

The element. surprise of



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IT'S THE TYPE OF FRONT YARD THAT COULD BELONG to any number of homes in the leafy inner-city suburb of Parkside. Upon opening the front gate, the visitor is greeted by a rambling cottage garden that leads to an original bluestone villa with an inviting bullnose verandah still intact. But at this house, nothing is quite as it seems.

Just like Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole, entry into this early 1900s home is a journey into the unexpected. On closer inspection the front windows are lacking any glass, there's no roof beyond the front door and indeed, stepping through the threshold one discovers there's no entry foyer or hallway, but rather a charming open-air courtyard with a strikingly modern house just beyond.

For John Maitland, director of Energy Architecture, the bold design was born out of a desire to add an element of surprise to an otherwise functional family home. "The intent was to treat the approach to the house in exactly the same way; you still knock on the old front door and ring the doorbell," he explains. "It's only

when the door opens and you step through to the garden that you realise Alice is in Wonderland."

Luckily, the owners loved the idea of keeping only the front facade and one bluestone perimeter wall. "We both liked it from the beginning, even though it was very unconventional," says one. "We had lived very happily in this house for 16 years and had formed quite a strong sentimental attachment, even though it was falling down around us. We were pleased that we were going to be able to keep something of our past."

The owners' leap of faith was just the response John and his project architect Mark Thomas had been hoping for. They were both genuinely excited by the prospect of creating a unique residence rather than the perceived safer option of building an extension at the rear of the existing house.

"The quirky nature of gutting the house and putting the garden where the inside was, was something the clients latched on to as soon as it was suggested," says John. "There they were sitting inside their cracking, broken villa and their architect is suggesting





Above: Despite the unique nature of the front of this home, it is the open-plan kitchen and dining area that has become its heart. "Even the way the light enters a room as the seasons change has been something to be enjoyed," says one of the owners.
Right: The original bluestone wall is a feature of the new home, running the length of the main lounge room and hallway. **Opening pages:** What was once the front door is now the front gate to the wonderland beyond.



they leave the outside shell, gut it, and build the house around it. I would have thought most people would have been shocked at that but it wasn't their reaction at all. Their trust was a real gift to us."

While the owners may have been dream clients, it did not prevent everyone from being on tenterhooks when the plans were lodged with Unley Council. However, their fears that the radical design would cause alarm in an area notorious for its love of character-sensitive developments were appeased early. "I nearly fell off my chair," says Mark when recalling the ease with which the council approved the plans. "The head planner was really excited about it, and in fact dealing with the council right the way through was an absolute pleasure."

The neighbourhood has also embraced the forward-thinking design. "It's made a lot of people stop and wonder what's actually going on inside," says an owner. "If we are working in the front garden there's bound to be one or two passers-by who will comment on it or ask a lot of questions."

Apart from the obvious cosmetic appeal with its young garden of maple trees, kangaroo paws, proteas and native grasses, the internal courtyard provides a practical element too, as it's central to the home's many green initiatives. The pre-existing bluestone wall takes full advantage of its new northern aspect, thanks to a specially designed membrane that helps to regulate the temperature of the house throughout the year. Two water tanks situated just beyond the original front entrance each hold 10,000



Retaining the original facade is a bold design element born out of a desire to add an element of surprise to an otherwise functional family home. The bluestone wall is coated in a specially designed membrane that helps regulate the temperature of the home throughout the year.

litres of water which, together with four other tanks dotted around the property, has kept the couple and their teenage son in hot showers and clean clothes for nearly four months. And there are solar panels on the roof.

Inside, the house adheres to the best green practices without compromising on good design. “We didn’t want a hessian house,” says one of the owners, while laughing at the thought. “We wanted a sustainable house but we are not purists to the point that we wanted to give up on comfort or aesthetics. We still enjoy our heated towel rails and our dishwasher.”

The couple decided to forgo expansive living areas in favour of smaller, intimate spaces. The exterior bluestone wall which serves as the house’s outside barometer becomes an arresting interior design element that runs the length of the main lounge room and hallway. Sandy-coloured polished concrete floors and rammed-earth walls continue the interplay of texture throughout the remainder of the home while also boosting its energy efficiency by doubling as insulation.

Just as the initial brief had demanded, the house is not lacking in comfort. A resourceful floor plan has ensured the couple – both professionals noteworthy in their chosen fields – each has a study to indulge their private interests. For her, a love of literature savoured over a garden view; for him, a passion for aerodynamics pursued in a sun-drenched upstairs loft.

But the couple agrees it’s the open-plan kitchen and dining area that is the heart of their new home. Generous stone benchtops and a walk-in pantry that still houses the original cellar cater for their love of entertaining, while the outdoor deck is put to good use.

It’s fair to say the family is smitten with their new abode. Just like a blossoming romance, they keep finding new elements to fall in love with. “Since moving in we are continuously discovering new angles and nooks. Even the way the light enters a room as the seasons change has been something to be enjoyed.” It’s a realisation of a dream from which even Alice may not have wanted to awaken.

