

Domain RENOVATION JENNY BROWN

Simple approach, stylish finish

An architect's transformation of his own house is a lesson in making the best use of available space.

It's always informative to see what an architect does with his own house renovation because the finessing of design and detail is usually taken to the max. It's the architectural equivalent of a self-titled album.

Nic Owen, whose Carlton house and practice is on the threshold of the University of Melbourne campus, worked a long-neglected little brick terrace beside a bluestone lane into the total package.

The three-bedroom house on which he raised a two-storey, cubed extension to the back boundary has an elevated and private north courtyard, a secret attic studio and — "Carlton gold" — a garage so well appointed that it doubles as a rumpus room or extra entertainment space.

It was raw material to work with, he says, an 1866 brick house that had been a rental for decades. "Nothing worked and there were gaps everywhere. No handyman had ever lived here." His attic ran through into his neighbour's roof cavity. "It was built before planning regulations."

In making the alteration, Owen took the back off, inspired by Japanese modernism. He was going for "timeless simplicity" so the palette is restrained and the lines clear and formal.

The keynote tones are black, white, green



and wood. The joinery, the floors and most of the feature timber are variations on hoop pine and spotted gum. The material choice and interior colour theme is Owen's abstraction of a forest. "We didn't have a garden, so we wanted to create

an internal forest in the city," he says.

The various greens that repeat in carpets, featured paintwork and the odd glass window are fresh. "We picked one colour and went with it. It's cool without being frigid."

In a small house only 4.5 metres wide, a Zen-like discipline that keeps spaces clutter-free relies on masses of joinery.

"We have more storage than the average suburban house," says Owen's partner, Josephine.

"We look tidy," Owen says, "but our mess gets bunged into cupboards."

The architect believes good joinery is one of the elements that makes a house work internally. "Designing joinery is one of my favourite things," he says.

Everything fits with nautical practicality. The bathroom, with a green ceiling and full-scale bath, has hidden alcoves and a big window looking into a small atrium. Above the light well is a tiny balcony. Below, under a bed of pebbles and plants, is a small rainwater tank.

Window placements are careful to provide outlook to distant trees and not city busyness, an effect that creates privacy. The second-level terrace that extends the living room has a 1.7-metre-high parapet wall. In the wall are two slot windows.

'Anything good is very simple but it also has a level of detail that works.'

NIC OWEN, ARCHITECT

That wall is beautiful because it appears to the interiors and to the bordering laneways as strictly tailored stacked concrete blockwork. Owen had seen this designer blockwork used in contemporary buildings in his native New Zealand "and absolutely loved the aesthetics of it".

He imported the extra-light mortar to ensure the right colour contrast with a material he selected to also match the bluestone pavers in the laneway. He put the spotted gum-timbered cube into the laneway too, "to give something warm and natural back to a little street that has no trees".

The materiality and the form, which he says "is basically timber and concrete cubes", is as simple it gets.

"And you can't get more timeless than that," he says.

"But that's the thing: anything good is very simple but it's also got that level of detail that you don't pick up from the outset but when taken all together, it works."

Because his partner is an artist, and because he had the opportunity, Owen fitted another piece into his residential jigsaw. By



Taking his lead from Japanese modernism and with a simple colour palette, Nic Owen has streamlined an old cottage.

PICTURES: RHIANNON SLATER



stepping out through the kitchen window and in through a large skylight that works like a tilted door, he opened up the attic apex and made a small studio inside it.

With the twisting brickwork of the 1866 chimney retained as a feature "for its honesty", he calls the secret attic "a nice little room to be in, especially if you're sitting down".

This is the house that Owen says kick-started his practice, which has since concentrated on renovations in the local area.

He's just about to tackle his second own-home renovation — still in Carlton — so this place, 260 Elgin Street, Carlton, which won the 2010-11 HIA renovations and additions award, is being auctioned at 1pm today by Thomson Real Estate.

As architecture unplugged, it is a fresh first solo outing, full of cool surprises.

CONTACT

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