

Farnsworth revisited

Mies van der Rohe in suburban Sydney? Well, it's a good place to start, writes Siobhan O'Brien.



To illustrate the vision of their dream home to their architects, Jon Cullen and Michelle Feng, the clients of this iconic city house explained they needed simplicity and order.

Then they produced an image of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's 1951 Farnsworth House. This icon of modernist domestic architecture, located near Plann, Illinois, is a transparent steel-and-glass box that hovers above the ground. It features an open-plan, clutter-free interior that abolishes the parapet walls, rooms, walls, doors, loose furniture and such. Quite a brief for a family of five. "We knew our

'The house has a beautiful simplicity. We did not want it to be so modern' that it would date in 10 years' time. It works for our family.'

clients desire for a Mies van der Rohe replica in Sydney suburbia wasn't meant to be taken literally, but it gave us some meaningful aesthetic and design guidelines," Feng says.

That's not to say it was an easy task. As one of the owners says, "We wanted enough space for everyone to find a quiet spot away from the madness of a full house. Spatially, we needed to allow for a large family and a house that would accommodate children into their teens and adulthood. As the kids grow, we want them to have enough space to entertain their friends without taking over the main living areas."

First, the architects dedicated the lower level to living, and the upper level to sleeping. An added feature on both levels are separate adult and children

zones. "Having these separate zones was crucial. There were so many different activities going on that they needed to be separated, somehow, except of course when they needed to be together," says the owner, who spends most of the time in the house.

The lower level has an office, a children's lounge room, a laundry, a cloakroom and a sizeable open-plan kitchen, dining and living area. From the entrance (with pivoting metal doors) are a number of options: turn left and you enter the office and the adjacent children's area, both of which step out into the front garden; go straight ahead, and stairs take you up to

the bedrooms or down a few steps to a laundry and cloakroom; or turn right into the rear living-dining-kitchen zone that steps out onto lawn.

The lower level has loads of natural light; the front (north) and rear (south) facades are extensively glazed, as is the double-height entrance and adjacent stairwell. As energy efficiency was a consideration, low emission (or low-E) glass was used.

The office and the children's lounge give privacy, yet they are still connected to the main living zones. The small laundry and cloakroom use space that could otherwise be wasted.

The open-plan living-dining-kitchen area contains all the requirements for a large family – a dining table that seats eight; two seating areas (one for the

children, with a television set; the other, with reading lights, is for the adults) and a sizeable kitchen with reconstituted stone benchtops.

Transparent bifold doors on the southern facade allow direct access to a travertine terrace and rear garden. Above the rear terrace is a motorised Vergola roof, which closes automatically when it rains. "In summer, the heat bells in here, because the terrace is on the southern side of the house, so it was important to close this area off in the warmer months, while in winter we open the roof to allow the sun in. We also liked the flexibility for the children's sake. They can still play on the terrace when it is raining," says one of the owners.

Upstairs, there are four bedrooms and a bathroom. The children's bedrooms are towards the front elevation, each with individual balconies. The main bedroom stretches across the full width of the rear with a private balcony that looks over the garden. A side window in this bedroom provides a glimpse of Sydney's CBD. "There are many areas of the house to enjoy on their own, but we love our large bedrooms," says the owner.

"The owners sometimes escape to the open roof terrace 'for a glass of wine at sunset'. Set back from the rest of the roof, this timber-decked terrace focuses on the distant view rather than the roofs of adjoining properties. A neat, elegant solution to space.

"The lovely thing is that we think there is an essence of the Farnsworth House. The house has a beautiful simplicity. We did not want it to be so modern that it would date in 10 years' time. It works for our family."



THE HOUSE
A contemporary home for a growing family.

TIME FRAME
Design and development: application approval: one year
Construction: one year

GREEN POINTS
• Retention of parts of existing building structure
• Existing bricks were recycled
• Light-coloured roof and external walls to minimise heat gain
• High-performance glass to maximise thermal performance
• Generous natural light in all rooms
• Excellent cross-ventilation

WHAT THE OWNERS WOULD DO DIFFERENTLY

Nothing. We love the design, the simplicity and the materials. The house has a wonderful continuity.

FEATURES OWNERS ARE HAPPIEST WITH

The visual and spatial relationship with the front and rear gardens, as almost every room looks out onto one of the gardens. The generosity of space within the house.

ARCHITECTS
Cullen Feng, 6310 4285, www.cullenfeng.com.au



1 The design was based on Farnsworth House, a transparent steel-and-glass box by Mies van der Rohe.

2 The stainless is extensively glazed to capture light.

3 The motorised Vergola roof, which closes when it rains.

4 The living room-dining-kitchen zone.

5 The double-height entrance and pivoting front door.

6 The ensuite to the main bedroom.

7 The main bedroom runs across the full width of the rear and has a private balcony that overlooks the garden.

8 The rooftop deck.

