



Mackenzie Pronk Architects' reinvention of the old double-fronted house straddles both inside and out, with an oversized retractable window system connecting the dining-kitchen area with the garden.

Reinvented Marrickville home gets a hold on you



Trisha Croaker

A recently renovated Federation home in inner-western Sydney provokes the following question: how do you successfully design a house that “holds you”? That opens you to your environment, without exposing you? That evokes safety and protection, without compromising connection to site and landscape?

The catalyst is an old, double-fronted, red-bricked home in Marrickville recently reinvented by Mackenzie Pronk Architects.

The clients' brief

Clients Robbie and Jeannie confess they “were the sort who weren't clear about the brief”. They hoped to remodel the family home, creating new living spaces better connected to the rear garden.

This expanded to a “refresh” of front rooms, the creation of a space to play basketball, and a home office. All work should respect the house's history, and encourage as much communal living as possible, rather

than retreat into private spaces.

“We wanted our three girls to live with us, as part of us,” Robbie says.

The site's challenges

The north-south running site was large, faced a quiet, wide tree-lined street, with a common garden area behind the rear boundary. The four-bedroom home had various deficiencies, particularly its failure to connect with the garden.

It offered the obligatory “falling down fibro mess” at the rear, with a number of original features butchered. All common garden variety problems for houses of this type.

The more frequent challenge in such houses, architect Neil Mackenzie says, is budgetary constraints. Just as Sydney real estate prices continue to spiral, so too do construction costs, with home owners frequently failing to anticipate and factor in the escalating cost of renovating.

The architect's solution

The front half of the home was kept as “private” spaces and simply refreshed – bedrooms were revived and bathrooms updated.

An unsatisfactory grand lounge room and spaces in the geographic heart of the house were reconfigured to be more workable and appropriate for a growing family, in the process creating a “semi-

private/semi-public space” acting as guest bedroom/music room as needed.

The rear was dramatically reinvented as the new contemporary “public” heart of the home. Mackenzie stretched the existing footprint north along the western boundary, gutting the rest to create a new light-filled, open-plan L-shaped living, dining, cooking and studying space.

This clear zoning, and logical sequence of spaces, creates an immediate sense of tranquillity, of calmness – and is the first signal of a house “holding” you in a logical, comforting way.

This sensation is apparent throughout. Changing ceiling heights, dropped from the old living room to the new kitchen and raised again over dining-study spaces, help define and hold occupants gently in each of these areas.

Connection to the garden is similarly treated. In place of the almost de rigueur floor-to-ceiling bi-fold or fully retractable doors connecting garden and dining-kitchen spaces, Mackenzie has opted for an oversized retractable window system acting as a window seat.

The effect is delightful, offering unimpeded visual connection to the garden and a “garden edge” seat allowing occupants to physically straddle both inside and out.

trish.croaker@gmail.com