

# Fire and light

The home of Genevieve Lilley, like her work, is beautiful, eclectic and unique.

PHOTOGRAPHY CHRIS CHEN

BY KIRSTY MUNRO

**Genevieve Lilley** and her family live in a Tardis. The unremarkable grey front of her narrow Sydney terrace conceals four levels of bright, open-plan living and a vibrant art collection.

After almost 10 years' living in London and America's west coast, Lilley, an architect and jewellery designer, and her husband Kingsley Wallman, a lawyer-turned-gemologist, have finally come home. And this home, once a dark, delinquent sliver of inner-city living that was passed in at auction three times, reflects Lilley's life and work.

The slim blonde, as pared-down as her signature designs, laughs as she takes me on a tour of the house, explaining how the airy, dynamic space was once a no-hoper. "This house was derelict when we bought it a few years ago and we just moved in last year. We bought it and then had a baby so it just sat here for a year," she says, though that gave her plenty of thinking time. She's almost apologetic as we hit the bedroom just two steps in the front door; most visitors enter the house through the back, up another flight of solid wood stairs. The bedroom

and its ensuite can be concealed behind a glossy white sliding door, a technique she also uses to hide clutter.

Space was tight in this narrow terrace, which is built on a steep slope, butted against a huge wall of sandstone. It's not surprising, then, to find Lilley's office is just a slim bench tucked into the hallway. "With the kids, I still do a day or so working from home, and the office has to be right in the thick of it, so I can keep an eye on them."

Above her desk is a striking work of art: a huge expanse of black glitter that looks like bitumen. It catches the light from every angle. "That was the first bit of art we bought in London. We had a studio flat with about two sticks of furniture, but we bought this. We used to sit in this empty apartment when we'd come home from clubbing and just stare at it, mesmerised," she says, with a grin. The artist, Martin McGinn, is featured all over the house as Lilley and Wallman have bought a piece from almost every era of his work. He is a good friend of theirs; the group even travelled to Russia together and always catch up in London. "He's great because he's a really grumpy, cantankerous old bugger."

The children's rooms have loads of natural light, with a small garden and skylight windows that make the most of the narrow shaft of daylight. "They have this *Brady Bunch* door," she laughs, explaining the sliding partition that gives each child some privacy. In summer, the whole space can be opened to the elements, which makes the children feel like they're camping. Her two children were also a key factor in the decision to return to Sydney. "We moved back to Australia because it was the land of the grandparents," she says. "When we finished in the US, we had to decide whether we moved back to London or back here. I think Kingsley grew attached to the sunshine and fresh air in America; I was more attached to London, but it's a difficult place to bring up children." Lilley expected to live overseas for the rest of her life, but, she says, "There's something about Australia that, in the end, brings you back."

While she still has an architectural practice and lectures at the University of Sydney, Lilley has branched into



Architect and designer Genevieve Lilley in her home, wearing her own jewellery designs.

---



---

"A building project can take more than a year; a jewellery commission can take about two weeks. And if something doesn't work you can melt it down and start again."

---

Genevieve Lilley

jewellery design. On their return to Australia three years ago, Lilley and her husband opened a jewellery store in The Strand Arcade, Sydney. The store, Venerari, offers a different perspective on jewellery design.

"I was one of those classic architects who never wore jewellery; you know, 'It's all just decorative'," she explains. "But my husband, who was a lawyer when I met him, came from a background of gem mining and dealing. Basically, in his family, giving each other jewellery was the norm. So I married into his family and there was the problem of, 'What do we give Genevieve?' So in the end, my husband called the trump by giving me a big, loose Australian sapphire and saying, 'Here, you work it out!' So I designed a ring, made a little Play-Doh model of it, and his mother, who worked in jewellery manufacturing, had it made. So that was the first piece ..."

Lilley approaches jewellery design like she would a building project. Sketches quickly give way to models, made from card, wax or whatever she can get her hands on. "It's all very *Play School*," she

laughs. And she believes that not coming from a traditional jewellery background has freed her to be creative without constraints. "I also know nothing about gem stones. Everyone in the shop is a gemologist, but I just choose colours and shapes. There's a range that we did that was considered technically impossible – I had no idea that it was supposed to be impossible; I just designed what I liked." Her office above the store has architecture projects on one side and jewellery on the other. When she tires of one project, she just crosses the room for a complete change of scale.

As Lilley notes, the design skills used for houses, furniture or jewellery are almost the same, but the speed of making jewellery is something she has come to love. "A building project can take more than a year; a jewellery commission can take about two weeks. And if something doesn't work, you can melt it down and start again."

What Venerari is best known for is reinventing the opal. No more silver koalas with opal bellies. Lilley designs chunky boulder opal beads that flash with blue fire and organic shapes that make the most of this unique stone. In

her jewellery, she makes maximum use of positive and negative space, just as she does in her architecture.

Which leads us to the bright kitchen, the centre of the house. The first thing that strikes the visitor is not the solid, practical furniture, or the easy flow of space out to the back garden, but the massive McGinn painting that dominates one wall. It is a giant pig carcass. Lilley and Wallman bought it off a transparency so they weren't quite sure just how big it was until they had a house big enough to hang it.

"Of course, my mother-in-law is sure the children will become deeply disturbed, looking at a pig's arse. It is called *Pig's Arse*," she says. "But they seem fine and they'll know where their food comes from."

On the mezzanine above the kitchen is an open living area that retains a lot of the terrace's original character with French doors and polished wood floors. Two burnt orange lacquer units were custom built for the stereo and for storage, contemporary versions of the



Clockwise from top left: *Pig's Arse*, by Martin McGinn (a Lilley favourite), dominates a wall of the bright, sparse kitchen; much of the furniture was bought at auctions or markets in London, like the vintage Eames fibreglass stacking chairs; the cheerful and irreverent *Prince Charles*, by London artist Huw Locke, sits above a cabinet designed by Lilley; the artwork, *Windup*, by Bjarne Werner Sorensen, sits comfortably amid a combination of vintage (the chandelier, Noguchi table) and modern (the floor lamp designed by Lilley, the Bertioa Bird chair and ottoman) furniture.





Above left: Another McGinn painting, 2D, adorns the sunny bedroom. Lilley designed the bed herself. Above right: some examples of Lilley's jewellery designs. Much of her jewellery shows an innovative use of coloured gems, including raspberry tourmaline, watermelon tourmaline, ametrine and peridot.

classic radio units of the 1930s. Her husband especially wanted a unit to conceal the stereo. Having children, his nightmare was having little fingers poking in and destroying his beloved sound system.

There is a rather bewitching piece of art in the living room that gives new meaning to the term 'craft'. "Oh, yes, that's by Huw Locke," Lilley says. "He's a huge Rastafarian from South London." The piece is a portrait of Prince Charles, rendered in kitsch crochet. Glittery lips sprout a pink plastic bong and his cheeks are adorned with plastic palm trees and the little figures you might find in a Christmas cracker ... if you look closely you see tiny AK-47s nestled among the more benign objects. It's delightfully subversive and famous in Lilley's family for hypnotising visitors. "I think his granny did the crochet," she adds. "We bought a lot of art in the UK but when we saw that, we basically stopped dead in our tracks."

The dining table was made from recycled church pews and is textured with the fork marks of impatient children.

Even the light fittings that dot the house are rather eclectic; it's a no-go zone for bland frosted oyster lights. Lilley recounts a subcontractor's consternation that none of the fittings matched. "I collect lights," she shrugs. "I've been buying them for years." In fact, she reveals, she still has an attic full of them. While Lilley and Wallman have collected many design classics, they are far from precious about them. "I bought this Noguchi table second-hand and it has a little chip; this lamp came from the Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen; this Verner Panton chair was bought at auction ... those kitchen lights were five dollars each in Amsterdam." Lilley must be single-handedly keeping the world's shipping industry alive.

We climb the stairs to the attic, which has been converted into a sleek, loft-style bedroom without a door. "This is the 'Eurotrash' suite," she announces. "Basically, we have friends from overseas who stay; from November to March we're fully booked, like a hotel. It means that they're tucked away up here and have their own space, but they're still connected to the life of the house and feel like they're involved."

A strong feature of Lilley's home and her jewellery design is a sense of simplicity. Of course, making something simple can be quite complicated. Take the generous chunks of basalt that form the kitchen benches. "The engineer said I'd used up most of the allowable load on the kitchen floor with those," she says. "So when we have a party, we have to stop everyone hanging out in there." Her practical, often humorous approach to design has gained her a lot of word-of-mouth clients. In fact, she's working on four houses in the streets near her own home: all people who saw her construction work in progress and wanted some of that Lilley elegance and common sense in their own homes.

Sitting in the morning sunshine, looking around the warm, family-friendly space, Lilley marvels about the way her life has turned out. Her husband has swapped a high-stress job for a life of making beautiful objects, she's achieved a balance of careers and children and she has exactly the house she always wanted. Perhaps Dorothy was right: there really is no place like home. ●