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sideways and sustainably

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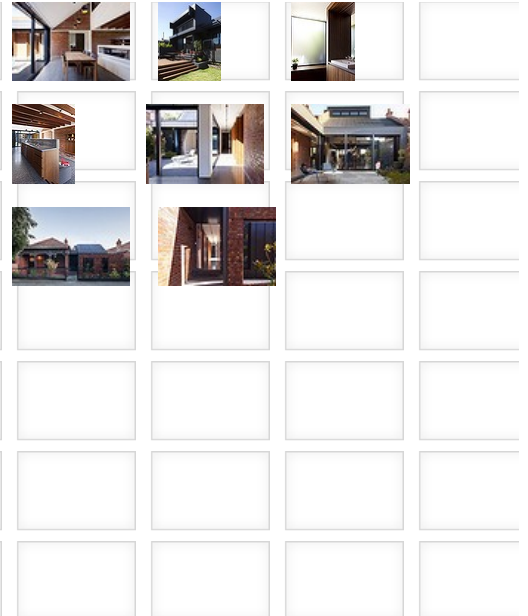
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Jenny Brown

Recycled material with an eco-friendly twist connect a smart project to the neighbourhood.

Renovation: Looking sideways and sustainably

Deceptive: Although small when viewed from the street, this big house incorporates a large courtyard, while the kitchen occupies three levels of living space. Photo: Michelle Williams.



A vacant block in one of the oldest streets in Melbourne's oldest suburb, Fitzroy, was, as architect Jane Sayers well knew, "a very rare opportunity" for the realisation of a wonderfully responsive and imaginative extension to a 1920s single-level brick villa. The owners, Sarah and Frank Jayamaha, had jumped at the chance to buy the house with the side garden because it gave them a 13-metre width and back exposure to northern light that is so hard to find in the inner city.

They wanted to expand their house sideways and towards the back lane so it could include three bedrooms and a study that could double as a fourth bedroom. A request for plenty of sunny living spaces and the full complement of sustainable features was written into the brief they took to one of the most green-credentialed architectural firms in Melbourne. DesignInc brought us the benchmark Council House 2 building in Swanston Street, but the firm rarely works on a residential scale.

Size-wise, project architect Sayers says, "it's a contrast to what we normally do. But it really embodies what we believe in: adaptive reuse, sustainability and spaces that have purpose and a meaning in that they connect with the human psyche and connect with a human landscape. It's warmth, light, shelter and privacy that make people happy and comfortable."

This big house, which looks so little from the street, is all of this and more. Set around a core four-metre-by-five-metre courtyard, and with new rooms that follow a land profile with a natural three-metre rise and fall from front to back, the house has three levels and different depths of floor and ceiling heights to affect a constantly morphing room volume and orientation.

For instance, the main bedroom at the front is snuggled below the paving level in the courtyard. A television or sitting nook is set down below the L-shaped and open dining-kitchen arrangement at the back. The study is up a flight of stairs above it and, in effect, makes the back area of the extension a three-level affair. While DesignInc didn't do the garden, it also plays with a combination of five levels that include wooden decks and cascading steps that descend to a patch of lush green grass.

In the arrangement of rooms that are no less sophisticated for being so thermally effective and sensibly scaled and zoned, the sustainability story is what underpins the whole design ethos.

Sustainable bamboo is the material of the cabinets that furnishes every space in a different way. It is also used as flooring, along with polished concrete aggregate. The kitchen benches are concrete and the round-the-corner elongated shape of this cook's galley has been designed to hide mess while keeping the hosts in the conversation during dinner party preparation.

Recycling is another theme. The hallway of the original house has been adapted for use as a light courtyard that illuminates the rooms in the old part of the house. The red-brick walls that once faced the side garden are now celebrated along the new entry hall and as the time-burnished backdrop in the new family rooms.

Red brick, reclaimed and recycled in the form of chips that have been laid, drystone wall-style, into the gabion cages that work as a screen and as the new frontage, are featured despite initial heritage and council planning misgivings. Yet it is that simple wall that gives the new part of the house such convincing connection to its neighbourhood.

Sayers says: "Originally, Heritage didn't want the site to be built on at all. So what we have tried to do here is to contrast the old with the new but to do it on a domestic scale so that it fits into the street context.

"The material gives the new an ancient feel that means it doesn't really stand out. It doesn't yell. It just becomes very quiet and very unassuming."

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