





Seamless & Ageless

BY KAREN DOAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELIZABETH HAWKES

There's a black and white photo of Canberra placed on a side table in the corridor of Helen and Patrick White's house. It shows the nation's capital in 1929 with a few houses dotting the landscape and familiar icons such as Old Parliament House. The photo is special to Helen and Patrick as one of the houses is in fact the house they own. "We loved it so much that the previous owners of the house gave us a copy," Helen says.

The house was originally designed by renowned Melbourne architectural firm Oakley and Parkes as part of a national competition the firm won for some of the first houses to be occupied by public servants and their families when they transferred from Melbourne to the new capital. The residences weren't the first Canberra buildings designed by Oakley and Parkes. In 1925 they were asked by the Federal Capital Commission to design the Prime Minister's Lodge.

Situated on a prominent corner in Forrest, the White residence has undergone a major renovation that's not so obvious from looking at the outside from the front and side of the building, which remain as they were when the house was built 77 years ago. "We didn't want to touch the façade," Helen says. It was also a condition that the original exterior be left unchanged as the house is considered a 'house of significance' and is on the heritage list. Its significance has doubled since it won the Renovation Project of the Year and open Renovation Project categories of the 2005 HIA ACT & Southern NSW Housing Awards.





Helen and Patrick “loved the old style” of the house when they found it more than a year ago. The 10 minute walk to Manuka, where they both work, and proximity to the schools attended by their three children were other good reasons to buy the house. But work needed to be done to improve the interior of the rundown house before the family could move in.

“The whole house was dark and dingy and it didn’t have a good feel to it,” says Architects Ring Associates director Terry Ring. The floors were uneven and various extensions added to the home over the years had resulted in an ineffective floor plan. Before Building Services started the renovation from scratch and gutted the whole interior of the house.

Although Helen wanted to “maintain the feel of the original house”, her brief to Terry Ring was to create “modern living areas to suit the family’s way of life” and to open it up and allow light in.”

Terry’s main objective was to ensure that the old and new parts of the house were “seamless”. The front section of the house — consisting of the main living room and ensuite, dining room and two living rooms — couldn’t be altered because of certain restrictions linked to the house’s heritage status. The back part of the house was an existing extension that didn’t relate to the original structure, garden or surroundings. Although with the kitchen and main living area, the extensions



now consists of three bedrooms, study, powder room, studio with adjoining wine cellar, laundry and double garage.

Keeping in mind Helen's desire to retain the antique feeling of the house, Better Building's managing director Ivan Juric and his team removed existing elements such as fireplace surrounds, doors, fixed joinery, door handles and windows that later were incorporated in the modern interior. "The house has been updated, it's now energy efficient with smart technology," Ivan says. "It's the same old house but brand new."

Located under the ground in the backyard is a 110,000 litre holding tank that collects rain water, one of the new features of the house. Another addition is the attic above the main living area, accessible by a pull-down ladder, and used as the family's storage room.

"It's a special house," Ivan says. "You can't pick where the extension begins. The only key is that there are no bars on the windows." The windows are larger and more transparent than the original windows used in the front part of the house. Shutters, supplied and installed by High Country Plantation Shutters, have replaced the heavy curtains of the previous interior and allow natural light in. There are no curtains or shutters covering the windows in the kitchen or main living area. The decision not to cover the windows was made because the family wanted to fully enjoy the northern and southern views of the garden, Helen says.

Terry re-designed the extension with large windows to "maximise natural light, allow the interior to reach the exterior and relate to the garden", which was designed by Foxys Landscape. The combination of old and new is continued in the garden. An original retaining wall with old Canberra red bricks running through it was the "theme" for the garden. "We used the red bricks for the paving at the front of the house, the verandah and staircase," says Terry Fox of Foxys Landscape. Bricks from the house were also salvaged and used again for the edging, walls and paving around the garden.

The Whites' favourite areas of their home are the kitchen and living area because of the bright and open ambience provided by the windows. The spacious family room leads out to the swimming pool on the south side and the northern terrace by way of French doors on one side and sliding windows on the other. The two types of doors "give a different feeling when you walk through them," Terry Ring says. Cross ventilation is achieved and the pool cools fresh air that flows through the house. "We wanted the outdoor areas to relate to each other and we like how well it works between them," Helen says.

The porcelain tiles laid throughout the back part of the house were also used for the outdoor areas. "It really gives you that inside-outside feel," Helen says. The tiles are a non-porous Italian porcelain chosen by interior designer Simone Schade for their "natural stone appearance, which emphasises the timeless style of the house". The tiles also match the natural stone top used in the kitchen.



Stone look-alike tiles were also used in the master bathroom in keeping with the tiles used in the kitchen and main living area. Before the renovation, the master bathroom and toilet were “really closed off”. The bathroom’s now “segmented and open, and there’s still privacy for when someone’s in the bathroom or shower,” Simone says. Shutters also cover the bathroom window for privacy and again, to let light in.

Helen describes the neutral tonal themes of the house as “great”. Simone chose colours to keep the house “classic, so it didn’t date” as well to suit the classic lines and federation style of the house. The older area of the house was done all in putty, and the newer area was “lightened up” with china white, Helen says. Simone adds: “The idea was to emphasise the older section of the house, yet it flows really well when you walk through the house.”

Combining the old and new parts of the house was an important factor for the Whites, and has proven to be a successful formula for all involved. Helen praises the work of Architects Ring and Associates, Better Building Services and Simone Schade. “We had a vision of how we wanted our home to be and they made it a reality.”