

A House Reborn

One day it dawned on us that life in Melbourne was not the fun it once had been. With the freedom of mid-life, a change of location had appeal. We loved the old Geelong house on sight. It had a name: 'Rathlea'. It also had a pleasingly proportioned verandah framed by ornamental grape vines and wisteria, green lawns, and established garden of trees and roses tended by a trio of lady gardeners, and a conservatory. We put tenants in and kept the 'girls' for as long as we could. Eventually, with drought and workload taking the toll, the aging ladies relinquished our garden. Subsequent gardeners haven't had the same touch. The lawn is long gone and some trees will not survive the drought, but revitalizing the garden is a project to enjoy now we are settled into our completed and restored house.

We soon realized that the house we had purchased, built in elegant 'Art Nouveau' (with Federation / Edwardian overlay) style with hints of faded grandeur, had 'good bones', but problems. It wasn't just mismatched previous renovations, or the strongly coloured walls and carpets, it was the problem of how to live in the house — what to do where. Size wasn't the issue. Rooms were big, downstairs ceilings high, and proportions good — but for livability the flow needed adjusting. Doorways were in the wrong places and meanly proportioned. Entertainment areas were grand, but there was nowhere for a couple to sit and chill — something we intended to do a fair bit of. The central ballroom with its original pressed metal ceiling was large, but the wrong shape for an intimate TV room or sitting room. A rejected design proposal involved dividing the ballroom with a leadlight feature. There were cracks, damaged plaster, and suspicious bulges in the walls; stumps and floors had to be replaced. The ceiling above the lounge and dining rooms was about to fall in. The rooms upstairs had low ceilings, and a bedroom had a makeshift, leaking ensuite bathroom. Two adjoining rooms, above the front verandah, were collapsing and in poor condition.

Previous owners had used a front room as a bedroom, but, with a marble fireplace, morning light and a circular leadlight window, this seemed a waste. An architect friend envisioned a library, with the window as a feature. How well he knew our love of books, passion for art, and the influences we have been exposed to through travel. The library would have parallels with Whistler's controversial Peacock Room — his inspired by a painting and collection of Chinese porcelain — ours by a window, a glass light shade, and a collection of books and model sailing ships.

This old house had been around for a century or so and, if we were going to work on her, we wanted to set her up for the next century. We wanted a house to live in for years to come — a house for the future, reflecting the beauty and style of the past, and the spirit of artists and craftsman of yesterday and today. We wanted to be able to hang our extensive collection of paintings — not as in a stuffy gallery, but as part of a vibrant dynamic living space. To achieve this was some feat — downstairs alone we have over 50 paintings.

Jamie Smarrelli of Icon Builders came into the picture at the beginning of the restoration/renovation project, after a draughtsman has prepared plans of the original house and the architect friend had thrown in some concept ideas. From the first meeting, Jamie impressed us with his attention to detail and measured, thoughtful approach to the project.

We ended up giving Jamie the entire project management role in addition to the building works. With no supervising architect Jamie enthusiastically grasped the opportunity to utilize his building experience and contribute ideas, concepts, details and practical designs. This resulted in an exceptional relationship between builder and client, and surprisingly harmonious results.

Jamie can — and did — tap into an amazing set of useful contacts in the related trades and beyond, and he has high expectations of his employees and subcontractors. Near enough is by no means good enough. It all had to be as good — and as beautiful — as it could possibly be — and it had to be right for us. It was obvious that those working on our house took pride in their work and interest in the project. Jamie introduced us to James, an exceptional painter and artist who did the ballroom detail, decorated our bedroom ceiling with the clouds of my dreams and painted two narrow landscape panels to fit either side of the fireplace — because I felt that none of the reproduction tiles available were suitable. I wanted to fall asleep in an environment that reminded me of mist and clouds.

During the 12 months construction period there were many workers — but on every visit the building site was clean and tidy. Our interior designer, Lisa Grounds, who came into the team along the way, commented that this ‘was the cleanest building site she had ever seen’. And when it came time for the final official inspection prior to handover, the building inspector reported that this project was the best renovation and restoration he had seen in his thirty-year career.

At every state Jamie provided detailed quotes, making clear what the exclusions were, so it was possible for us to budget. He communicated efficiently and ensured that what he said would be done within a timeframe was achieved. Nothing seems to faze him. When issues arise — even before they manifest for others — his brain is ticking away weighing up practical solutions, which he presents in a professional and business-like manner.

The project developed as it went along, becoming more extensive as new possibilities opened up in the roof space. We decided to make the most of this substantial area, with Jamie developing practical solutions to what may have been problems in less capable hands. With segments of the roof lifted and huge windows (that open for ventilation) the upstairs area now has stunning views in every direction, with a media room, a children’s play area, two beautiful light and airy bedrooms, one with an elegant en-suite bathroom, and crowning it all, a marvelous study for Richard, on top of the ballroom, with a well-designed bathroom, so that this area can be easily converted for additional guest accommodation. The ceilings have been lifted into the roofline, and elegant angles have been achieved, bringing to mind the way Frank Lloyd Wright utilized available space in his Oak Park family home. Jamie’s exemplary attention to detail is

reflected in things like the angled bottom drawers of the guest room wardrobes — so as to make the best use of the roof space above the angled bedroom ceiling — and the mirrored bathroom cupboard that is deep enough to accommodate rolled towels. Oh yes, we also have, hidden behind a discrete doorway, a fabulous accessible area of box-room storage.

The original ballroom (intact) is an acoustically wonderful jewel in the centre of the house. We enter it through an Arts & Crafts medieval-inspired archway. Mirror paneling houses a copper hall light that dates from 1900. It was Jamie's idea to construct the central arch, with its shape and dimensions inspired by the pitch and detail of the old metal ceiling — and his suggestion to hide into the panel details the marvelous, spacious drawers and cupboard for linen on one side — and a coat (and music system) cupboard on the other.

We wanted a house that would be alive with natural light, but also celebrate electric light and the beauty of the period light fittings that I was painstakingly collecting from many sources. Jamie respected my desire to source suitable lighting, and his electrician did the necessary work to rewire and make safe the old fittings. In the dining room we combined Art Nouveau fittings and shades with the contemporary designs of Volker Haug that use the old Edison incandescent light bulbs.

We commissioned a local sculptor, Cinnamon Stephens, to create several original lights inspired by the house itself and Art Nouveau. She chose the grapevine as a decorative motif for one large stunning piece, and peacock feathers for a smaller light in the library. The lighting — old and new — is an important element to the reborn house.

The year of the restoration and renovation was a difficult one at a personal level, with the strain of unexpected illness and finally loss. It could have been hell — but it wasn't. Jamie has been sensitive throughout, and has managed to keep the project as stress-free as possible for us.

Many special features and details in this house have been Jamie's inspiration — others have been ours, made possible through Jamie's skills, and well-honed sense of practical design. He has listened to what we said and discerned what was important to us, and then set about making possible features we had hoped for.

When he knew of our interest in the spirit of Art Nouveau and the art of Mucha, he bought himself a book on the era. Our curved glass display shelves were suggested soon after. He was fascinated by our book of Prague's Municipal House and was inspired to design and construct fabulous ceilings that look as though they have always been there. He absorbed the influences of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Jamie's passion for music has resulted in an integrated sound system that will keep Richard happy for years. Our library is a triumph — the joinery and the shelving is excellent — the trims, details, ceiling, and display shelves with concealed lighting are great. I adore my kitchen with its unusual design and practical features — and it is beautiful. A week after moving in, I cooked

dinner for 26 people. Our home is beautiful — and it is truly ours. Its spirit is intact — and we feel good living in it.

Hearing the horror stories told by other people about their renovations and building projects, we are most grateful to have discovered Jamie Smarrelli of Icon Builders.

Hanging above our staircase is a work of calligraphy done by Melbourne artist Deirdre Hassett. The quotation from Louis Nizer is appropriate: *'A man who works with his hands is a labourer. A man who works with his hands and his brain is a craftsman. But a man who works with his hands and his brain and his heart is an artist.'*

We highly recommend Jamie Smarrelli and his work.

Pamela and Richard Jarvis.