

KEEPING COURT

Courtyards are not very common in Australian homes, but there's every reason why they should be. They're great for extending a home and letting the light flood in



■ WORDS / Kristin Utz
 ■ PHOTOGRAPHY / Marian Riabic
 and Ray Clarke

The courtyard has a long history in Mediterranean and Moorish architecture, but despite our similar climate, it's not a common feature in Australian homes. Instead, we have tended to emulate the British and American "garden suburb" design, which has led to planning controls that dictate a garden to the front and rear with the house in the middle of the block. But whether it is big or small, a courtyard can be a great addition to the home, introducing light, facilitating cross ventilation, forming a natural extension to living areas and providing shelter from harsh wind and sun. Courtyards are also fantastic spaces for small children and pets because they are usually contained and can be easily seen from inside the home.

SIZE MATTERS

A courtyard does not have to be large; it can be adapted to suit the aspect and size of the site. It's a contained space, often described as an

"outdoor room", and will work best by having walls (or screens) on at least three sides. Small courtyards can be used as a visual focus and may contain a water feature, sculpture, tree or other plantings to extend the indoors and add light to the home's interior.

In larger projects we use courtyards for outdoor living and they often include an operable roof, sun-shade system or partial roof. They work well to separate the main living area from a rumpus room, a quieter reading or sitting room. They provide a visual link to the rest of the house yet offer acoustic separation.

On coastal sites, larger courtyards provide a sheltered area that can be protected from strong north-easterly sea breezes which often ruin outdoor entertaining in the evenings during summer. A courtyard can provide a welcome retreat from strong wind and sun, while still offering a sea view through its glass doors or windows. It is important to provide shade in a courtyard with a northern aspect.





A COURTYARD CAN BE A GREAT ADDITION TO THE HOME, INTRODUCING LIGHT, FACILITATING CROSS VENTILATION, FORMING A NATURAL EXTENSION TO LIVING AREAS AND PROVIDING SHELTER

CREATING A TRANSITION

Courtyards work well in alterations and additions to terrace houses or bungalows because they can be positioned to separate the addition from the existing part of the house while providing light, ventilation and an outlook for hallways, bedrooms, bathrooms or dining rooms (or all four). A courtyard can also be positioned on a boundary where there is minimal width. In this instance it will provide visual space rather than additional living space, but its effect on a room or hallway is enormous.

Courtyards are good transition spaces that can help define where the old part of the house ends and the addition begins, or to accommodate a change in level between the garden and the house. Steps make great seats and retaining walls can be extended to house a built-in barbecue or an outdoor benchtop.

A MATTER OF STYLE

The choice of material and plantings is very important when creating the right ambience

for a courtyard. Sometimes the home's internal flooring can continue into the courtyard, particularly if that flooring is stone or tiles. This can extend the living room and create a seamless transition of internal and external space.

Timber decking and planting is functional and more economic and can be used to raise the area so that it matches the height of internal floors. A more visual courtyard could contain pebbles and planting, water or sculpture, and can be lit at night to great effect.

Make sure any materials used externally are marine-grade, weather-proof and sealed correctly, and that lights have the correct IP rating (IP 65) to protect against moisture. It is also important to choose plants and grasses that do not require full sun and will not grow too high. Do not over-clutter the space with furniture or plantings; a courtyard should be a calm, contemplative space that offers a visual and acoustic retreat, while extending and enhancing the interior spaces that surround it. 🏡

