

# For future reference

*A philosophical approach transforms a difficult brief into a flexible family home ready for whatever life brings*

Words **Robyn Willis** Photography **Anthony Basheer**

It was the Greek philosopher Heraclitus who first noted that the only certainty in life is change. But despite its universality, the notion of change is something many struggle to accept. Especially, it seems, neighbours.

By the time the owners bought it, the original home on this site in a quiet heritage precinct in the Adelaide suburb of Millswood had already been demolished because it was in danger of collapse.

Rather than insist on a carbon copy of the original, council instead mandated that any new house should be in keeping with the adjoining properties and wider streetscape, abiding by street setbacks and height restrictions, but with scope to design something contemporary, both in style and function.

However, the owners were unable

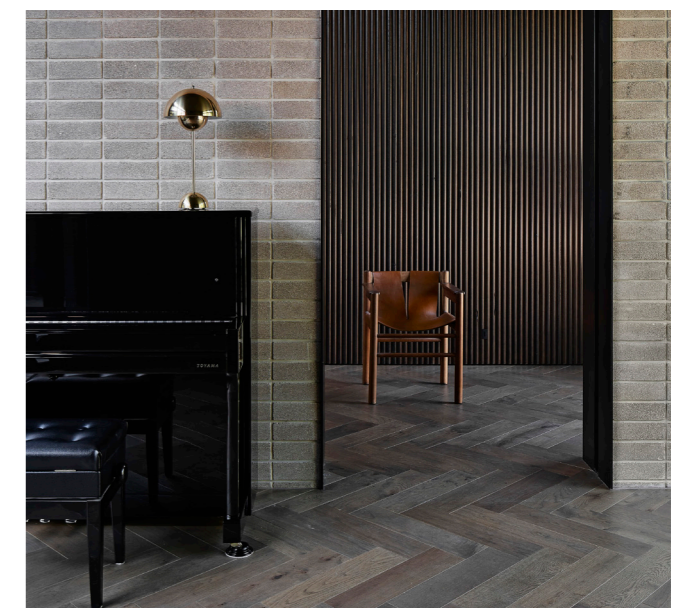
to get their original plans approved.

They were working with a trusted team who had helped build their previous home, but were unfamiliar with the constraints and challenges of heritage design.

“Their builder and draftsman could not solve the problem of fitting everything in and they kept getting knocked back at council,” says interior designer Sara Horstmann of Adelaide-based Das Studio. “We were at a meeting with the owner, who is a steel fabricator, on another matter and when we started talking he said ‘if only I had met you five months earlier, you could have designed my house’.

“We said ‘it’s not too late’.

The couple wanted a house that would comfortably accommodate them and their two adult daughters for as long as the young women wanted to live at home. One of the owners, an accomplished chef, >>



A courtyard memorial garden can be enjoyed from the pop-out living and dining space, which has been designed to capture northern light (left).

The commercial grade kitchen (top) was a key part of the brief.



This stylish family home uses a classic palette of timber, brick and steel and interpreted it for modern living.

<< wanted a fully equipped kitchen where she would be at the centre of the action, while the other owner wanted the house to showcase his skills with steel.

The family was also intent on honouring their eldest daughter, who had passed on a few years prior, through the design of the house.

In addition to the heritage constraints, the house needed to stay clear of a tree protection zone for two mature river red gums at the back of the property. While neither tree was on the site, their root systems were.

It was a lot to take on.

“Once you were dealing with setbacks to align with the existing bungalows and you could not build too far back, we were left with about half the block to work with,” says Horstmann.

Given there was some precedent for two-storey homes in the area, Das Studio architect Dino Vrynios set to work, designing a contemporary home, with bedrooms on the upper floor and living space, including a substantial kitchen and dining area, on the ground floor.

“It’s the biggest kitchen we have ever designed,” says Vrynios. “There is a whole other kitchen behind the

main kitchen you can see and there are three sinks and four ovens.

“It has the capacity of a commercial kitchen.”

Given his expertise in steel fabrication, the owner was keen to build and install a steel staircase in the middle of the hallway, with a double height void above to draw light through the house.

Vrynios says it was a defining moment in the building process.

“The owner had this pre fabricated staircase craned onto site — it was almost like we built the house around the staircase.

“It was so great working with him — we learned so much.”

Because the front of the house faces north, Vrynios pushed the living and dining area out on the eastern side of the site, and wrapped it in floor-to-ceiling glazing to draw in light. This allowed for a pond and landscaped garden in memory of their daughter, that was still shielded from the street.

While it was undoubtedly contemporary, this was in some ways a modest house built to serve the needs of a close knit family.

Initially, that did not wash well with the neighbours, who were sceptical that the house would fit >>



The steel staircase (below) was prefabricated off site and craned into position. Dark finishes and touches of metallics throughout the house (above and left) add contemporary sophistication.





The front of the house is undeniably contemporary, while adhering to the setbacks and height restrictions of neighbouring properties (below).

<< into the heritage conservation area. There were a number of objections during the planning stages. And it didn't stop there.

"One of the neighbours trespassed onto the property during construction and went up a ladder to take a photo because he was convinced it would adversely impact his property," says Vrynios. "There was some very strange behaviour."

Once the house was completed though, everyone gained a new perspective. Even the river red gums went from being a liability to an asset. The central void has provided the perfect framing for the trees, creating a connection to the natural environment from the heart of the house.

"River red gums are these gnarly twisted monsters and now they provide this moment of drama at the rear of the house," says Vrynios.

"They create this amazing double height void which beautifully frames those two trees and creates a gangway from the bedrooms to the floor below."

Horstmann says the trees have definitely transitioned from one-time foe to friend.

"For one of the owners, those river red gums were the bane of her existence because they prolonged the project, but now she loves them," she says.

Even the neighbours have given the finished home their nod of approval, while council have lauded the project as an example of how to design and build a contemporary home in a heritage area, dubbing it 'future heritage'.

For the owners, though, there's a bittersweet epilogue to the project, as both their daughters left home to pursue promising career opportunities interstate. While it was an inevitability, this is still very much a family home, whenever it is required.

"The clients were aware that their daughters would fly the coop but it was about creating a space where the girls would always feel welcome," says Vrynios.

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The owners' daughters were encouraged to contribute to the design, which includes ample built-in joinery.

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