



Once more, with feeling: The owners of this Forestville home wanted it to accommodate their growing family, perform better environmentally and be a hub for family gatherings. Photo: Brett Boardman

Homes that help heal the heart



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From the Drawing Board

Speaking with architect Carol Marra of Marra + Yeh Architects last week, the issue of how you design for clients with the most emotionally charged, intensely personal of briefs comes up.

We were discussing a recently completed alteration and addition in Forestville, undertaken for clients Belinda and Chris.

"It might seem counter-intuitive but actually having a very personal brief makes it easier in some ways," Marra said.

Functionally, the couple's brief wasn't uncommon. They had a growing family and wanted to grow in place, with privacy for parents and children, a house that performed better environmentally and that would be the new hub for large family gatherings.

Having suffered the recent loss of her father and nearby family home (the venue for family get-togethers), Belinda wanted her home to become the heart of her extended family.

"For this house, it became clear

very early on that the essence of the project was about memory, gathering, sharing and making memories – so that becomes the narrative and all other requirements and objectives can be filtered through that lens," Marra said.

"I do think architecture is about taking an abstract notion, like memory, and giving it real physical substance."

The original house was a typical postwar, single-storey, four-bedroom brick veneer home not designed for the climate, not connecting with a nature reserve next door, with one unusable bedroom and a south-facing backyard.

"Our clients didn't have a lot of money, so we needed to do something with a small footprint but huge impact and high energy performance," Marra said.

Her solution was to redesign the old house to accommodate three bedrooms and a bathroom to the east and north-facing living to the west. From the living area, she pushed south into

the garden to accommodate a new double-height dining and second living space opening south and east and master bedroom and bathroom.

Keeping services where they were to minimise costs, Marra designed a new galley-style kitchen running east-west between new and old – positioned centrally and offering views from the mailbox to back fence. Large floor to ceiling sliding panels were inserted to separate new from old visually and acoustically when necessary.

To best connect with the garden, Marra quietly cascaded the living room down to the kitchen and then on to the new addition over a series of steps.

A dramatic double-height black-butt plywood and timber beamed butterfly roof was used across the living/dining space – allowing northern and eastern light and air to be drawn in and solar panels to be positioned on the north-facing wing.

Externally, the house appears unchanged from the street while reading as two timber boxes from the rear, blending harmoniously with the bush setting and old brick veneer.

Moving in for Christmas, Belinda hosted the first of many old-style family gatherings, with the new-style house performing "fantastically".

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