



FEATURE STORY

Words by Sue Williams

Transformed by a fresh approach

Kitchens and bathrooms are the most common renovations to undertake. Two award-winning NSW designers say people should take their time, think laterally and dream big.

They were two of the trickiest kitchen and bathroom builds imaginable.

The kitchen in a 1920s Californian bungalow was huge but at the same time cramped, with lots of dead space, while the new bathroom of a passive house built around a 60-year-old pepper tree had to be just as fabulously sustainable as its surroundings.

“Both were extremely challenging in their own ways,” says Selina Zwolsman of the Kitchen & Bathroom Designers Institute (KBDi). “And both had to fit their briefs without compromising appearance in any way.”

The results were excruciatingly difficult and took an enormous amount of work, but the two NSW designers found plenty of reasons to celebrate, after they each won the national titles

of the annual KBDi Designer Awards. “I think all the stars aligned for me,” says Sydney kitchen designer Helen Baumann of Helen Baumann Design, who won the state title for Kitchen Designer of the Year, as well as the national Australian Certified Designer of the Year, for her redesign of the kitchen in a Roseville house.

“I think my strength is that I spend time looking at a few different options, and then plan things very carefully, and nurture the ideas until they’re perfect, and then I’ll move forward. I do suffer from anxiety, so I like to have all my ducks in a row first.

“I think the biggest mistake other people can make when renovating a bathroom is to rush it. It’s a journey. Just like when you’re planning a holiday, you have to research the

country you’re going to, look at how to get there and get your head around all the details.”

The design brief for the open-plan kitchen was to create an elegant interior with a style to complement the heritage of the home but at the same time make it a modern, comfortable, relaxed living space for a family of four.

To do that, she thought laterally about the cramped layout and moved the position of the island bench 90 degrees so anyone cooking in the kitchen could look out towards the rest of the room and the deck beyond. She put in a beautifully curved dolomite bench that showcased the space to welcome people in and moved the laundry out, taking out part of the wall to let more natural light in, and turned the area into a hidden butler’s pantry.

Left and above right: The Roseville kitchen redesigned by Helen Baumann.



The home owner, Lynn Nicol, was delighted with the result. “It’s made a huge difference to how we use the space and its functionality,” she says. “Now everything is flipped around. Helen really helped with all the circulation issues, and we can now entertain comfortably in an area that was previously cramped and awkward with a lot of dead space.

“In addition, it’s really pretty to look at. It’s brought the space to life and made it lovely and warm. And it made the seven months we spent cooking in the garage in an air fryer and over a single induction hob – with all the COVID lockdown delays – all worthwhile.”

The KBDi judging panel proclaimed it a “hands-down” winner. “The judges loved every element of this design, from the intelligent space planning to the elegant material and fitting selections,” they said in their statement.

Baumann’s design showcases dolomite natural stone in the island bench, splashback and repeated in the media unit, the black and white cabinetry and the brass highlights in tapware, handles and decorative mesh insets. The butler’s pantry, meanwhile – something Nicol wanted where her teenage kids could make a mess and it wouldn’t be seen from the rest of the house – has a Carrara marble hexagon splashback.

They’re all finishes designed to be classic and timeless yet make a bold statement, as befitting a designer who previously worked as a production designer on a number of iconic Australian TV shows like *True Believers*, *Brides of Christ* and *Body Surfer*, and in London theatre.

“With that kitchen, it shows how you sometimes need someone who’ll see the room from a completely different

perspective,” says Zwolsman. “It’s not just about replacing the boxes; it’s about thinking outside the square and finding a solution that, if you live there, you wouldn’t imagine.”

National Bathroom Designer of the Year went to Eliesha Paiano, of Paiano Design, who also strove to think laterally about the bathroom she was asked to plan for a passive house built by Adam Souter of Souter Built on his own property at Unanderra, Wollongong, with architect Alexander Symes.

“I believe that great design starts with spatial planning, with emphasis on functionality and liveability,” she says. “Aesthetics is equally as important, shaping the way we feel in our own home.”

Her brief included making the bathroom as sustainable as possible, to match the rest of the house, even though it was allocated only a small space. To add to the complexity, the house has two

different functions: during the week, it serves as an office for Souter Built, and at the weekend it becomes an Airbnb passive house experience.

As a result, Paiano set out to look for new materials that would add to the bathroom’s environmental friendliness. “The bathroom itself cantilevers off the ground and features some unique items such as the world’s first 100 per cent waterproof recycled wood-chip basin, from Woodio in Finland,” she says.

“Then the vanity unit is Paperock Tactile – a plywood with high-pressure laminate and nano anti-fingerprint technology. The tapware is from Wood Melbourne and has handcrafted aged brass with feature blackbutt that ties in with the rest of the build for visual balance and harmony.”

Souter says he chose Paiano for the task as she’s exceptionally cool, calm and collected, and was unlikely to get flustered by the demands of the brief.

“She was brilliant,” he says. “She found and sourced a number of products we didn’t even know existed, like that wood-chip basin cast into a resin. It’s pretty incredible.”

The KBDi judges were equally impressed. “There is much more to this bathroom than can be captured in a photograph,” they said. “The passive-designed treehouse required thoughtful planning and considered material selections to meet the client’s sustainability goals.

“The designer created a space with an earthy aesthetic, innovative material usage and a highly functional layout, ticking all the boxes for a sustainable and liveable project. The judges were delighted to award the designer a national title.”

Like Baumann, Paiano advises renovators to take their time. “Really think about how you and your family want to use the space long term and

“Be true to your personal aesthetic ... That’s how you’ll be happy with the space for many years to come.” Eliesha Paiano



how you want the space to make you feel,” she says. “Will it serve you as a sanctuary where you will relax in a bath and unwind after work, or energise you in the morning to kick-start your day?

“Be true to your personal aesthetic and don’t fall victim to what’s ‘hot’ right now. That’s how you’ll be happy with the space for many years to come.” ■

Left and below: Eliesha Paiano’s winning bathroom design in Adam Souter’s home.

