

# TRANSCENDENT TIERED GARDEN

A landscape design team provided a much-needed update to the gardens of this architect-designed abode perched above Manly's world-famous beaches.

Words by Paul Best •  
Photos by Nicholas Watt

When it first sold more than a decade ago, this home in Manly, on Sydney's Northern Beaches, was trumpeted for its architectural design – no mean feat since all of the multimillion-dollar properties on Montpelier Place were heralded by some of Sydney's top architects.

It is one of 26 houses and terraces that form part of St Patrick's Estate, owned by Sydney's Catholic Archdiocese, on the private, no-through-road overlooking Shelly Beach.

In this instance, acclaimed Sydney architects Tzannes was behind the modern two-storey residence. As so often happens, though, the property's tiered gardens received less love.

"The external areas were very much what I'd call a builder's palette," says Secret Gardens landscape designer Mark Curtis.

"With, I suspect, a little guidance from a landscape architect."

When new husband-and-wife owners – he a dabbler in property development, she an interior designer – decided to renovate indoors, it provided an opportunity to relandscape outside.

"While the owners controlled the interiors, they sought our direction on what could be done outdoors, particularly the material palette," Curtis says. "They were keen to have their say but also see where we could take it."

Music to his ears. For more than three decades, husband-and-wife founders Rochelle Abood and Matt Cantwell have put a collaborative approach at the heart of their studio's work.

Needless to say, Secret Gardens, in collaboration, identified some "clear faults" with the existing outdoor areas. Most obvious were those at the front, the first of three areas the studio tackled. The others were the side gardens (primarily two courtyards) and the rear, which backs onto bushland.

While a beautiful melaleuca, or paperbark, dominated the front, Curtis says none of the landscaping responded to it. He singled out disjointed layers of nandina – what he calls the "McDonald's carpark plant" – and badly pruned lillypilly hedging for their lack of context.

Layered sandstone walling on the way to the front door was also overly imposing and sterile. Sandstone slab steps helped break that visually, adding some of the drama the owners wanted.

"Good design is about creating a sense of arrival and that journey to the front door," Curtis says, "although we were conscious not to over-engineer the space."

At the same time, the team had to be mindful of Catholic Church bylaws restricting what the studio could do. There were prescribed colours, required sandstone walling and lawn – and no front fence. "The church wanted to maintain a sense of place," Curtis explains.

Walls were lowered and softened using a mix of hero and spillover planting, which promoted semi-naturalistic coastal tones – a mix of glaucous greys, greens and blues – instead of sickly-glossy greenery or the obligatory rows of buxus and gardenias.

Top of the list were sculptural plants, like dioon cycads, with their architectural vertical fronds “guiding the eye up into the paperbark”, and grass trees with their spiky crowns.

Circling them were textural plants blending natives and ornamentals: spills of rosemary, carissa desert star and alpinia, lomandra crackerjack, cotton lavender and kalanchoe.

“The palette sets the tone for the rest of the garden,” Curtis says. “Restrained, multiplied out into different spaces, rather than busying the garden with too many plants.”

The courtyards presented similar issues, being dated and jarring. A central outdoor lounge – off the kitchen and dining-living areas – that stepped up to a dining terrace repeated the

“builders’ palette” of concrete pavers and timber decking.

In its place, natural limestone, mirroring the owners’ renovation inside, was laid in a jigsaw-like French pattern. “The big mistake we see is owners compelled to have as many different materials as possible,” Curtis says. “We always look to restrain.”

The courtyard was also decluttered of all the small, random potted plants and replaced with pygmy date palms and olive trees in giant brass planters. The lounge was given a dramatic backdrop of monstera in a customised aluminium planter and new timber screen with brass channels.

“Visually, everything connects,” Curtis says.

The stairs were widened in order to “create a stronger journey to the rear garden” and hedging, blocking the view, was replaced by plantings similar to the front, like curtains of rosemary, but also Cousin It casuarina and blue beargrass trees.

**Fact sheet**

**What:** The tiered gardens of a house on St Patrick’s Estate.

**Where:** Manly, Sydney, NSW.

**Landscape designer:** Mark Curtis from Secret Gardens.

A water feature in a second courtyard, off a rear living room, was replaced with a more sculptural one: a stretched bronze V designed to elongate the space. Mounted on a tiled herringbone-patterned wall (replacing breeze blocks), it trickled into a calming pond.

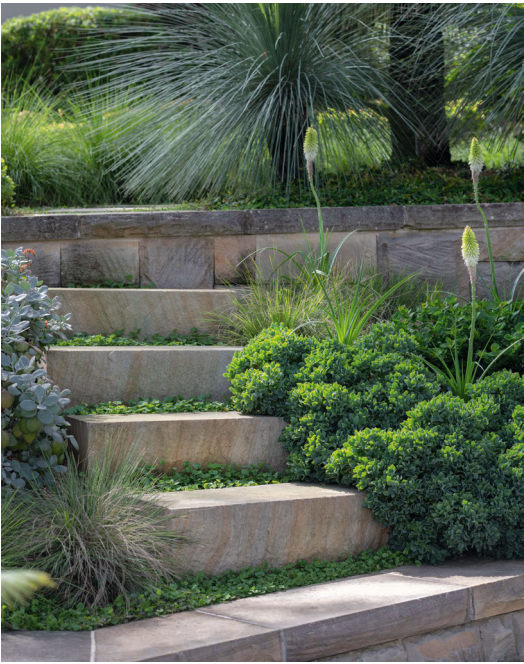
Concrete pavers were replaced with gravel, and a dizzying array of ad hoc plants with lush new greenery, such as tractor-leaf plants and rhipsalis. “We linked it to the new internal finishes,” Curtis says.

On the top level, the rear garden – gravel and lawn areas with terraced sandstone walls backing onto remnant bushland – was only lightly touched. A pergola was removed, replaced by chairs and a ring of naturalistic plantings.

Like the front, cascading plantings softened and spilled over the sandstone walls.

“The way we work, we always let your eye appreciate the different forms and context, as well as the subtle differences in the colours and foliage,” Curtis says. ■

“We found common ground with the owners, with their background in interior design, in terms of our own design ethos and how the outdoor spaces could evolve.” *Mark Curtis*



**Left and above left:** Catholic Church bylaws required there to be sandstone walling, which the team softened with cascading greenery.

**Far left:** Chairs replaced a pergola in the rear section of the garden.