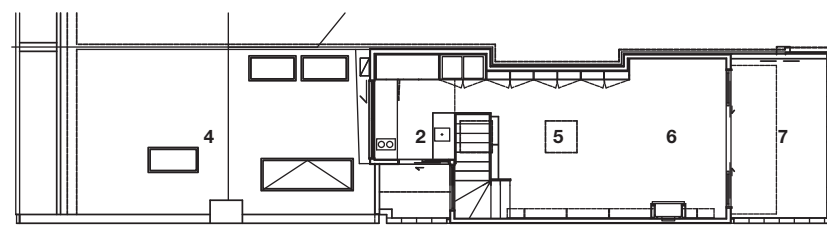




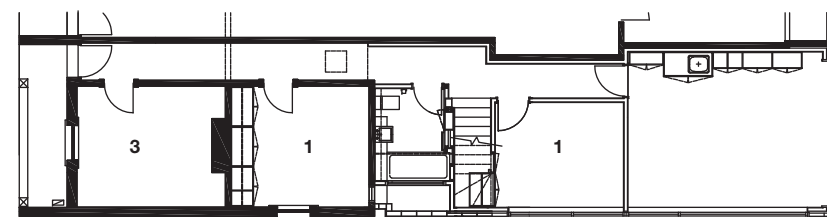
## VINTAGE GREEN

Carefully negotiating a heritage overlay and close confines, Nic Owen Architects crafts a verdant interior within a compact inner-city renovation. **Story by Jenna Reed Burns**

**Photography by Rhiannon Slatter**



First floor plan 1:200



Ground floor plan 1:200

- 1 Bedroom
- 2 Kitchen
- 3 Office
- 4 Studio
- 5 Meals
- 6 Family
- 7 Balcony

**PREVIOUS PAGES:** A pair of skylights picked out in bright leaf green fill the living area on the top floor with light. **OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP:** Spotted gum is used extensively to clad walls and floors in the living area, as well as constructing decks, balustrades and furniture. **BOTTOM:** Energizing lime green carpet is featured on the lower level, and a stripe of British racing green wraps around the volume, camouflaging a new narrow window.

**HERITAGE OVERLAYS** can be polarizing. While some see them as the proverbial pain, complicating matters and limiting all manner of development opportunities, others embrace the challenges they represent. Luckily, given their line of work, architect Nic Owen and his wife and business partner, artist Josie Backhouse, fall into the latter camp. “Most of our work is in the inner city,” says Nic, “little terraces with heritage and site restrictions, but I love that because it often creates the best architecture.”

Such an attitude meant this couple were far from daunted about transforming their single-storey terrace on a busy street, within walking distance of Melbourne’s CBD, into a comfortable living and work space.

The house, with cobbled bluestone laneways wrapping around two sides of its north-facing site, was built in 1866. It’s one of eight originally identical brick dwellings, with a central laneway dividing the terrace into two rows of four houses. As one of the end terraces, built hard to the central laneway, it came with pluses and minuses. Because the side face of the house can be seen from the street, council stipulated that the front two rooms and the original pitched roof had to be retained and that any new addition should stand alone and not exceed the height of the ridge. It also required all new work to be respectful of the old in terms of materials and overall form.

Nic’s solution was to retain the front of the house, demolish the remaining ramshackle skillion-roofed rooms, and build a robust, new two-storey box in their place. The new addition, built to the site’s boundaries, almost doubles the living area while retaining the same amount of open space, now raised from ground level to the first floor in the form of balconies leading off either end of the living area.

But before construction could begin, Nic had to negotiate to block off the rear lane as well as a metre-wide strip of the central laneway. “At ninety-seven square metres, the site has a very small footprint, so whatever we did it was going to be a fairly expensive build because of the ‘fiddle factor,’” Nic explains. “Being so close to everyone, any building work impacts on the neighbours, so it was an exercise in community diplomacy. I had to get twelve neighbours to sign an agreement to block off the lane – lots of bottles of wine were given out,” he adds with a laugh.

From the outside, the distinction between old and new is deliberately easy to read. A slotted groove at the junction, housing a downpipe which feeds into a concealed rainwater tank, visually separates the two halves of the house. Cladding the lower half of the new addition are

sheets of black Formply. Above, the new upstairs living area is covered in oiled vertical timber boards while the boundary walls of the two balconies are formed from concrete blockwork in a stacked bond.

“My favourite materials would have to be a plywood of some description and concrete,” says Nic, a Kiwi accent betraying his homeland. “It’s the aesthetic of my childhood. There wasn’t the big volume of bricks as a building material in New Zealand, so concrete blocks are everywhere, as well as timber. Also, from a visual point of view we wanted the house to be very simple and timeless, which is why there are only three elements. The Formply acts as a black-board for the inevitable graffiti, but it also visually grounds the house and hides the garage door.”

The observant viewer might also notice rich, bottle-green glass filling three horizontal windows and perhaps even a flash of green on the ceiling of the living room above. But it’s not until inside the house that the enlivening role the colour plays becomes obvious. The carpet of the downstairs hallway is an energizing lime green, the same colour that’s been used on the ceiling of the jewel box-like bathroom. In the master bedroom, a stripe of British racing green streaks its way up one end of a wall and across the ceiling, camouflaging a new narrow window on the way. Upstairs, in the light-filled living area, a pair of skylights are picked out in bright leaf green.

“It’s actually amazing the difference a colour makes,” says Nic. “Because Carlton is a bit of a concrete jungle we’ve splashed green through as a way of creating a forest feel inside. You’ll see that with our use of timber as well.”

Applied as facings to walls and ceilings, as well as being used to clad some external walls and to construct decks, floors, balustrades and furniture, the main timber used is spotted gum – the same species that has been planted as a street tree a block away. Treated with different finishes (gloss on the floors, stair treads and furniture; satin on the walls; oiled outside), the timber’s appearance alters with each application.

“It’s our bit of play,” says Josie. “If you stand out the front of the house and look down the street you see the trees, then you look into our house and see all the green.” While to some people this may sound like self-indulgent archi-speak, it really does work. The carefully controlled use of timber and splashes of green add a lively, nature-based element to the interior, visually connecting the house and its inhabitants to the canopies of trees that can be seen from upstairs. Why, even the freestanding coat rack in the hallway has a deliberate yet delicate, tree-like appearance. H



## ARCHITECT

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## PRACTICE PROFILE

The young design-focused practice consists of a husband (architect) and a wife (artist) specializing in residential architecture.

## PROJECT TEAM

Nic Owen, Josie Backhouse

## BUILDER

Kleev Homes

## CONSULTANTS

**Engineer** John Horan and Associates  
**Interiors and lighting** Nic Owen Architects

## PRODUCTS

**Roofing** Lysaght Custom Orb  
**External walls** Spotted gum timber cladding; concrete block; fibrecement sheet; Formply **Internal walls** Spotted gum plywood; hoop pine plywood; plasterboard **Windows** Commercial aluminium; custom coloured glass; Viridian VLam Hush glass **Doors** Commercial aluminium **Flooring** Polished concrete; spotted gum ArmourPanel plywood; Edwardstown 'Cadium Green' carpet **Lighting** Custom-designed pendant lights by Nic Owen Architects **Kitchen** Miele appliances; SmartStone 'Vanilla' benchtop; hoop pine and spotted gum plywood joinery with coloured 2pac finish **Bathroom** SmartStone 'Vanilla' benchtop; spotted gum plywood joinery with coloured 2pac finish **Climate control** Nobo wall heaters; Canon gas fireplace **External elements** Spotted gum decking; aluminium mesh open grate balcony **Other** Rainwater tank in lightcourt; custom-designed spotted gum bed, dining table and coffee table

## FLOOR AREA

132 m<sup>2</sup>

## PROJECT COST

\$350,000

## TIME SCHEDULE

**Design, documentation** 6 months  
**Construction** 7 months

**THIS PAGE, TOP:** The distinction between old and new is retained. **BOTTOM:** The lower level of the new extension is clad in black Formply, while the upper level is covered with oiled, vertical timber boards.

