



Open all hours

Ancient cultures recognised the value of cool courtyards. Three architects explain their use of open space and the benefits. By Jane Burton Taylor.

Outdoor space with a house is an area for free, or close to it, but the benefits are priceless. By allowing for such a space when planning a home, you provide an opportunity to catch breezes and/or to capitalise on a sunny corner by building a private domain that's also intimately linked with nature.

Good design is as much about the space in between as the space in a building. So said Dutch architectural guru Aldo van Eyck, one of the great contemporary humanists of the profession. Van Eyck's once-revolutionary philosophy (born in the era of hard-edged modernism) is alive and well in Sydney where leading residential architects place a high value on the space in between.

Be it an inner courtyard, a breezeway, deck or void, external space *Penelope* into the floorplan of a house has the potential to deliver light, air, views and a sense of space into the heart of a home.

At its most basic, the alternative – a house that covers most of its site – gives the unnatural experience of walking inside on a sunny day to dark rooms and needing to turn on lights and even the air-conditioning.

"There is nothing worse," says Caroline Pidcock, president of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects. She believes well-designed houses with a link to the outdoors can avoid such a jarring scenario.

"When you are in a home connected to the outdoors, you don't feel like you are in an enclosed box. You feel like you are outside more because you have daylight and ventilation; you have natural warmth and cool which is much more pleasant than having it done artificially."

There is a multitude of ways of using open space within the floorplan of a house.

Rather than building to the permissible boundary, for example, an architect can set aside a strip of land between neighbours to provide privacy and a green belt. Architect Virginia Kerridge recently chose this option in her design of a house on a steep waterfront site on the lower North Shore. She then designed a window running the length of the house, delivering both northern sun and a great view to the main living area.

Though setting aside external space means sacrificing internal floorspace, the exchange usually makes the house feel larger. External space within a house "borrows" from the outdoors with the result that rooms seem less constricted. And the area is generally useable.

"You maximise your garden or land space by incorporating the outside indoors," says Alex Popov. "It becomes an extension of your rooms."

He gives the example of houses in Kyoto. "A door slides open to reveal a courtyard. The rooms is immediately transformed even though the courtyard might be tiny."

External space within a home also borrows a sensual dimension from nature, says Pidcock. "We forget sometimes that we have five senses. Great experiences come when more than one are excited. Wind going through trees, rain falling, the scent from different plantings. When you open the inside to the outdoors, then you can incorporate [these experiences], you don't have to go outside."

Historically, one of the most popular uses of external space is as a device to ventilate or cool the home. Popov says it's this widespread use of inner



courtyards that initially sparked his interest.

"In Mediterranean cultures the courtyard is traditionally used for heat exchange," he explains. "We [in his practice] found we were able to use smaller courtyards as a device to cool a home, rather than air-conditioning."

In his waterfront Neutral Bay house, Popov opted for a small, central courtyard with a shallow pool. The wind comes in from the front of the house, moves across the water and cools all the rooms of the house. "The house has a beautiful climate," he says.

The courtyard achieves several other functions. With sliding glass doors on three sides it brings the harbour view into the study at the far end of the house. It also provides a charming, almost formal entry

to the house. Its water feature, a blue mosaic wall with a spout trickling water into the pond, sets the sound of running water through the house, recalling the architecture of the Moors who strung buildings, such as the grand Alhambra Palace in southern Spain, around a series of courtyards with water features.

Popov says the conventional Australian subdivision with front and rear lawns encourages houses to be heat boxes. "Introduce a courtyard and you immediately have heat exchange," he says.

Having explored the potential of small inner courtyards, Popov and his team are now designing larger ones. He recently designed a house in Bilgola with a timber deck, punctuated by column-like

similar view. She sees inner-city living as a driver for the inclusion of outdoor space within the floorplan of modern homes.

"In dense inner-city areas, you can't control what is happening outside, but you can have control by [creating] inward-looking captured areas."

It is an approach that can be beneficial in the suburbs, too, says Lahz.

Take a conventional rectangular floorplan on a large suburban block and stretch it to the perimeter of the site in a F-, L- or U-shaped plan. The change allows internal spaces to open to decks and courtyards.

It also provides external space with minimal overlooking and eliminates the awkward and unusable bits of space often left around the edges of a house. "By taking the plan and spreading it across and wrapping it around

terms of the floorplan, it acts as a private and protected outdoor dining space.

"We wrapped the deck or veranda into the house," Lahz explains. It also serves as a cooling device. "It becomes a chimney, the hot air rises up and out."

The house has three other outdoor living areas. A "show pony" terrace overlooking a public pathway at the front of the house, a more secluded deck off the kitchen and a side courtyard with a plunge pool. This latter courtyard space is protected by a high wall which "disintegrates" as you move down the block toward the waterfront. "At the rear it is high and protective, shielding the lap pool down the side boundary," says Lahz.

spaces you can create these zones of captured courtyards and gardens," says Lahz.

It is an approach she and her partner, Andrew Nimmo, have explored in three house designs at Casuarina on the North Coast.

In the first completed house, the architects pushed the floorplan to the boundary of a long, narrow site and combined elegant timber screens to ensure privacy with a series of decks, courtyards and a breezeway covered with timber battens in the centre of the house.

Like Popov's inner courtyard, the breezeway facilitates views from the rear of the house. In

internal spaces in a house far more interesting, she says. The textures of materials used in the outdoor space add another level of aesthetic interest.

"You can either have a timber deck which will weather or a masonry terrace," says Pidcock.

"The walls which provide a sense of enclosure to the space can be treated in all sorts of different ways, too. For example, they can be planted bamboo or timber battens. Spaces can be covered so you can be out there when it's raining."

Some options for covering an outdoor area include canvas, which casts a soft white light, elegant timber battens, as in the Lahz Nimmo-designed house, or a European-style wire pergola with grapevines trained over it so the space is shaded in summer, but the sun is *Penelope* through its lattice when the vines are bare.

"There are lots of different options for designing and connecting indoor/outdoor spaces," says Pidcock.

For a recent Balgowlah project, she blurred the edge between inside and out by curving the outside wall of a house and cantilevering the upper level over the lower. "The whole plan curves around to gently connect inside to outside."

Ecologically, too, there is an advantage to this approach of designing to maximise the in-between spaces.

"It is quality rather than quantity," says Pidcock. "Smaller houses are better ecologically. But the house has to be well designed. Then, by connecting indoor and outdoor space, it feels bigger than it is. You have borrowed view and dimension and at the same time moderated the wind, the sunlight and the rain in a positive way."

Courting favour: (clockwise from top) a breezeway in the centre of this North Coast house, by Lahz Nimmo Architects, acts as a private dining space; Alex Popov designed a deck that takes up half the block for a Bilgola home; curved walls create a courtyard in this Balgowlah house by Caroline Pidcock. Photos: Brett Boardman and Craig Carlstrom