



Design *in Descent*

A Brisbane architect rewrites the narrative of an old Queenslander on a small, steep block with a design that relishes every gradient. Tamara Simoneau explores.

TEXT TAMARA SIMONEAU | PHOTOGRAPHY SCOTT BURROWS

Credit must go to the early designers and builders of Queensland’s quintessential offering to the architectural archives, particularly in its capital, Brisbane, where old city suburbs rise and dip haphazardly on topographically tricky terrain. The archetypal ‘Queenslander’ is essentially a timber and tin box on stumps. It’s an enduring design and dream build on flat ground – but a lesson in ingenuity on a block like this one, where only the entry meets the earth. Securing one of these original inner city centenarians could be considered equal parts privilege and curse. And those tasked with adapting them for modern life without destroying their charms might feel the same way.

Owners Matthew and Caroline, a pair of physicians who work in nearby city hospitals, were drawn to its lofty position and expansive views of the Brisbane skyline to the south. Less appealing was the state of the dilapidated relic when they bought it five years ago. “It had what appeared to be a homemade downstairs area that obviously needed to have something done to it,” says Matthew. “And it was clear that the backyard was not being used at all.”



“The distinction between the lounge and the library is determined by how many books you have on the shelves.”

A year in, they began a working relationship with architect Matt Kennedy, principal of Arcke, a boutique firm familiar with the quirks and restrictions of old Queenslanders, to transform the former share house into a family home that made the most of its lot. “The original Queenslander perched precariously on a ridge and lacked any real connection to the steep ground at the rear of the site,” says Matt. “All of our renovation designs start with an in-depth understanding of the existing site and terrain together with a thorough comprehension of the structure and history of the original home. From there we are able to determine core elements to be retained and restored. There is an honesty and integrity to the way Queenslanders are built and we always try to work with and complement this in our architectural response,” he says.

His clients had made it clear they didn’t want a conventional upstairs/downstairs floorplan. “Essentially all the living gets done on one level and the other level becomes just a dormitory,” says Matthew. “I was cognitive of the fact that if the kitchen was on the top level no one would go downstairs and into the backyard. And it might seem contrived putting it on a lower level, away from the obvious entrance of the house.”

Matt came up with a plan to satisfy the brief in an innovative way – and the kitchen was at its core. “Matthew and Caroline had very fond recollections of family meals, conversations and moments at the dining table and we discussed at length the importance of its position in the house,” he explains. “It was determined by all [involved] that we foster this space for gathering and celebrate its importance. Because of the divide between upstairs and downstairs, we settled on the idea of locating the kitchen and dining at the half level. The benefit of doing this was to create a space that is equally accessible from upper and lower levels and very much the heart of the house.”

OPENER | AN UNWANTED AND UNUSED VERANDAH ON THE BACK OF THE TRADITIONAL DESIGN MADE WAY FOR EXTRA LIVING SPACE THAT CELEBRATES THE OUTDOORS WITH RETRACTABLE WINDOWS AND OVERSIZED DOORS AT EVERY LEVEL. ABOVE | SPECTACULAR CITY VIEWS ARE ENJOYED FROM THE LOWER LEVEL SITTING ROOM IN WHICH ASYMMETRICAL ROSEWOOD DOORS ARE THROWN OPEN TO INVITE THE OUTDOORS IN. OPPOSITE | THE LIBRARY, FINISHED WITH BIRCH PLYWOOD FLOOR-TO-CEILING SHELVING, IS A POPULAR SPOT WITH EVERY MEMBER OF THE FAMILY.



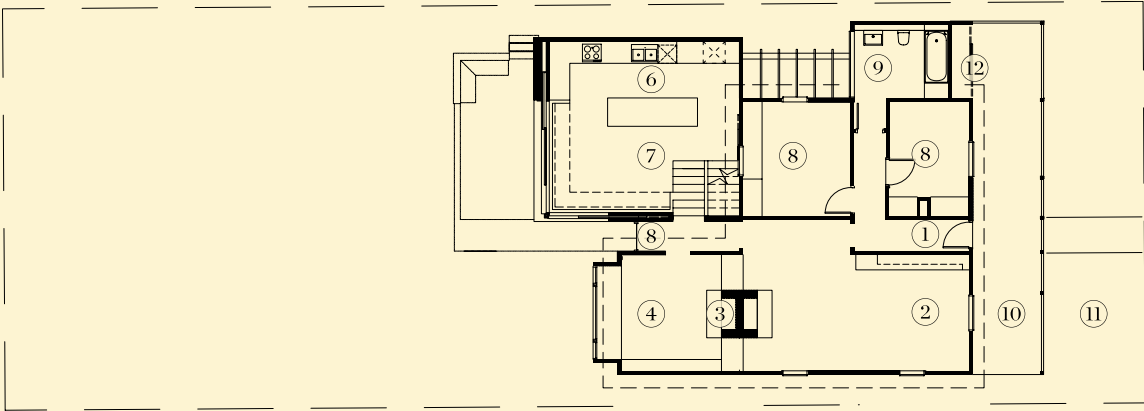


Dropping the kitchen down by a half staircase under the existing roofline also resulted in a soaring ceiling – creating a light-drenched space with the help of oversized sliding cavity windows that capitalise on the view. “Matt’s solution works [well] in practice,” says Matthew. “You can easily get to the kitchen from the entry and when you’re in the kitchen you can see and access the downstairs with ease too.” The design ticked another all-important box for the clients who weren’t interested in wasting any real estate on a deck that would be exposed to the elements and sporadically used. “You have to think carefully about how you’re going to use space when you’re renovating an existing house on a small block,” says Matthew. “I wanted the kitchen to be capable of turning into a semi-outdoor area. That’s what led to the arrangement with the very large sliding windows. When they’re open you just have one post in your sightline and can be almost as exposed as if you were on a veranda.”

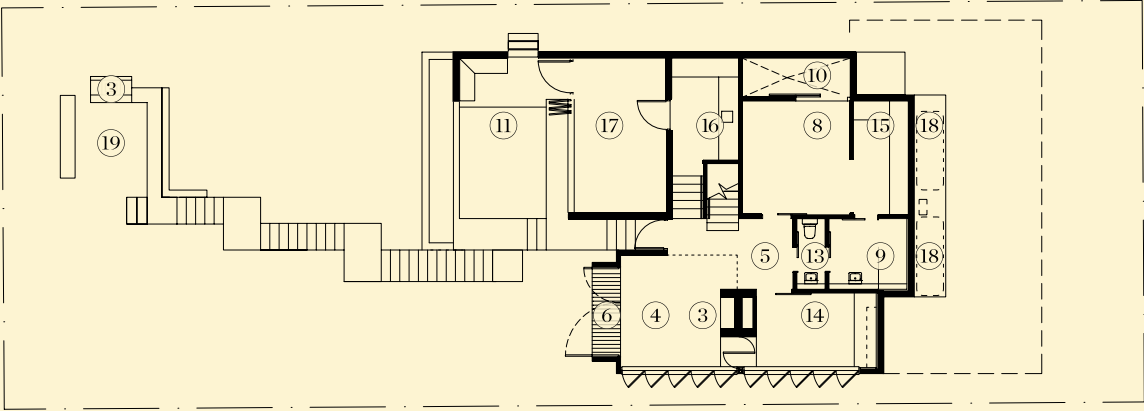
Down another half staircase is the main living zone. Winding down further a music room and the laundry tuck neatly under the kitchen. The cascade continues to the lower floor with access to the backyard: brick stairs and a series of terraces descend to a fire pit area for abundant balmy evenings.

“A large part of the design response was about attempting to ground the lower rear of the house and establish an improved connection between inside and out,” says Matt, who was on site up to three times a week during the ten-month build, fastidiously monitoring its progress.

ABOVE | THE KITCHEN IS THE HEART OF THIS HOME, AND THE CENTRE OF ITS RE-IMAGINED DESIGN. “I WAS NOT GOING TO BURN UP ANY SPACE ON A DECK SO THE KITCHEN IS ALSO A LIVING AREA AND AS GOOD A DECK AS YOU’RE GOING TO GET,” SAYS MATTHEW. WITH NO FORMAL DINING ROOM, EXTRA SPACE WAS ALLOCATED FOR BUILT-IN BENCH SEATING TO ACCOMMODATE FAMILY MEALTIME AND LARGER GATHERINGS OVERLOOKING THE CITY SKYLINE.



SECOND LEVEL



FIRST LEVEL

- | | | | |
|----------------|------------|----------------|------------------|
| ① ENTRY | ⑥ KITCHEN | ⑪ LAWN | ⑮ LAUNDRY |
| ② LIVING | ⑦ DINING | ⑫ STORE | ⑯ MUSIC ROOM |
| ③ FIREPLACE | ⑧ BEDROOM | ⑬ W.C. | ⑰ WATERTANK |
| ④ SITTING ROOM | ⑨ BATHROOM | ⑭ STUDY | ⑱ OUTDOORSITTING |
| ⑤ HALL | ⑩ DECK | ⑮ WALK-IN-ROOM | |



“You have to think carefully about how you’re going to use space when you’re renovating an existing house on a small block.”

OPPOSITE | PLANS. TOP LEFT | THE ORIGINAL FIREPLACE HAS BEEN KEPT INTACT AS A NOD TO THE HOUSE'S HERITAGE. "IT WAS IMPORTANT TO RETAIN SUCH AN ELEMENT BECAUSE OF THE INGRAINED TEXTURE AND MATERIALITY, BUT ALSO AS A PHYSICAL AND METAPHORICAL CONNECTION BETWEEN THE OLD AND NEW," SAYS ARCHITECT MATT KENNEDY. TOP RIGHT | "WE DECIDED [ON A] CONCRETE FLOOR COVERED IN HEXAGONAL SHAPED ENCAUSTIC CONCRETE TILES," CONTINUES MATT.



There's no denying the overall visual impact of the end result, but Matt hasn't neglected the details. Timber floors link old with new, and modern finishes are softened with complementary birch ply features throughout. "We have used it on ceiling linings and cabinetry. We like using it because it offers warmth and texture," says Matt. The custom ply and recycled timber shelves flanking the top floor library which open out to those glorious views, also double as a privacy screen. "The distinction between the lounge and the library is determined by how many books you have on the shelves," says Matthew. More minimalist styling means the lounge can also catch the view.

But the test of any design is its livability factor after the clients settle in, and this is where Matt's attention to detail has future-proofed the re-imagined Queenslander. "Every room is used, no room is arbitrary and they're all the right size," says Matthew. "I think that's a real achievement."

