



They're calling it the "Downton Abbey factor". Nothing beats the way the sun glints off ancient sandstone literally as old as the hills, its honeyed tones setting a benchmark of class and style even in the most modern of settings.

For just as Britain's Highclere Castle has showcased sandstone to the world as Downton in the Emmy Award-winning TV series, on this side of the world sandstone – albeit in rather more modest homes – is undergoing a similar surge in popularity.

"Elements of sandstone are certainly desirable, although full, solid sandstone homes can be a little limiting in that they tend to be heritage-listed so you have to get approvals from council for alterations," says buyers agent Dennis Kalofonos, principal of Sydney Property Finders.

"But it's always beautiful, beautiful. We're very lucky to have golden sandstone in Australia which is fabulous, whereas overseas it's mostly grey which can look like granite ..."

Sydney has long had a love affair with sandstone, not least because it forms the bedrock for much of the region and was the favoured material for building homes and public buildings from the late 1790s. Many of these were built near quarries and some of the best examples can be seen today in The Rocks, Glebe, Vaucluse, Bellevue Hill, Paddington, Elizabeth Bay, Potts Point, McMahons Point, Mosman, Castlecrag, Hunters Hill and Balmain.

Now, with the top end of the Sydney property market having just undergone something of a revival, sandstone homes – most of which are located in less prestige areas – have swung back into vogue.

"The market in prestige homes over \$1.8 million or \$2 million is much stronger this year than last year," says Domain Group senior economist Dr Andrew Wilson. "It hasn't got to the stratospheric levels of the more budget market but it is up and running again. That market is more spring-focussed and there are reasonable signals for then."

Sandstone buildings give a classic edge

The colonial-era material is acquiring a new shine among buyers who are attracted to its history, elegance and unique beauty.

Words by **SUE WILLIAMS**

THE UPSTAIRS AND DOWNSTAIRS OF SANDSTONE HOMES

While sandstone homes can have all the grandeur and elegance of a bygone era, it's important that their maintenance and comfort aren't also well past their use-by date.

"You have to be alive to the issues like insulation and possible dampness," Chris Curtis says. "After all, they were built in an era where damp courses might be lead-based and may have perished or be downgraded."

But while sandstone is a porous material, excellent at absorbing moisture, there are now many good sealing agents on the market, says Brian Seidler, executive director of the Master Builders Association NSW.

"They can stop the moisture getting in and stop leaching from things like gum leaves falling on them."

"But you still have to be vigilant and, if you're building now in sandstone, be mindful of the quality you're buying, particularly if you're importing it from overseas. It's very popular now and seems to be making a bit of a revival."

Many people are choosing to add sandstone features such as edging, entrance ways or paving to brick homes. "That can make homes look more stately and at times exclusive," says Graeme Wolfe, Housing Industry Association executive director, NSW. "And that can also add value."



People see them as being well-built and different and obviously rarer since they're built of a natural substance. There's no doubt they're always a talking point among buyers.

Buyers agent Chris Curtis

Sandstone construction and features certainly add value to any home – sometimes more than 10 per cent for two otherwise identical houses, believes Richard Simeon, principal of Simeon Manners Property. The market for them is smaller but those who want them often really want them.

"They hark back to the colonial past of Australia, steeped in history, and they have incredible acoustic and thermal properties," Simeon says. "As a fashion statement too, they have a lot of charm and elegance, and they're about solidity and presence and can be very funky with a modern interior."

Buyers agent Chris Curtis of Curtis Associates agrees. "They're probably over 10 per cent more expensive," he says. "People see them as being well-built and different and obviously rarer since they're built of a natural substance. There's no doubt they're always a talking point among buyers."

Just like our love for all things *Downton Abbey*, our Sydney spin-offs are similarly objects of immense nostalgia. "We are all holding on to those absolute monuments of the past," says Ian Agnew, NSW State Manager of Archicentre. "They've proved their value over time and their style and design are making them become more and more valuable."

CASE STUDY



"THAT SANDSTONE FINISH REALLY ADDED VALUE"

Mellow: Caroline Astridge outside her house in St Ives. Photo: Dominic Lortimer

It had always been Caroline Astridge's dream one day to own a sandstone house. And when she couldn't find a good sandstone home to buy, she decided to create one instead.

"It's such a beautiful product," says Astridge, 48, an IT project manager with two daughters aged four and one. "I just love the appearance of sandstone, the aesthetic. It has such a lovely, mellow yellow colour ..."

Her stunning six-bedroom, four-bathroom home in St Ives is today unrecognisable from the building she bought back in 2004.

Then, it was an unremarkable 1960s brown brick-built house. Now, it's a magnificent two-storey mansion with a new roof, a new floor, fully renovated inside, and so well clad in a gorgeous honeyed sandstone crushed and sprayed on to insulation block, it looks as if it could be solid sandstone all the way through

– but with none of the downside.

"You wouldn't know it's the same house!" Astridge says of her home at 18 Gould Avenue, St Ives, which is now up for sale for offers over \$1.4 million via agent Mary Hepburn of Century 21 Cordeau Marshall, 0413 240 605.

"It now looks so attractive and that sandstone finish really added value. It's got such a unique distinctive look about it. I love it!"

Indeed, the whole venture was such a success, Astridge is now building another sandstone-clad house just down the road to move into.

"Building with solid sandstone blocks can be cost-prohibitive, but the way I'm doing it keeps the cost down, but looks just as good," she says.

Sue Williams

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