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GRAND DAMES

Victorian prestige meets modern
manners in reworked terrace beauties.

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Cover story

CLARE BARRY

Heritage meets modern magic

The Victorians were all about show, it seems - and that's great news for renovators ready to see the light and give their terraces a 21st-century makeover.

Melburnians buying into the elegance of a classically proportioned Victorian terrace house might get a little of the era's aspirational pomposity along with the prime inner-city location.

After the restrained, Regency-style classicism of early examples such as Fitzroy's 1850s Royal Terrace, more elaborate Italianate ornamentation kicked in on terrace houses built in the 1860s and '70s, leading to the excesses of the "boom style" by the late 1880s.

"Melbourne was the richest city in Australia and people wanted to show that," says architectural historian Natica Schmeder, of Context Heritage Consulting.

"Hyped up" ornamentation included elaborate cast-iron verandah detailing, cast-cement pediments and balusters, and walls rendered to emulate stonework. "Trying to make materials look more prestigious than they really are, that was a big Victorian thing," says Schmeder.

"It was an affordable display of wealth, because there was a lot of mass-produced repetitive ornament in there.

You might call it an aspirational display because they were very much putting it on the front and in the front room, making a

TOP TIPS

- Cherish the formal front rooms and upgrade the back for modern living.
- Consider opening up the rear facade for an indoor-outdoor area with a greater sense of space.
- Designing everything including joinery makes a space feel bigger and gives a uniform feel.
- Traditional paint colours can replicate the stately feel Victorians admired. Try a matte finish to look like stone, in a lightish yellow-brown like sandstone, with brown or deep bronze green on cast-iron elements.

Source: DE atelier Architects, Nic Owen Architects, Context Heritage Consulting

statement to the public. The back of the house was not meant to be seen."

This "hierarchy" of rooms spells good news for those adding a modern extension to their Victorian terrace.

"It's preserving the sense of a hierarchy where you have the grand rooms with period detail at

the front and the utilitarian rooms at the back," says Schmeder.

A modern addition can maximise light and create a sense of space, says Briony Darcy of DE atelier Architects. "You have to use opportunities to get light into the inner hub of the home. There's lots you can do as you move into the building to create light and space that doesn't detract from the heritage values.

"We've done a rear extension where we put stepped clerestory windows in around the living and dining area that allowed us to get east, west and northern light deeper into the house," says Darcy.

"You can drop a skylight over a stairwell or use artificial lighting to open up that space, and light-coloured walls to reflect light."

Architect Nic Owen is a fan of a light touch on heritage projects.

"These structures are going to outlast all of us and new works, as good as they might be, in 50 or 100 years' time they may want to scrape that off, but it's still got a beautiful Victorian terrace as its basis."

The terraces' grandeur and charm explain their popularity, says auctioneer Sam Gamon. That, along with a scarcity factor, makes them "more valuable and harder to acquire as time marches on".



CASE STUDY

CREATING SPACE

When architect Nic Owen reworked a three-storey Victorian terrace house in East Melbourne, the confines of the Victorian Heritage Register dictated his scope.

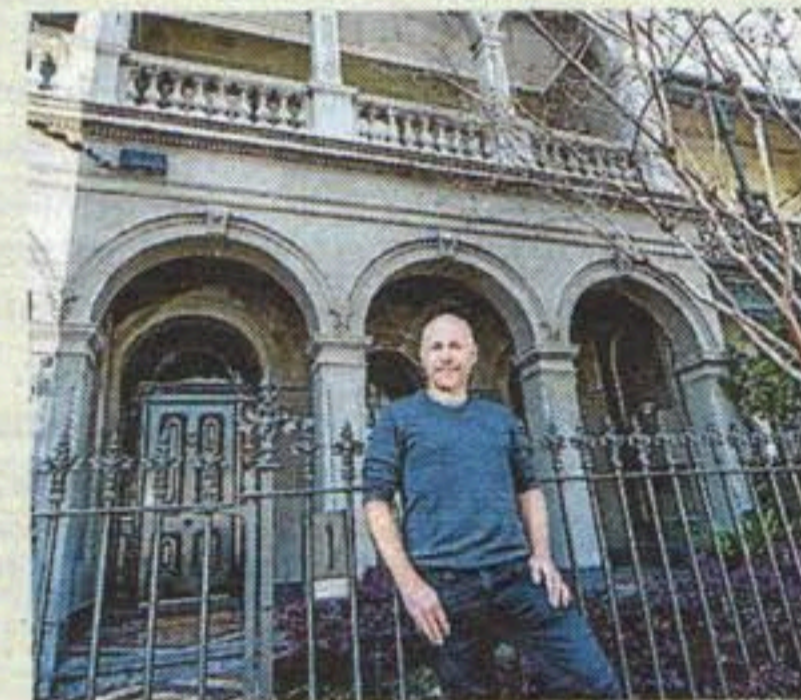
"They didn't want to see any new works from outside the building, even the back laneway, so it became pretty much a large internal fitout."

He simplified the palette of the house, in a row of 16 terraces built in 1877, and tried to make it feel bigger by using light materials, mirrors, and connecting it to the outside.

"We removed all the joinery, reoriented the kitchen and used new joinery elements to define spaces rather than building new walls," Owen says.

"There's a monolithic benchtop that separates the kitchen from the living space, and in the master bedroom we created a pod that slots in like a timber box. Rather than carving up the room to create an en suite, it sits in there and, wrapping round it, you've got the robe.

"There's a sense that the house is reversible, you could take out those elements and still be left with a beautiful Victorian terrace."



Architect Nic Owen in front of a double-fronted terrace in East Melbourne that he redesigned.