple approached a few landscape designers for a solution to their challenging L-shaped site. They hoped to reclaim the space and create an entertaining/barbecue zone, relaxed sitting area and - key on their wish list - room for a two-person spa. The most imaginative response came from Steve Warner at Outhouse Design Landscapes & Gardens. "Steve and his team really nailed the brief," says Derek.

Steve's vision was for an immersive, multi-zoned garden, an "engaging space you can walk into and journey through". His first step was to cut away the retaining wall, which immediately opened up the site. Then, thanks to a combination of lateral thinking and clever engineering, he elevated an entire section of the garden so it sits above the plumbing, creating a multi-level design while allowing access to the services. In this area he placed a circular daybed, spa and outdoor shower, all accessed via a "bridge" of raised stepping stones that appear to float through a sea of greenery.

In the alfresco dining area he designed a bespoke, integrated barbecue bench/recliner seat made out of lightweight concrete coloured with dark pigment. "It's the hero of the garden," says Steve, "a piece of furniture that draws you outside." The sinuous lines of this sculptural benchtop/seat also form part of the "visual ribbon" of curvilinear shapes and dark tones that flow throughout all zones.

Plant-wise, Steve matched his palette to the surrounding backdrop of raw, formed-concrete walls. "The architecture is wonderful but quite brutal and industrial, so we needed strong and textural plants that could hold their own," he says.

Chosen for their foliage contrasts, the plants are layered to create depth and lushness. At ground level are hardy native violets and *Ajuga reptans*. The mid-level consists of *Philodendron 'Xanadu'*, *Rhaphiolepis 'Oriental Pearl'* and *Liriope muscari 'Isabella'* against a green boundary wall of lady palms (*Rhapis excelsa*). And the canopy layer is created by a regal tree fern (*Cyathea cooperi*), its umbrella-like fronds creating a privacy screen above the spa. In the opposite corner is a frangipani tree while Madagascan jasmine (*Stephanotis floribunda*) climb a series of vertical wires, forming soft, green tendrils against the raw concrete walls.

Derek and David are thrilled with their pocket-sized, resort-style garden deep in the heart of the city. "It's a total joy to be able to walk outdoors into this space," says Derek. "To be able to jump into the spa with a tree-fern canopy overhead, in this location, is amazing." **H&G Outhouse Design Landscapes & Gardens, Stanmore, NSW; outhousedesign.com.au.**