



The force behind The Block

Emily Power

From kids playing cricket on Sydney's industrial streets to businessmen playing the property game in Melbourne's poshest postcodes – meet the best mates behind *The Block*.

Architect Julian Brenchley and the show's co-creator and executive producer Julian Cress have been buddies since age eight.

They grew up on the same street at McMahon's Point, northern Sydney, back when the now fancy suburb was "timber yards and brothels", Mr Brenchley said.

Decades on, they still share a sense of boyhood fun.

The latest five Block apartments – which have transformed the once seedy Hotel Saville in South Yarra, on the corner of Punt and Commercial roads – will be auctioned on Saturday.

With the exterior design, Mr Brenchley tips his signature trilby hat not to industrial chic, but to their beloved *Star Wars*.

Mr Cress and Mr Brenchley saw the first movie together as youngsters in 1977.

The roof of the octagonal tower looks like the wings of a TIE fighter spacecraft, and Mr Brenchley said the steel frame facade – when "squinting every so slightly" – references Hans Solo's Millennium Falcon.

Along with the show's co-creator David Barbour, the friends have become property developers by default.

Across *The Block's* 12 years and 11 seasons, they have completed luxury real estate ventures from Sydney's beachside Bondi to Melbourne's hip Prahran.

"We operate under a different criteria for development – we underdevelop, in that we create really quite special assets," Mr Brenchley said.

"Developers hate us, because this would have had 60 apartments but instead, we've done six.

"We are testing the boundaries of

unit typology in the area. We are doing less units and creating a demand for a larger, more substantial dwelling, and then causing valuers and real estate agents all sorts of headaches."

Mr Brenchley has designed every Block residential project starting with the debut season in Bondi in 2003.

He was on board from the outset, after Mr Cress and Mr Barbour successfully pitched a renovation reality show to then Channel Nine deputy chief David Gyngell.

When Mr Brenchley discovered the Punt Road eyesore site was on the market, it came with a permit for up to 60 apartments.

Some local residents, against the idea of high-density in their pocket of genteel South Yarra, were pleased to see those plans ripped up by the producers.

"I know we are in the business of making a show, but in the process, hopefully we are giving something back to Melbourne, which is an added benefit and opportunity," Mr Brenchley said.

The auction results will be revealed on the series finale at 7.30pm on Wednesday on Channel Nine.



Domain
Hide and sleek:
Houses designed
to surprise



The Block's creator, Julian Cress, with Julian Benchley in front of the renovated Hotel Saville.
Photo: Jason South