

How difficult is managing a major renovation project when the homeowners are based in a different state? Just ask a building boss and an interior designer who converted an old boarding house into an exquisite inner-city abode.

above board

Story: Ian Bushnell Photos: Aimee Crouch

Sydney builder Adam Baker didn't quite realise the enormity of the task until he put the sledgehammers through the walls of an old boarding house in Annandale. The structure – a two-storey terrace at the front with an add-on at the back – was a mish-mash of styles. It was divided into five apartments, and the brief was to transform it into a modern family home with its own distinct character.

'On day one of construction, I walked through and knocked out the walls between the flats, opened up the stairs and walked through it as one house,' recalls Adam, the managing director of Baker Developments. 'It was a bit overwhelming and much bigger than I anticipated.'

Since his company manages the whole design process, Adam and his regular architect developed a working plan. However, this project needed a keen eye to realise its potential and make the most of what was essentially a narrow two-part box on a long skinny block.

Enter interior designer and HIA member Jenny Matek, who had worked with Adam before. She knew the quality of his craftsmanship and appreciated his work ethic.

'I was in love with it,' she says. 'I saw the potential of being a beautiful old home in Annandale.' Jenny also took charge of the bathrooms and kitchen through the firm she and her husband Ante Matek run, AM Bathrooms and Projects.

Adam, also an HIA member, says Jenny had a dramatic impact, making economical use of the space. She adapted the flow throughout the property and brought more light into the house.

She played with the layout, reconfiguring rooms, but wanted to retain as much of the character and original features in the front section as possible.

A key input was the introduction of curves throughout the home, including arches down the front hall and in the kitchen, despite Adam's initial misgivings. But first, there were some engineering challenges to overcome. The internal brick walls had to come out. Concrete was poured over the top of the slab to even out the floor, but without reducing the habitable living height.

Steel frames and beams replaced the walls and were jacked up against the ceiling slab to create as much height as possible. But when the bulkheads went in, the space Adam was fighting to make just disappeared.

The solution came with those curves. Jenny had wanted to create a plaster curve in the kitchen to point the eye to the outside, but Adam couldn't see it working. 'There were quite a lot of beams in that section, and they looked terrible, all squared off,' Jenny says. She won, and instead of getting rid of it, Adam extended the idea through the whole back area. This had a massive impact on the field of space.

Putting a plaster curve on either side of the bulkhead to tie it with the kitchen enabled the middle section to be lifted by 60 to 70mm, and cleverly hide all the hardware and the plates.

'It doesn't sound like much, but it felt like it was close to your head as you walked through, compared to getting it up out of the way. As soon as I felt that, I knew we should do it to all of them,' says Adam.

The other big engineering challenge was the ensuite, which Adam says had no right to be where it was – on top of the existing slab with no floor package on top of the living area.

Instead of drilling down through the slab for the sewer connections and waste water, Adam >



INTERIOR DESIGNER JENNY MATEK INTRODUCED AN ABUNDANCE OF LIGHT INTO THE HOUSE



Photo courtesy Sebastian Mrugalski



Black timber cladding

Annandale house at a glance

Builder: Baker Developments

Interior designer:
AM Bathrooms and Projects

Location: Annandale, NSW

Materials:

- Ground floor floorboards: European oak, forest 12mm engineered timber
- Black timber cladding: Swadlings Timber, St Peters, Sydney
- Kitchen: Polytec cabinets and Caesarstone benchtop and splashback, ACE Joinery
- Bathroom vanity cabinets: ACE Joinery
- Bathroom tiles: 1200 x 600mm Amalfi Blanco from Stone World; Fez feature tile from Di Lorenzo Tiles
- Downstairs bathroom tub: Reece Posh Solus freestanding bath 1700mm
- Bathroom fittings: Reece
- Shaker door wardrobes, laundry chute, walk-in robe: Impressive Wardrobes
- Carpet: Armure textured loop pile, 100% New Zealand wool from Bremworth
- Cast iron fireplace: Jetmaster.



THE BATHROOMS ARE MASTERFUL MANIPULATIONS OF SPACE



BI-FOLD DOORS FRONT AND BACK ALLOW THE HOME TO BREATHE

Photo courtesy Sebastian Mrugalski



English
oak
flooring

THE INTERIOR DESIGNER HAD CREATED A PLASTER CURVE IN THE KITCHEN TO POINT THE EYE TO THE OUTSIDE

went through walls and walk-in robe to the outside of the building. Here, an eave evolved into a sloped roof structure that created a void to hide services externally.

The bathrooms themselves are masterful manipulations of space, with an elegant open-plan design. The use of big tiles and strategic placement of services make it feel more spacious and luxurious. 'Sometimes you have to step back and think about the space and who will use it,' Jenny says. 'It's not just about choosing the tile or your sink – it's thinking about the flow of the bathroom.'

Opening up the home created space inside, but bi-fold doors front and back allow it to breathe. At the rear, the house opens up to a landscaped side courtyard with a floating concrete shelf barbecue and a backyard with outdoor furniture.

The doors and original kitchen window flood the living space with light, despite the built-up neighbourhood surrounding. At Jenny's suggestion, the signature living room fireplace mirrors the barbecue area. There are four fireplaces in all, including one hidden behind a kitchenette, just one of the surprises to expect in an old home.

That unpredictability meant adapting to changed circumstances and being prepared to spend in the right places to get the owner's desired result, such as the \$100,000 landscaping job, while still being budget-conscious.


Adam added individual touches such as the black timber cladding on the second storey of the rear section to avoid having a monochrome box and stained cedar on the master bedroom bedhead. The floors are engineered English oak, a stable product for going over the variable surfaces below.

The almost year-long build, which came in at an economical \$750,000, involved some 20 trades while negotiating COVID-19 disruptions. Luckily for them, supply chains held up.

But due to border closures, the owner stayed at home in Far North Queensland and could only be updated on the project via Zoom, which made it challenging at times. 'He never saw the place until way too late,' says Adam. 'I wanted to get him in to appreciate the transformation.'

Jenny's contribution is a testament to the positive impact an interior designer can make, 'as long as they're qualified and experienced enough to actually add value', says Adam.

For Jenny, the key was a mutually respectful relationship. 'When you've got the type of respect where you understand the value of what people can bring to the table – your project just goes through the roof.'

www.bakerdevelopments.com.au
www.ambathrooms.com.au 

THE BOARDING HOUSE WAS TRANSFORMED INTO AN EXQUISITE INNER-CITY ABODE