



## HEIGHT OF STYLE

This lush balcony garden is an oasis of calm for the owners of a top-floor apartment in Sydney's bustling inner city



With apartment living on the rise, you would expect relaxing green landscapes to be a thing of the past in urban environments. Not so. This inner-Sydney balcony proves you can have a lush garden no matter where you live. The homeowners' brief to OUTHOUSE design's principal designer Steve Warner and senior landscape architect Katrine Mardini was to convert their unused, exposed balcony into a place of shelter — somewhere they could relax and entertain.

"With inner-city living on the increase, there is pressure to maximise every square inch," says Steve. "Also, this amazing balcony was so unique that not taking advantage of it would have been the crime of the century."

To bring the drab space to life, Steve, Katrine and the team designed a clean-lined modern courtyard-style space that provides a visual sense of unity with the interior of the apartment and features a bespoke pergola to provide protection and shade. "The overhead structure with its Vergola insert is a standout feature," says Katrine. "It introduces an interesting organic shape that shuns sharp corners and draws you into the wider garden."

The striking sculptural pergola was custom-designed by PO Box Design to envelop the louvered roof section and cover the expansive

entertaining space. Built using lightweight powder-coated aluminium, the colour of the pergola was chosen to match the apartment building. "This was a major factor in the design as we wanted to complement the existing development and create a flow from the upper balcony to the lower garden," says Steve. "Also, as nothing could be bolted or fixed onto the existing tiled floor, the pergola was used as the key connecting point to the main building."

Previously, the far end of the balcony had been covered in white pebbles, making the space unusable and difficult to maintain. The pebbles were replaced with timber decking, complementing the new seating and providing a cleaner more contemporary look.

As the apartment was on the top floor, the OUTHOUSE design team had to contend with limited access for construction. All items had to be dismantled into sections so they would fit in the elevator and then be reassembled on the balcony. The structural engineer also imposed weight-loading restrictions, which the team dealt with by favouring lightweight aluminium for key elements, such as the pergola and planters. To ensure minimum impact on the floor tiles and manoeuvrability, the individual planters have commercial-grade casters.

"All key garden beds, including the main one that wraps around the seating area, were raised

from the ground using commercial rubber feet to allow for drainage and flow of excess water into the existing drainage points," adds Katrine.

For sustainability and reduced maintenance, all plants are drought-tolerant and happily rely on natural rainfall alone. Of the plants, Steve says, "A clean planting palette was created to deliver strong, bold architectural contrast to the striking overhead structure and privacy screen at the side." Among the plants chosen are *Rhaphiolepis indica* 'Oriental Pearl', *Dichondra argentea* 'Silver Falls', *Westringia* 'Greybox', *Strelitzia reginae*, *Cupaniopsis anacardioides* and *Sansevieria trifasciata*.

The upshot is a welcoming and sheltered architectural balcony garden, one in which the homeowners can relax and entertain — and one that requires almost no upkeep. Perfect!

NSW

PROJECT DETAILS

Landscape design  
**OUTHOUSE DESIGN**  
 Address Studio 24/43-53 Bridge Road,  
 Stanmore NSW 2048  
 Mobile 0415 764 775  
 Website outhousedesign.com.au





STEVE WARNER

## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Connecting people of all ages to the outdoors is what drives Steve Warner, designer and founder of OUTHOUSE design

**Why did you choose landscaping?** As a young lad I spent my school holidays in my grandparents' community garden. They had a keen interest in gardening, a real passion for production and believed in the "paddock to plate" ethos. This ardour for the outdoors and gardening was ingrained in my parents first and then in me. I have always gardened as a hobby, but one day I realised that life is too short not to do what you love, so I enrolled at the Ryde School of Horticulture. I graduated with a Diploma in Landscape Design and was lucky enough to land my first job as a landscape officer in one of Sydney's largest councils. In 2006, I established OUTHOUSE design.

**What is your design philosophy?** I believe a well-designed garden has balance, interest and intrigue. It needs to connect with the people who will be using it on a visual as well as sensory level. When creating a space, whether it's a small courtyard, family garden or a rural

landscape, it should offer an experience, but it should also be sustainable and approached with a "do it once, do it right" attitude. We also ensure that we plan for change. Our clients' lives ebb and flow with the journey of life and the gardens we design for them need to be able to support that.

**How do you ensure the desired outcome?** You need to spend time getting to understand your client and the outdoor space that you are designing. This is the most critical part of the process and shouldn't be rushed. I believe a designer's job is to guide the client and encourage them to be part of the process, if possible. At the end of the day we are trained to design gardens, but designing a space with your client, rather than dictating the design, is what we should always strive for.

**How is your company different?** OUTHOUSE design is unique and our team has proven that traditional landscape architecture can be

delivered differently. Our highly skilled, award-winning team is comprised of specialists who lead projects in the areas of private residential gardens, health and wellbeing, commercial and education, and play and recreation. And that's what makes OUTHOUSE design different to a generalist landscape architect or designer.

**Can you share some career milestones?** We have been very fortunate to have many of our projects featured in national design magazines. We have also been honoured with 22 industry gold medals, including the highly coveted Allan Correy National Award for Design Excellence on two occasions. On a personal note, I have had the honour of becoming a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Landscape Designers & Managers, and am a past president of that association. All of these professional milestones have been amazing, but designing the outdoor space at the Sydney's Children's hospital, which I did in collaboration with Katrine Mardini, our senior landscape architect, has definitely been the highlight of my career to date. It's the chance to make a difference and connect people of all ages and abilities with the outdoors which is why we do what we do.

**OUTHOUSE design,**  
[outhousedesign.com.au](http://outhousedesign.com.au)

## PATCH OF PARADISE

How landscapes can help you practise mindfulness



**Words:** Steve Warner

It has long been said that gardens can heal the soul and replenish our jaded or dulled spirits. For years we have been coming together in one form or another to cultivate soil, produce food and experience a social connection. The term "therapeutic landscapes" is a great descriptive umbrella for this sense of community that can come from striking the right balance.

Most of us would agree that our life's journey would benefit from the physical and mental wellbeing that a considered landscape would provide, but where the opportunity truly lies is when this design inclusion is more deliberate; this is where the research into wellbeing and the benefit of mindfulness is so compelling.

### A place of escape

We believe the key thread that unifies every unique space is the inclusion of individual personality and goals; elements that create a home rather than a house, an experience rather than a place of routine. This is a space that transcends the everyday, creating an escape, an incubator or an extension of a passion.

You don't need a quarter-acre block or the rambling grounds of an historical garden, you simply need a space that will connect to you personally. A space that you will feel safe

and secure in, also warm and relaxed. Let's take a moment and consider elements that you could connect with, ones that create a mindful approach to the here and now. This could simply be the inclusion of some well-considered items, natural materials and sensitive plant selection, not forgetting location, which makes all the difference.

### Practise makes perfect

You can practise mindfulness in various ways:

- Rest yourself upon a cushioned timber seat. Feel the sunshine on your face, the tactile timber under your fingers and the enduring nature of that support.
- Experience seasonal change under a deciduous tree. Watch as the autumn leaves become radiant in the sunlight and slowly float to the ground; listen as they rustle in the wind or are crunched under foot.

- Focus your gaze on the falling water that slowly trickles down the face of a wall-mounted water feature or listen as it cascades from one bowl in a fountain to the next.
- Feel the calm movement of the breeze on your skin as you sit in your garden. Watch as it interacts in a tactile way with flowers or smell the scent it carries.

All of this can be found in your own small patch of paradise and a skilled landscape designer can deliver these in a purposeful yet not scripted manner. Let's face it, the world we live in sets high expectations, creating pressure and anxiety. Sometimes we can't change that element of our lives, but we can invest in a new space that helps regenerate the soul.

*Steve Warner is an award-winning landscape designer and director of Sydney-based OUTHOUSE design. [outhousedesign.com.au](http://outhousedesign.com.au)*





## A WORK OF ART

Of innovative design, this visually arresting, contemporary urban garden is a testament to construction excellence



**SIMON MUNN**  
 Founder and Director,  
 Urban Garden Enrichment



Having bought this inner-Sydney home, after downsizing from a much larger property, the owners had a clear vision for their new outdoor space. It was to be easy to maintain, so the existing pool area had to be repurposed, and it needed to be modern and visually interesting, providing the ideal showcase for their exclusive art collection.

The brief didn't end there, however, says Steve Warner from OUTHOUSE design. "They also wanted an open aspect entertaining area at the rear of the house which would be protected from the sun, an intimate entertaining area with privacy from the neighbours, and a sense of connection between the garden and the studio above the garage," he explains.

Urban Garden Enrichment was the company charged with building the new garden, and Simon Munn and his team set about transforming the space. The first task was to remove the pool and stabilise the area, a complex task when the only access to the site was via a door to the garage.

The garden was divided into two zones. The first is the inviting entertaining and dining area. Here, Urban Garden Enrichment installed a customised concrete bench for the barbecue and bar fridge, a built-in seat,



garden beds and a pergola with a louvred Vergola roof. The area was paved in 800mm x 400mm Andorra limestone tiles, which were also used for the "floating" steps that lead down to the next level.

The second space, its design inspired by a 1970s-style sunken lounge, is a place

for cosy gatherings and because it is low-set, allows a clear view from the house to the main sculpture which claims pride of place at the rear of the garden. Spotted gum decking boards were used to build the sunken lounge and deck area, its warm tones complementing the lush green planting.



Considerable technical expertise went into the construction of this garden. "To begin with," says Simon, "the original pool structure, which was not square, filled the majority of the backyard area so it was important to try to retain as much of the existing pool support structure as possible.

Other major parts of the job included the adjustment of the levels in the back area to allow for paving, garden beds and the sunken lounge deck area, building structurally sound support in the pool area to allow for the concrete base, and the installation of new retaining walls in the pool area."

The creation of the steps connecting the spaces was another impressive construction feat. "To do this we core-drilled multiple holes into the retaining walls we built for the garden beds. We installed heavy-duty galvanised angle bars into the holes spanning across to the other holes and concreted the bars in place. The control joints were left unfilled and clean to create a sense of suspension. Next, we glued the tiles on top of the bars with a gap between the tile and the wall to allow for slight movement on the steps. This evoked a sense of floating down the steps towards the sunken lounge."

Throughout the garden, the owners' collection of beautiful art was installed, including a vertical garden wall and various sculptures. The sculptured feature piece at the end of the garden, installed on a concrete base for stability, sets the tone for the garden and can be admired from all outdoor aspects, as well as from the home.

Although distinct, the two spaces feel unified due to the use of the same large-format paving throughout and the single-species (*Syzygium australe*) boundary planting. For a low hedge around the sunken lounge, there is *Viburnum tinus*, while elsewhere you will find *Rhaphiolepis indica* 'Oriental Pearl', *Malus atrosanguinea* (used as a feature tree) and *Ajuga reptans* and *Dichondra argentea* groundcovers.

In the 2018 LNA Master Landscapers Association Landscape Excellence Awards, this project won Gold for Urban Garden Enrichment in the Residential Construction \$75,000 to \$150,000 category, as well as the prestigious title of Husqvarna Residential Landscape Construction of the Year Award.

**NSW**

**PROJECT DETAILS**

Landscape construction  
**URBAN GARDEN ENRICHMENT PTY LTD**  
 Address Annandale, NSW  
 Email [simon.urbangarden@gmail.com](mailto:simon.urbangarden@gmail.com)  
 Website [urban-garden.com.au](http://urban-garden.com.au)  
 Instagram @urbangardenenrichment  
 Photography by Katrine Mardini & Peter Brennan