


RENOVATION
 JENNY BROWN

Idea backs up the grandeur

Plan B gave a refined 1910 Boroondara house a modern edge both sweeping and sympathetic.

Adamant about protecting one of the inner east's loveliest Queen Anne enclaves from inappropriate development, Boroondara Council keeps a tight rein on what happens to the red-brick houses with the tall chimney stacks and high, terracotta roofs. Architect Geoff Challis and his clients were initially considering a two-storey back extension to one such house to preserve as much of the big backyard as they could.

This plan was overruled. Plan B, putting a single-level main living "pavilion" at the back, and two wings that attach to the original house via two long side corridors, turned out to be no evident compromise. It achieved more than the clients envisaged and performed the task Challis set himself "to balance and respect the grandeur of the old house" while adding much contemporary amenity.

The pre-1910 house was designed by prominent Federation architect Christopher Cowper, celebrated for the Summerland Mansions in Fitzroy Street, St Kilda. Having the chance to reformat and revamp its dilapidated interiors turned into another plus in a project that added three bedrooms and a considerably scaled living, dining and kitchen pavilion with five-metre ceiling elevation and glassed outlook to a garden focused on an old peppercorn tree.

It meant that into refined rooms with 3.6-metre ceilings, carved wooden fretwork and stained glass features, Challis could introduce fresh elements as "new finishes built into the old walls that give a simple, seamless effect so that nothing is competing with anything".

From the front entry, for example, a new glass-curtained stairway and a

ceiling-high wall of limed oak veneer set up the theme of "old spaces sliding into new spaces".

"It was about making the connections subtle and not a shock," the architect says. On the back elevation, this mindful blending of form and materiality, of the authentic with the innovative, is most apparent.

The new roof-lines work not only with the solid old house, but are empathetic with the multifaceted roofs of the surrounding Federation housing. Challis points out how in the additions "a whole collection of roofs now cascade towards the backyard" and how the clerestory windows that laterally subdivide the roof and, like a lantern, bring multi-directional daylight into the living pavilion stay in character and leaven what could have become "a heavy roof" with a substantial overhang.

The Marseilles tiles on the new roof are recycled and tinted with vintage lichen. The red brick of the four square pillars, which visually anchor the extension and delineate the undercover entertaining terrace, were sourced from the same manufacturer that supplied the pressed reds a century earlier. "We also matched the colour of the old mortar. It was about staying as sympathetic as possible."

But while the exteriors so suit the wider setting, the interiors have been elegantly modernised. Venn Architects interior designer Gill Stewart was the leading hand in the decor, which has some definite moments of impact. The lighting fixtures are always arty and "the good room", as the client now calls it, is another exemplar.

Two downstairs rooms in the old house were remade as one gracious space. With two fireplaces, white



Quietly impressive: The back pavilion (main) houses the kitchen (above right) and seating. Photos: Derek Swahwell

picture rails and skirting boards, this room has been painted in such a dark greyish brown that the walls appear black. The main bedroom's ensuite has black patterned wallpaper. The new timber floor has been black japanned. The hard tiling is bluestone.

The floor-to-ceiling, oak-lined corridors that conceal storage run for metres; 12 metres in the case of the teenagers' bedroom wing, which was set along one side of the extension and was a major stipulation in the brief. "We wanted zoning," the owner says. "We wanted privacy from the [three] teenagers. I didn't want to walk past kids' bedrooms."

She got her sanctity via a cunning ploy of having two oak-veneered corridors running as parallel carriageways that are concealed from each other by the beautiful panelling. The owner jokes that she can "seal the kids off completely".

The "good room" might have become a cave of gloom but by enclosing a four-by-eight-metre courtyard with white painted walls into what has become the core of the house, light bounces into it. "A much-used sun trap" that the owner has decided "is our urban space" is the keystone of a deceptively complex piece of residential architecture that is

always seeking to underplay itself. "We thought it was best to respect the statements that are already here," Challis says. "The old home already had grandeur and prestige. We wanted the new to read as clearly as we could without competing with all the lovely things already here: the house, the landscaping and the canopied streets of such a lovely neighbourhood."

CONTACT

vennarchitects.com