

# Domain RENOVATION JENNY BROWN

## When fence sitting is impossible

A neighbouring imposition was used to great effect in this revamp.

**T**HE imposing bulk of a brick wall on the two-storey Federation house next door could have been a big constraint on the new back addition to a late-Victorian brick house on a seven-metre-wide inner-city block that Paul Porjazoski of Bent Architecture was asked to design.

The very definite brick wall consumed most of the northern boundary and, thus, much of the opportunity for sunlight.

But, instead of being “pushed around” by it, the architect chose to work with “the potential dilemma that we could never disguise and embrace it as the context that gives this project its personality”.

Indeed, in the reconfigured rooms of the lower storey of what is now a double-level, four-bedroom house, the wall becomes the prime visual asset through charcoal-framed windows set high to the ceiling line to grab what natural light they can.

Asset? In the precinct of Clifton Hill, where late-19th-century industrial buildings nudge late-19th-century residences, red brick is the vernacular so it looks perfectly apt as a featured material.

In extending the old house's footprint slightly into the fortuitously sunny backyard, Porjazoski chose to add even more red brick — this time as a broad, two-metre-wide by 3.5-metre-high masonry pillar on the southern wall. His rationale “was to reference the brick on the other side and create a space that sits between red brick walls”. It now makes the kitchen-dining-living room “feel like it could be outdoors”.

When the 3.5-metre sliding doors are rolled away from the north-west corner of the living room, the indoors, floored in messmate timber, meld into the black-butt deck and that boundary of hard masonry — half a metre



beyond the actual house perimeter. It all becomes implied spatial extension.

“By opening the side, we could make the space feel wider than it is,” Porjazoski says. “And for us,” the client says, “it’s more living space. The children are out there all the time.”

Throughout this project, which added an upper storey with three bedrooms, a shared bathroom and five metres of shoulder-height storage joinery running the length of the top-floor corridor and taking advantage of otherwise dead space, the architect has used a lot of cunning contrivances “to create a light-filled family home with two living spaces, two bathrooms and four bedrooms on a block that is 300 square metres or less”.

The relatively high, 3.2-metre ceilings inherited in the original structure were used to advantage and amped in the back living areas by an additional bank of big clerestory windows that rise to the full height of the raked skillion roof. “They are there to bring in as much



Light is encouraged via a push into the sunny backyard (top) and clerestory windows (above left). PICTURES: BRENDAN FINN

northern light as possible so they needed to be that tall,” Porjazoski says. “They couldn’t be shy.”

The southern hallway on the lower floor was another once-dark inheritance that had daylight introduced by setting more clear windows above the doorways to rooms including a bathroom, laundry and a sitting-rumpus room with such handsome hardwood bookshelf joinery it also convinces as an adult library space.

Porjazoski refers to the not-incident natural light feeds as “highlights”. A skylight above the stairwell serves the same function, as do light-bouncing, ceiling-high mirrors in the family bathroom.

All the new light goes a long way towards making a not-particularly-large house feel much bigger.

“There is — we’d like to think —

a clarity to the architecture,” Porjazoski says. “It’s not overcomplicated. But in a house like this, where everything is defined by the site limitations, it’s the light that makes it feel more open.”

Porjazoski pushed back even more on the site constraints by inserting inbuilt furniture in the sitting zone.

In the kitchen, the joinery appears as much structural as practical. Wood-veneered and black-laminated cupboards reach the ceiling around a black, reconstituted-stone island bench.

And the ceiling that defines the kitchen zone is lined in unapologetic yet unexpectedly attractive pressed-cement sheeting.

“We like the idea of using exterior-grade material inside,” the architect says.

Beyond the kitchen, the ceiling line of the living space takes in an extension of the timber ribbing that forms the exterior pergola. “Solid Victorian ash beams [were] dragged inside to reinforce the connection between inside and out.”

Porjazoski reckons that the clear lines and context complicity of the renewed house are, in fact, fairly simple architecturally. “It straightforwardly works with established rules of facing into the sun.” But he also says it’s a thesis “on how a house doesn’t have to be physically big to be impressive”.

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