

Taking on the master

Designer restores a Harold Desbrowe-Annear house.



Domain RENOVATION JENNY BROWN



Remaster of art and craft

A designer has breathed new life into an architectural classic. By **Jenny Brown**.



A renovation has modernised yet respected the design of this historic home including (clockwise from main) the family room, a new pool area, the exterior and porch entry.

PICTURES: SCOTT HASKINS, MARK DONALDSON

IN AN extensive Armadale residential renovation, building designer Luke Middleton took on one of the giants of historic Melbourne architecture, Harold Desbrowe-Annear, and won.

Last year Middleton took out the Building Designers Association of Victoria (BDAV) award for heritage renovation. The designer, who made his name as a stickler for sustainable architecture, was humbled by the commission but, obviously, not overwhelmed because he managed to match an arts-and-crafts master's hand in a voluminous, contemporary and carefully detailed two-level rear addition to an already substantial 1920s home.

In refining and rationalising existing interior spaces, and adding on the client's "utopian list" of three new bedrooms; a contiguous kitchen-dining-family room with open study space, an expanse of decking around a new swimming pool and sauna, Middleton says he first "carefully observed the attributes of the existing building and used them as the springboard elements" in his work, which is so nuanced it convinces as 21st-century arts and crafts.

With its wonderful semicircular and leadlight-enclosed porch entry, the double-brick, rough-stuccoed Desbrowe-Annear house had a tremendous tiled roofline, deep eaves and a powerful presence. But an '80s alteration had confused the interiors into a layout Middleton describes as "so higgledy-piggledy and dark that it closed it all down".

In the makeover, rooms and walls swapped situations to put all the living spaces — sitting room, dining, kitchen and step-down family room — into a flowing walk-through, see-through arrangement on the northern garden side. The four bedrooms were concentrated to the south side.

The entry corridor remains appropriately formal. But where it was formerly a low, dog-legging hallway, it is now a wide, high, oak-floored gallery looking along the east-west axis to the greenery surrounding the pool deck.

With such considered window placement and strategic skylight boxes that double as heat-voiding "chimneys", the once heavy house has a tangibly fresh translucency. It also has cohesion in the form and material conversation that struck up between two designers working in different centuries.

In the "layered view" progress through the building, elements of Middleton's remastering begin to appear in the front rooms. He clad a free-standing firebox shared between the kitchen and dining room in vertical, silver-top ash as "a little bit of the new coming into the old. Desbrowe-Annear liked natural materials and it is the introduction to a new aesthetic," he says.

In the kitchen he took advantage of Desbrowe-Annear's roof form to create a double-height space that apexes at 5.5 metres. "We made a cathedral ceiling. It was obvious."

From this point, Middleton took over the design narrative. In the

core of the kitchen and rising to the roof is a freestanding double-height square timbered box as a domestic utopian pantry. "Again," Middleton says, "wood becomes the theme and the natural palette."

All the horizontal wood surfaces are American oak. All the vertical timber insertions are the same Australian hardwood species. "Timber is the punctuation that anchors the space. Rather than just a bunch of white boxes, the wood gives an expression of warmth and is neutral enough to allow it to become an emblem of the building."

Thus, steps and floors seem to mutate into walls. Joinery is trimmed in bandings of wood. "So floors fold up to become joinery." A timbered box harking back to the pantry module, floats above a semi-subterranean family room, which

slips off and down from the kitchen. It is visually open but separated by subtle degrees of sinking and screening.

The best screened space is the two-bedroom wing now known as "the boys' zone". Much to the delight of the boys, it is totally obscure in the house. A massive pivot door off the dug-down family room camouflages the hallway entry to two bedrooms and a bathroom. You wouldn't know it was there. "Every child who comes here thinks that door is the coolest thing," the client says.

If this major addition was the usual great white box story, it would have seemed dauntingly huge. Yet the way Middleton has slipped and "shuffled" room spaces and ceiling profiles, voids, forms and functions — one mutating into the next "in

transitions that make sense" — and the way he has added so much subliminal detail to the finish, has kept it very personable.

The clients say there is not one space in their house that they don't use in some way, every day.

Functional, rational and beautiful detailing is very much an arts and crafts trait. Desbrowe-Annear "did not do fashionable", Middleton says. "He did solid and timeless 3D sculptural architecture that emphasised natural materials."

Middleton follows similar instincts to similar ends: "I'm not into catalogue architecture."

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