



# Modernist ideal

---

A love of American Modernism influenced the renovation of this house in suburban Sydney.

---

WORDS Rachael Bernstone

PHOTOGRAPHY Brett Boardman

**AFTER RAISING THREE BOYS IN THEIR** home in the northern Sydney suburb of Forestville, and discussing plans to extend for many years, homeowners Belinda and Chris finally bit the bullet and approached some architects whose work they'd first seen in this magazine.

"We'd been thinking about renovating for a very long time – we were never happy with the flow of the original house – and had spoken to a draftsman years before who talked about infilling the back of the house and adding another room," Chris says. "But we didn't think that was satisfactory so we put away the idea for a few years."

A renovation by the home's previous owners had added a master bedroom with ensuite, but it was only accessible through the third bedroom. And while the living room at the front of the house faced north, the kitchen and rear deck were south-facing.

Chris and Belinda just couldn't see how best to extend to retain warmth and natural light. That's when architects Carol Marra and Ken Yeh of Marra+Yeh came to the rescue.

"At our second meeting with them, Ken said to Carol, 'Show them your move', and she described her plan to knock down the master bedroom and reorient the house [around an internal courtyard]," Chris says. "We were both excited by that, and worried as well."

Carol also suggested the extension should step down the block to foster a greater sense of connection with the sloping backyard, and she proposed two new decks – one where the master bedroom had stood, and one at the rear – to offer different experiences depending on the weather and the season. →

↶ East and south-facing decks provide outdoor living spaces. This eastern deck replaces the old master bedroom, which now sits in behind it off the dining area.





④ The modern addition contrasts with the existing suburban house, improving the thermal performance of the existing house and providing much-needed additional space without increasing the size of the home too significantly.

Retaining its position at the centre of the home, but entirely new in plan and design, the kitchen opens to the existing lounge and the new open plan living area at the back, creating two zones for adults and children to relax, separately or together.

Drawing on Belinda and Chris' appreciation of Modern architecture, especially houses by Marcel Breuer in the United States, the architects chose simple materials such as plywood, timber and rubber for the interior.

"The cabinetry and new ceilings are all Australian plywood made from [plantation] eucalyptus, which is strong, durable and local," Carol says. "The kitchen flooring is rubber which is a durable and natural material that improves over time, while the stainless steel counter tops are very robust and acquire character with use."

The new build is deliberately modest in

size in keeping with the scale of the original house. "Their budget was not extravagant so we knew the renovation would be small in footprint," Carol says. "But in contrast to what is happening a lot in that area and older [Sydney] suburbs generally – where single-storey brick houses are knocked down and replaced with two-storey project homes – we wanted to do something more considered. Our solution is small, but high performance: it improves the environmental performance of the existing house and the addition provides a much higher environmental standard."

The new room is lit from the north by a clerestory window above the kitchen, while other windows and doors were carefully positioned to prioritise views and cross ventilation. A concrete slab floor provides thermal mass and contains hydronic heating for winter. The walls are lightweight

➡  
The rear addition is clad with Forestry Stewardship Council certified spotted gum from Woodform Architectural. Steps lead from the southern deck to the garden that slopes down away from the house.







➦ The existing lounge steps down past the renovated galley kitchen to the new open plan living area at the back. Sliding doors connect and close off the openings between the two living spaces.

timber framing with timber cladding externally and generous insulation between.

By moving the master bed and ensuite to the southeast corner of the house, the new eastern courtyard off the dining area brings in morning light and opens up previously closed off views of the majestic eucalypts in the adjacent park.

With its warm timber interior, bespoke joinery that houses the couple's collection of books and art, and better connections to its bush setting, the house offers a compelling argument for renovating rather than rebuilding.

"Because of the high ceilings, clerestory

windows and the way you can see through the whole house now, the way you experience the space is much bigger than its floor area of 160 square metres," Carol says. "I think that generosity of space makes it particularly successful: it's a small space that has a very big impact."

"A house in our street was recently sold, knocked down and replaced by a McMansion," Chris adds. "We definitely had a desire to demonstrate there were different ways of doing things that could give you terrific results without knocking houses down." ⑤