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"It was dark and rainy, our feet were soaked from tramping around, and we drove past and almost didn't go in," recalls Jennie Smith, a marketing recruitment specialist, of the day she and her husband David, an author, first saw their home in Sydney's inner west. "The ban on the windows and doors and the general state of the facade almost turned us off." Once inside, however, it was love at first sight. "I couldn't believe how bright the rooms were down the long hallway, even on such a gloomy day."

That was the summer of 2002. Five years down the track, Jennie and David — along with dog Macy and Perry — couldn't be happier. The Smiths reclaimed their Saturdays, but traded the house-hunting rigour for entire weekends spent sanding, painting walls and twisting the arms of builders. Although the house initially presented badly, it was structurally sound. So once they moved it, added a bathroom and opened up the back, all the remaining work was purely cosmetic. Enter tinsmith Jennie, who had a very clear vision for every room, right from the start.

HOT TO SCALE Filling a small living room with oversized furniture seems like an odd thing to do, but Jennie found success in playing up the space-savered open area with a large, dark-grey modular sofa (see opening page). Not only is it colour perfect for dog hair, but, being so low to the ground, it helps create a sense of ceiling height. A large painting by Brad Meares adds to the impression of space and picks up on the red of the ladder.

LESS IS MORE Every house has its own character, but when it comes to semi the hallways are always pretty much the same: brightly and often dark. For theirs, David and Jennie opted for a less-is-more approach, using a bookshelf at the end as a focal point. "I wanted a chandelier, but David wasn't keen," explains Jennie, "plus I felt the look could be too busy for the space." The idea did get the nod in the end, but with a tongue-in-cheek twist — a chandelier now hangs over the front-door landing.

To retain the hallway's original feel, Jennie used a mahogany-coloured Cabot's stain on the floor and the soft velvet finish of Coverd in Pate's Eggshell Acrylic in Gardonia on the walls.

NEUTRAL TERRITORY The reserved tones of donkey, beige, camel and olive allow the graphic red accents of the home to shine, as well as warm up the starkness of the sea of surrounding white. The second bedroom (left), courtesy of a TV room, sees this work to optimistic effect. An artwork by David's sister Sophie Smith picks up on the impact colour red, while working with the surrounding hues of green.

DOUBLE DUTY "In small spaces, everything needs to have a reason for being," says Jennie. Her multi-level ladder is a great case in point. "We owned it in its raw form when we lived in Manly and couldn't part with it, so we decided to have it painted red," she says of the feature piece that acts as the anchor to the living and dining space. "Our builder thought we were mad, but we convinced him it would work." Taking centre stage in the room, it's used to hang up tea towels or hold the day's papers.

In the same way, the double-ended bookcase works to keep the busy kitchen area hidden, as well as hold a large amount of books with its wide capacity. Cookbooks and table dressing can be accessed from the kitchen, while novels and other reading material face the living room. ➔



COLOUR CONFIDENCE Red, by Jennie's own admission, was never the couple's favourite colour. "I love pale grey and greens — they're soft and calming," she admits. "But once the ladder was painted fire-engine red, the house became a magnet for it! We were given the coffee machine that secured the Brad Meares painting as a wedding gift. The skateboard decks above the fireplace just jumped out at us at a local exhibition."

Now, David and Jennie love how red brings the house to life and contrasts with the surrounding greys, greens and dark timbers. Best of all, though, it makes any home-related decision-making easy. "Because the house is small, I've been strict with the colour palette, so as not to make it too busy or busy," explains Jennie.

SPACE BYADERS Jennie loved the idea of having a long dining table surrounded by bentwood chairs, but realised such an setting would eat into the living space. As a compromise, four chairs were paired with a custom-made bench seat that dips under the table when not in use. While not as comfortable as the buckled chairs, the bench is a lifesaver when it comes to entertaining.

In the same spirit, a wooden drinks trolley can be rolled into the fireplace cavity when not doing the dinner-party rounds.

SMALL QUARTERS The only with Jennie and David chose to move were at the back end of the house, so pushing out the main bedroom to borrow more space wasn't an option. Assuming a "just deal with it" attitude regarding its size, they decided to bring in a large, dark-coloured bedhead, fill the walls with letters spelling out "Sleep" and work in an attention-grabbing throw. "There wasn't much else we could do," says Jennie. Opting for a four-poster tallon, she installed the urge to install built-in into the walls on either side of the room. "I thought that filling them would take away the beautiful light that comes through the windows." ➔