

Domain

NEW LIVING

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COVER STORY

By MARY O'BRIEN



Back to the future

The way we live now is very different from the way we lived in the past. So how do we adapt beautiful old houses for our 21st-century lifestyle? Restoring or renovating a period house is a delicate balance between rescuing the features of the past and providing the living spaces we expect today.

In a successful renovation, a heritage house is revitalised, a streetscape is protected and a well-located home is ready for the next chapter in its life.

Most architects aim to design an interesting contemporary extension with open-plan living areas, lots of sunlight and a connection to the garden. Linking a contemporary addition to a period building demands sensitivity and creativity.

Dealing with council and heritage issues is another challenge that can add months, if not years, to a project.

Architect George Yiontis, of Melbourne's Coy Yiontis Architects, is sensitive to heritage issues, but he doesn't believe in mimicking the original buildings.

"The approach we take to any addition is to quite distinctly architecturally differentiate the new from the old so there's a point of connection between the two," he says. "The architectural problem is how you stitch these two together."

He recently completed the Nolan House, an appealing contemporary addition that connects to a pretty Federation home.

"From the front, it's a perfectly restored Federation building," he says. "But the guts of the living areas are very contemporary, tranquil, light-filled and it's landscaped in a contemporary way."

While being a heritage house, it fits our contemporary lifestyle to a T."

He says old houses have problems because they weren't well built.

"A lot of our clients actually don't want to live in a heritage building. They have bought into a heritage area and they love being there but they would love a new house."

BRETT BOARDMAN PHOTOGRAPHY

"The kind of living spaces people want are going to be different to 100 years ago where they were typically internalised. The kitchen has really become a living space - it's where we spend most of our time."



Yiontis believes some councils are too conservative in their approach to renovations in areas with heritage overlays. He ran into problems a few years ago when he presented a plan to build a contemporary house in the heritage-listed area of St Vincent Place in Albert Park. It took three years and a lot of negotiating before permission was granted.

Heritage renovations are not everyone's cup of tea, Toorak architect Anthony Pie says. He likes to take a sympathetic approach to period buildings and recently completed an extensive renovation in South Yarra – across the road from another one of his projects.

The first house was built in 1913. Heritage overlays meant the chimneys and rooflines had to be retained. The front rooms were restored, skirting boards re-installed and the bay window seats in the original living areas were replicated upstairs.

Pie's latest project involved building a huge basement, including a car lift to accommodate a car collection. It makes sense to create subterranean space in an expensive area, he says.

The kitchen is now the heart of the house and people want to have dining space included.

"Clients have greater aspirations for kitchens than they had in the 1920s and heritage architects sometimes don't understand this."

He says he's not an advocate of putting glass boxes behind heritage houses. He likes to have sympathy for the material, form and colour of an old building.



PETER CLARKE

The Conway Atkins House by Sam Crawford, opposite and above left; Nolan House by Coy Yiontis, above; Sung Dobson House by Sam Crawford, right; an Anthony Pie creation, below.



ANDREW WUTTKE

"You need to keep the integrity of the street with beautiful houses and trees," Pie says. "There's a reason that people wanted to live there."

Councils are mostly concerned with streetscape, Sydney architect Sam Crawford says.

Some councils think additions should be visibly different to the original so the new and the old are separated, Crawford says. Other councils think the addition should look like the old building.

"It doesn't add to the heritage value of a building if you can't tell what's original and what's new."

Crawford says not all old houses are precious – many were speculatively built and not very well constructed.

HERITAGE GUIDELINES

Care for the fabric
Changes to heritage buildings should not diminish, destroy or conceal components.

Ability to un-do
If changes are the last resort they should be reversible.

The old and new
Changes that falsify the evidence of the building's history should be avoided.

Easy does it
New work to a heritage building should be sympathetic to its features.

Respect the work
Earlier changes offer evidence of historical development.

Keep It In context
The setting of a building is an important part of its significance.

Compatibility
A historic building should be used for the purposes for which it was designed.

Know its history
An understanding of a building's significance should underpin any work undertaken.

heritage.vic.gov.au



Conway Atkins House



BRETT BOARDMAN PHOTOGRAPHY


"The kind of living spaces people want are going to be different to 100 years ago where they were typically internalised. The kitchen has really become a living space – it's where we spend most of our time."

Crawford recently turned a Queen Anne-style bungalow in Sydney's Cremorne into a home for a young family. The four grand front rooms of the Sung Dobson house have been respectfully restored.

The new areas are contained in a cubic extension at the back that comprises a kitchen, dining and living area. A bathroom, pantry and laundry bridge the gap between the old and the new. The extension is clad in spotted gum and external timber shutters keep the house cool in summer.

In another project, the Conway Atkins House in Dover Heights, Crawford had to renovate a functionalist 1949 house. He was required to use materials that matched the original ones and use similar proportions for the windows.

The new design, with its bespoke joinery, creates warm, light-filled spaces that celebrate the curves of the art deco original.

"It's very important we conserve our heritage but to me that doesn't mean copying it or repeating it." 

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OUR COVER

Nolan House by Coy Yiontis Architects.
Photography by Peter Clarke.