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SEPTEMBER 2004



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# Award winner mixes old and new

Renovations and extensions on an old St Kilda weatherboard home combine historic charm with modern urban architecture.

**A**ustralia's capital city inner suburbs are full of old houses which have period charm but are a bit past their use-by date when it comes to the practical requirements of life at today's pace.

So how to renovate them so as to catch up with today's needs without losing that charm, while maximising the enormous real estate value of their locations? It's a common problem, and the solutions are as diverse as the houses involved.

## The extension is, in effect, a house in its own right

Sherbrooke Constructions, which specialises in this kind of work, faced that challenge in Melbourne's colourful old bayside suburb of St Kilda. The house was



a typical traditional weatherboard, more than 100 years old, which had a rather ordinary earlier brick flat-roofed extension at the back, housing a fairly cramped kitchen and study. This had probably replaced an even earlier lean-to kitchen.

According to Robert Drechsel, co-director of Sherbrooke, the original house was 'a bit of a rabbit-warren' inside. It had that all-too-familiar design of main entrance hallway with bedrooms

off to the sides, leading to a central lounge room and then to the old brick add-on.

The necessary renovation involved two key elements – refurbishment of the core of the old house to include two offices, and a complete rebuild of the back extension to provide a generous new space catering for everyday functional needs. The brief specified retention of Victorian-era character and compatibility with the general architectural diversity of modern St Kilda.

Robert is probably selling the finished job a bit short when he says he and Sherbrooke co-director Graham Salan didn't have to change much. Especially



*Left: The Sherbrooke team (front, from left) Graham Salan (director), Robert Drechsel (director), Robert's son Jake; (back, from left) Andrew Sale, Bernie Clark, Paul Evans, Simone Janiak and Ron Boles.*



given that it picked up the 2003 HIA Victoria Award for Renovation Project of the Year and was a finalist in this year's national award in that category.

The clients were a professional couple, one a photographer and the other an interior designer, both working from home. They wanted the existing front bedrooms converted to stylish offices with good street presentation. So new double French doors were fitted to those rooms, giving separate entrances to a new deck running the full width of the house. The rooms also needed some new wiring and joinery but the original fireplaces were retained.

Separating the old house and extension is a big new Shoji-type glass door which slides away into the wall cavity when it is necessary to open everything up. Although the old core has baltic pine flooring, this has been stained quite dark and sealed to match the hardwood floor of the extension. Despite the different grains of the timbers, this treatment ties everything together and complements the Japanese mood set by the sliding door.

Robert describes the completely new rear of the house as having a boxy 'warehouse' look – one large box below and a smaller one on top.

Tresspa panels (now called Meteon) were chosen for the external cladding of the extension. These are quite large, about 2400 by 1800mm and 15mm thick. Although they are in stark contrast to the lines of the traditional weatherboard,

Robert says the new and old surfaces blend well. The extension isn't, and doesn't look like, something just tacked on – despite the contrast between old and new.

The age of the house posed no particular technical problems or nasty surprises along the way. Robert says: 'For us it was relatively straightforward. We basically demolished and rebuilt the old lean-to, gutted and refurbished the old section, replastering and replacing weatherboards where necessary.'

### **The brief specified retention of Victorian-era character and compatibility with the general architectural diversity of modern St Kilda**

Downstairs the extension houses a modern new kitchen, meals and family room, powder room and shower. The kitchen is one large and uncluttered area with two big benches – one a breakfast bar with sink and the other housing the oven, hotplates and rangehood. There are no overhead cupboards, all storage being in a pantry off to the side.

The family room includes a new fireplace. This is a metal firebox sunk in the wall and surrounded by stonework. A raised timber hearth extending the length of the wall was added, providing a large shelf for things such as video and audio gear.

Upstairs there are three bedrooms (including the master with ensuite), a laundry, separate toilet, and bathroom. The

extension is, in effect, a house in its own right, providing ample room for growth of what is now a young family. (The couple's first child has just been born.)

Because the brief included an 'outdoor-indoor feel', the whole downstairs back wall of the extension is a six-metre wide folding glass door opening on to a large covered deck area.

The nature of the extension made it necessary for the clients to move out and give Sherbrooke a free run for the five

months or so needed to complete the job. However, being professionals in businesses where an eye for detail counts, both were actively involved in the project, doing their own research on likely materials and fixtures. For example, they selected the panels used to clad the extension and the polyresin kitchen finishes.

Robert and Graham, who each started out as carpenters, established Sherbrooke in 1987. Around 60–70 per cent of their market is now in ambitious renovations, most of it through referrals.

Small wonder, then, that the client-builder relationship built up on this award-winning renovation has already led to another job – a similar extension for the client's photographic studio. What you might call a photo finish. ■