

STUDIO SUNSHINE NORTH GARDEN

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, one in four people in Australia live alone.

So how do you create a home in the suburbs for one person that has privacy, is connected to nature and stays open to the surrounding community to avoid isolation?

Studio Sunshine North sits within a new housing development in Sunshine North (10km west of Melbourne's CBD). The land is slightly sloping, on a corner facing north with views over the Maribyrnong river and a decommissioned quarry, now full of water.

The space is modest by today's standards - 90m² made up of two pre-built modules joined together by a glass passageway. High ceilings and large windows overlook nature in every direction helping the house to feel much larger than expected. An enclosed garden provides privacy and acts as a huge outdoor room. The house faces onto the street with a large balcony so that passers-by can see in and interact with the owner.

From nature to nurture: a garden that dissolves into the distance

The garden has distinct areas or zones. At the front (northern) part of the block, the garden appears to be an extension of the natural bushland that surrounds it, with long native grasses, shaggy shrubs and trees, punctuated by the occasional sculpted ball, helping to reassure visitors that this isn't an abandoned block of land. An arc of hedging olive trees provides a natural wall that begins the next zone...

A raised garden bed, created from excavated rocks and soil (removed while leveling the rear of the block) is treated much like a coral reef. Viewed from above, rigid succulents compete for space and provide a textured background to larger sculpted forms: *Dracaena draco* 'dragon trees', *Gynerium* lilies, tall reed grasses and a rambunctious *Hardenbergia violacea* that threatens to engulf the house.

Alongside the house, a once weed-filled dead zone has been tamed by filling with pigface cuttings – one of the few plants capable of keeping the council's running grass at bay. This leads up the hill to the 'red garden', a strappy blast of red, orange, black and yellow hues. Black crepe myrtle, Japanese maple, phormiums and New Zealand flaxes all combine to create beautiful silhouettes against a fortress-like wall painted in dusty-pink lime wash.

Here, one starts to wonder what might be kept more private...

Behind the cloistered walls, an oasis has been created. A small pond surrounded by rough, velvety, and fragrant Mediterranean cottage style plants: *Salvia*, Curry, Rosemary, Geranium, plants that you can brush past and smell. Small trees have also been crowded into this private space: 'Forest Pansy', 'Smoke bush' and an olive tree.

Looking out at the bare industrial rock faces and lake beyond it's easy to forget that you are in Melbourne and one wonders if this isn't a portal to the Middle East!

GARDEN NOTES

What about sustainability?

The garden retains ALL of the soil and rocks that were on site before building began. Rocks dug out for footings and leveling have been reused throughout the garden.

For the most part, plants have been chosen for their resilience. Plants need to contend with hard clay soil, low water and hot summers. Olives and lavenders particularly thrive in this soil. Native grasses and small native bushes (eg Grevillea hybrid 'Winter Delight') have also done very well.

Prostrate natives have struggled the most (banksias, prostrate grevilleas have all died).

Approximately 80-90% of the entire surface of the block has been left permeable. This allows water to soak into the soil, helping trees to be watered from deep below and reduces run-off into local waterways. The house is also relocatable, so it could (in theory) be moved to another location if the need ever arose.

The garden is a haven for small, medium and large native birds and lizards. There are lots of tiny finches, honeyeaters, magpies and other birds who enjoy the grass seeds and flower nectars. The courtyard garden has flowers year-round and there's always a busy trail of bees hard at work.

Shane Delonix - a coastal approach to gardening

I grew up close to the coast and spent a lot of time bushwalking in heathlands, where highly dense and diverse groups of plants can be found enmeshed together. As a result, I like to overplant with a diverse range of colours and textures to see what works best. Overplanting also helps keep the weeds down and there's a higher chance that I'll hit on something that really grows well.

I am drawn to blue greens, greys and silver tones. It has been a challenge to create what appears to be a coastal landscape in clay soils. The clay soils do provide great nutrients to plants though, so it's been good to experience a more 'inland' type of garden.

I also like to use a lot of pots. I have a favourite Vietnamese pot shop that is close by and I like to mix it up with vessels that are not always considered as part of the regular garden vernacular. I use bins, 44-gallon drums and anything else that has a great colour or texture and can hold soil.

These notes can be downloaded from the Open Gardens Victoria website:

www.opengardensvictoria.org.au