

ON TREND | MATERIALS

The sandstone that surrounds us

Words by Holly Bodeker-Smith

You don't have to dig deep to spot sandstone, one of civilisation's oldest building materials. The sturdy, fine-grained rock is abundant in built and natural environments, from Melbourne's St Paul's Cathedral to Uluru. For millennia, Indigenous Australians used it to create grinding stones and sharpening tools. Today, artists, architects and designers use the gritty-yet-graceful material to add warmth and a natural edge.

"The beauty and age of sandstone is a drawcard," says Tom Butterworth, a Sydney sculptor who crafts functional sandstone furniture and homewares like vases, stools and tables. "Geologists date it back 260 million years."

Its abundance works in his favour. Butterworth sources excess sandstone and broken blocks from job sites and quarries that are otherwise destined for landfill. Then there are the buildings set for the wrecking ball. "I've [used] material that came off an 1880s home to create sculptures," he says.

His final works belie the grittiness of the production process, which he describes as "noisy, heavy and hard". Over weeks and months, Butterworth uses mighty demolition saws, wet saws and blades to cut giant sandstone blocks into chunks. Then, he carves intricate pieces using a hammer and chisel. "When you come across [iron] it's tricky, but mostly it's soft and beautiful," Butterworth says. "It's my purpose to reveal what's already there and immerse that into the interior."

"You create a welcoming feeling when you introduce a beautiful piece of stone into your house – whether through sculpture, furniture, walls, sinks or benchtop."

Jemima Retallack, co-director of Retallack Thompson Architects, has a similar philosophy.

She first worked with the material on her own home, an 1850s sandstone cottage in Darlinghurst, Sydney, shortlisted in the 2023 Houses Awards. "When you inherit this whole sandstone dwelling, you have to work with it. It's 500 millimetres thick in places; it's not straight, it's jagged and it undulates."

She and her (life and business) partner Mitchell Thompson incorporated steel elements into the space – like stairs, platforms and window frames – to contrast against the stone's rough appearance. "You can bring out its texture and colour with a counterpoint, like painted- or galvanised-steel." She also suggests pairing it with orange and amber fabrics and upholsteries, as well as timbers, to emulate the outback.

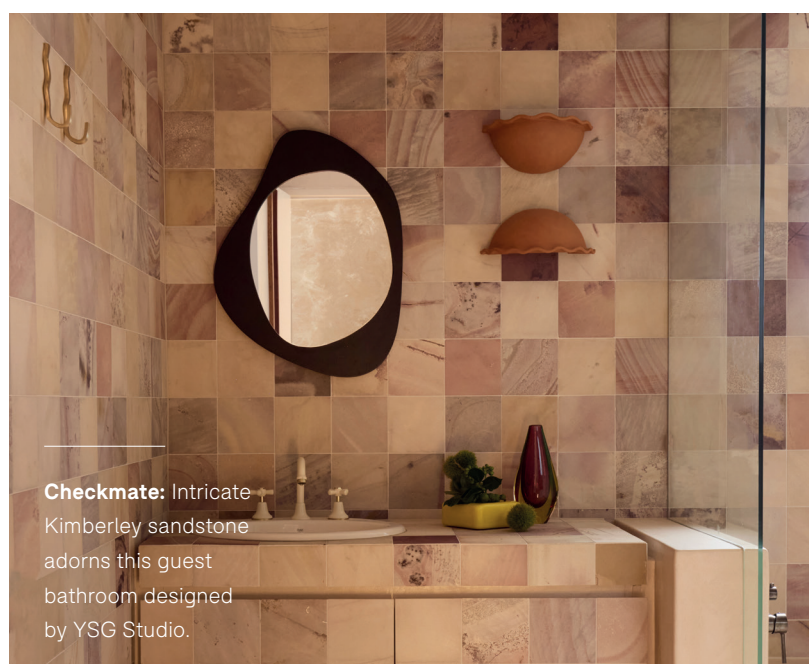
Retallack has increasingly noticed architects and designers use existing sandstone from sites during rebuilds. "It's nice to tie in and celebrate that history," she says. "[Part of our original] building had burnt down. We used the rubble in our garden as retaining walls." Although it had been buried, it was workable enough for new life. "Sandstone lasts. It doesn't really hold dirt, it absorbs it," she says.

The ancient material can always find new life. YSG Studio – the celebrated firm founded by Yasmine Ghoniem, who won Designer of the Year at the Australian Design Excellence Awards in 2021 – incorporates it into new builds. Checkmate, a family home in Byron Bay, uses handcut West Australian Kimberley sandstone throughout the entire bathroom. Each tile has its own streaks and patterns, creating an earthy cornucopia of pinks and off-whites. "The tone blushes at different times as the light changes, depending upon the amount of natural light entering the room," Ghoniem says. ■



Stone House:
An exposed sandstone cottage designed by Retallack Thompson Architects.

BEN HOSKING



Checkmate: Intricate Kimberley sandstone adorns this guest bathroom designed by YSG Studio.

PRUE RUSCOE

“You create a welcoming feeling when you introduce a beautiful piece of stone into your house.”

Tom Butterworth



Functional wares:
Sculptural vases crafted by Tom Butterworth.

NICHOLAS CALDWELL