Houzz Tour: When Two Houses Are Better Than One

The clever subdivision and transformation of an under-utilised backyard in Melbourne's Brighton East yields a double windfall.

Bettina Deda

The real estate agents' mantra: 'It's all about location' rang especially true for a Melbourne couple who took advantage of their home's corner position to come up with a genius plan to build a new, second house in a dilapidated, under-utilised backyard that required continuous maintenance and was only used to park cars. Instead of redeveloping the total property, which was likely to become a lengthy process, they embraced the value of the original house as it stood, refurbishing it slightly (and later renting it out). Then, with the help of Melbourne-based Schulberg Demkiw Architects, they subdivided the plot and had a new contemporary townhouse built in the old backyard to accommodate the growth of their family.

The design solution worked around the permissible building envelope with setbacks minimised and building heights maximised to provide the building form. The architect avoided building walls onto boundaries that may have had a negative impact on the adjoining properties. The result is a townhouse that radiates a feeling of spaciousness through numerous glazed connections to the exterior and interior features, such as an open glass fireplace and a slatted staircase. And because the whole property is on a corner, the new build (now in the backyard of the older house) also has its own street access, and even parking.

Houzz at a Glance

Who lives here: A couple, their daughter, and two cocker spaniels.
Location: Brighton East, Melbourne.
Year built: 2013.
Size: 341 square metres (ground floor: 135 square metres; first floor: 162 square metres; garage: 44 square metres); 3 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, study, powder room, laundry and garage.
Architect: Robert Schulberg of Schulberg Demkiw Architects, Melbourne.

With a view to the future expansion of their small family, the homeowners, a young Melbourne couple, took advantage of the corner aspect of their property to subdivide and build a new house in an under-utilised backyard.

They wanted a contemporary design that was sympathetic to the scale and character of the adjoining properties. The existing house would stay, with minimal modifications made to it. As for the new house, the plan would include a selection of interesting exterior materials to assist in breaking down the mass of the building's elevations while marking the new residence as an independent entity.

Stepping though the front door and down a short hall, a visitor to the house will first encounter a spacious living area. A black and white theme throughout the house creates a dramatic backdrop for the warmer tones of the soft furnishings.

"The monochromatic black and white colour scheme for the house was a challenge," Robert Schulberg explains. "But we managed to add warmth and comfort by introducing different textures and materials to complement the colour choices of our clients."

Walls painted in 'White on White': Dulux; unfinished European oak timber floorboards in Charcoal Grey: Be Floored; lounge: Natuzzi; ottoman: Keeki

The open-glass fireplace, a feature in the living room, is a hybrid of the Pure Vision and Simplicity 1000 gas fireplaces from Real Flame. It connects the study and living area. It has an open front, a glazed side plus a double-glazed back to the study. This particular design was installed in order to take advantage of the function and aesthetics of the fireplace from either room, but its beauty lies in the double glazing, which limits drafts and noise transference to the study.

Fireplace: Real Flame; original vintage poster: Letitia Morris Gallery

The living area of the home is generous, open and leads to a small yet versatile outdoor space. An easement along the western boundary determined the orientation of the house, but also determined where this outdoor area could be positioned. It takes advantage of this unbuildable space and is now catering for two of the most important members of the household – the cocker spaniels, Zuri and Cleo.
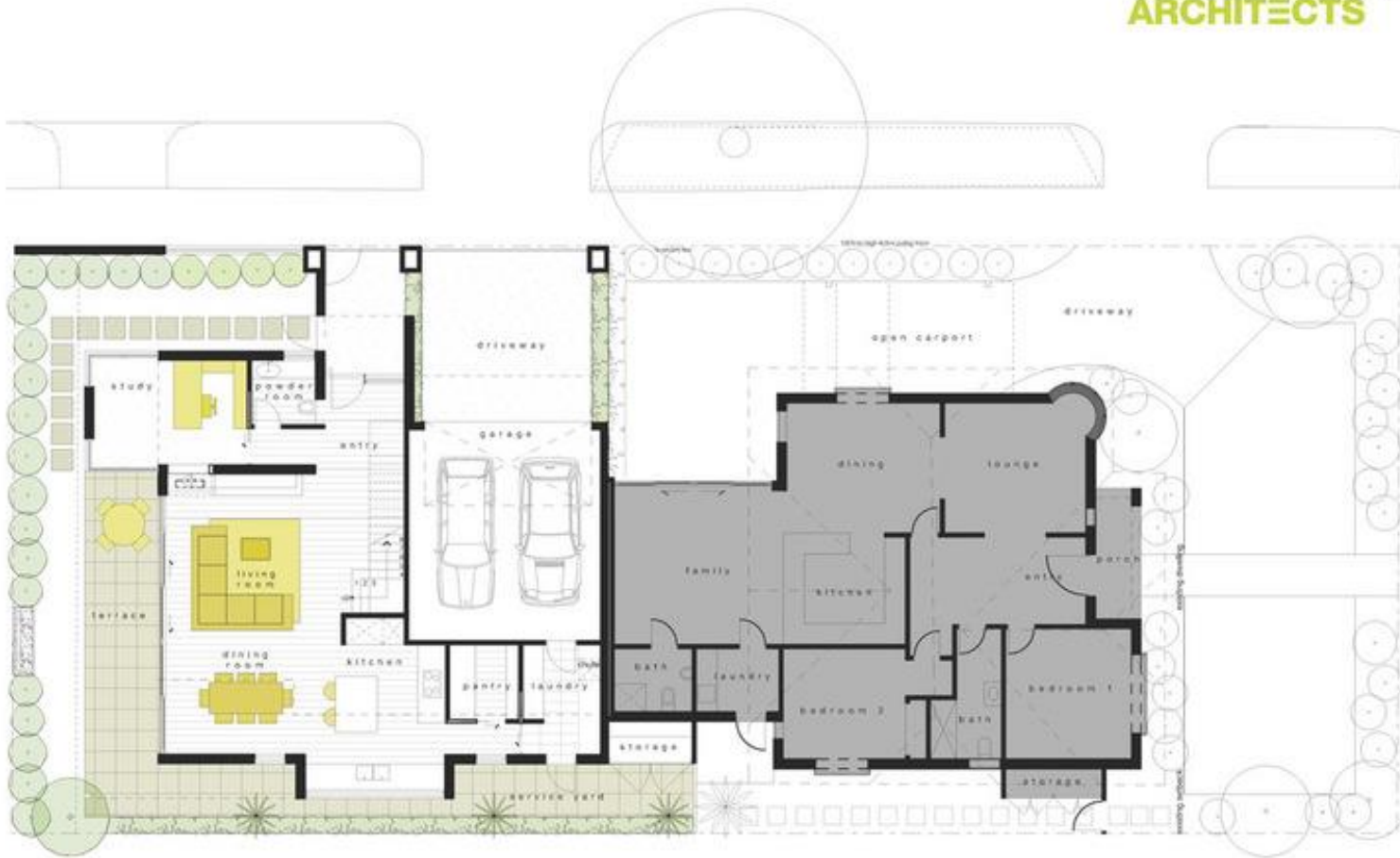
The orientation of the house, with the extended verandah roof to the west and the eaves above, allow for extensive glazing and this provides abundant natural light to the interior while the generous eaves protect the interior from direct westerly sun.

Asteroid pendant: Home of Lights; artwork: David Bromley; custom-made water feature: Dean Durrant Design

This image shows the foundation of the new home next to the original old house. To make the older home a little more sympathetic to the design of the new build, the architect replaced its gable roof (circled in red) with a flat one.

The planning intention was to maximise what could be constructed on the site. At first, the local council objected to a second house on the property, so the owners went to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) and after a lengthy process of 28 months, the Tribunal eventually agreed with the architect's plans. "We believed that this project was consistent with the Council's Planning Scheme as well as the State and Local Planning Policy Frameworks and contributed to the higher density living requirements in the local area," Schulberg asserts.

Here is the plan of the new house and how it is positioned in relation to the old existing home marked in grey.

On the ground floor of their new home, the homeowners envisaged a large open-plan living area with kitchen, laundry, powder room and study, opening to a small garden area and with car parking provisions to both houses.

The open-plan living and dining area flow seamlessly into the kitchen, which maximises the use of vertical storage space through floor-to-ceiling cabinets on the left side, overhead cupboards on the right side and additional storage under the kitchen bench. The contrasting monochromatic colour scheme, clean lines, including a limited use of handles and a flush cooktop, create a very modern look. A mirrored splashback in the kitchen reinforces the sense of spaciousness.

Benchtop in Pure White: Caesarstone; kitchen island and full height cabinets painted in 'Black': Dulux; kitchen cabinets painted in 'White on White': Dulux; Mirrortex Tough splashback in Smoke: The Splashback Company; wall-mounted rangehood and wall ovens: Miele; integrated refrigerator: Fisher & Paykel; Siemens integrated dishwasher: E&S Trading

The window along the entire side wall of the kitchen enables plenty of natural light to penetrate the space and connects the owners to the outdoors, where a vertical garden attracts the eye.

Walking through the kitchen and passing the pantry, you reach the laundry, seen here being watched over by cocker spaniel Cleo. Like the kitchen, the laundry is a showcase of optimised vertical storage space, including an internal drying cupboard. Cupboards overhead and under the bench feature recessed finger grips for a sleek and modern look. An integrated chute channels the dirty washing from upstairs to the laundry. The laundry is connected to the garage, which makes it easy for the owners to access the adjacent pantry without having to carry their shopping bags through the house.

Laminate cabinets in Polar White: Laminex; wall tiles in Extreme White and floor tiles in Extreme Black: G-Lux

Also on the ground floor, next to the entrance, is the powder room, which is abundant with natural light. The mirror behind the basin reflects the beautiful black feature tiles. The floral, feminine motive embellishes this small space and contrasts the black and white colour scheme effectively.

Composition wall feature tiles in Nero: Classic Ceramics; vanity stone benchtop in Diamond White: Apaiser; Sanctum vanity basin in Diamond White: Apaiser; Logic basin spout: Rogerseller
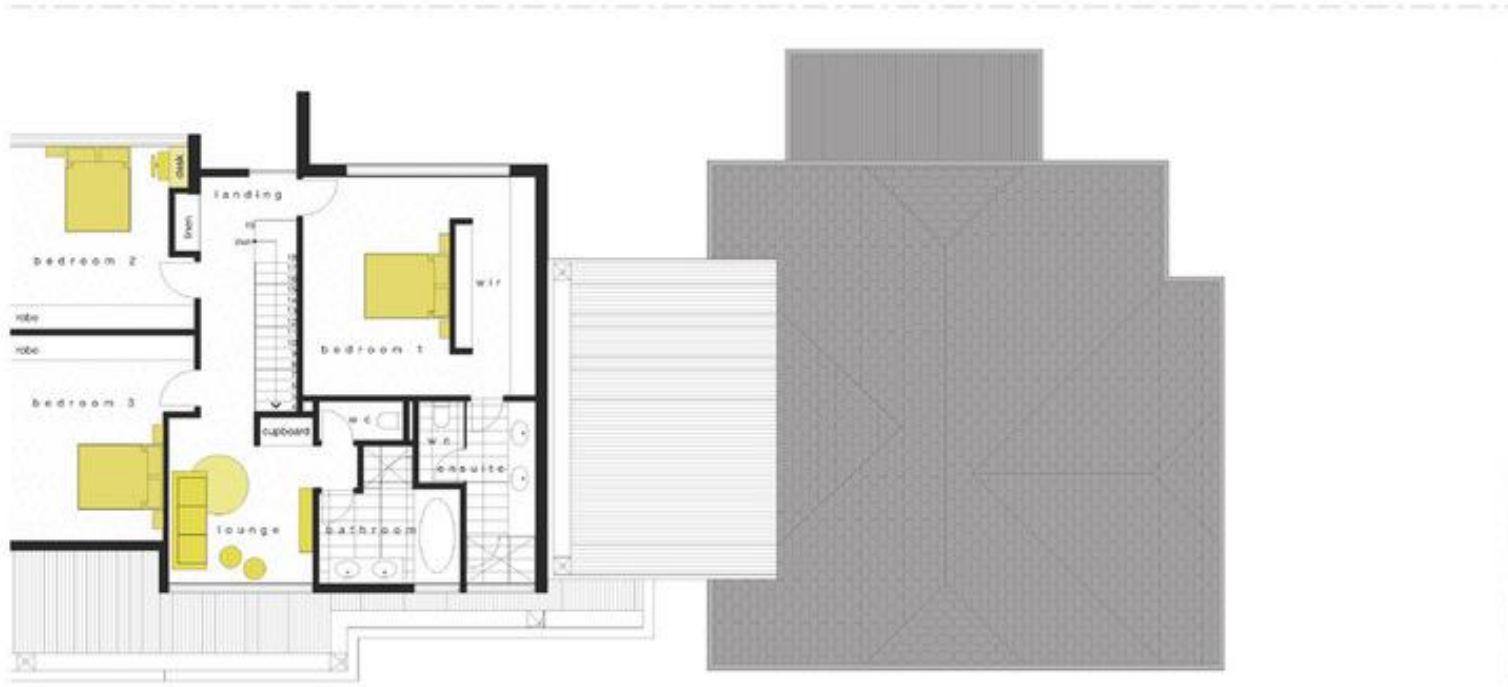
Next to the powder room, the light-filled study offers peace and quiet to work from home. With the use of floor-to-ceiling corner windows, opening the view to the greenery outdoors, this work area radiates calmness and relaxation. It is a private space but is still linked to the main living area through the glazed fireplace.

The slatted staircase leads to the first floor. The handrail was stained to match the colour of the floorboards. Zuri, the golden cocker spaniel, has found the ideal place to relax on a comfortable shag pile rug.

Shag pile rug: [Bayliss](#)

On the first floor, the homeowners wished to accommodate a master bedroom suite with walk-in robe and ensuite, two additional bedrooms, bathroom and open landing area. As the floor plan demonstrates, the three large bedrooms upstairs, including a full master bedroom suite and a casual lounge area, offer ample accommodation and room for a growing family.

The master bedroom features a large window and includes a walk-in wardrobe behind a dividing wall in the middle of the room.

Bedhead: Keekï; Shadow bedside tables: Domayne

Adjacent to the master bedroom, the ensuite features a wall-hung double oval basin vanity with under-sink storage and a mirror above with slimline LED lighting strips, a large shower with two shower roses (one wall-mounted, one ceiling-mounted) and a separate toilet.

Benchtop with integrated basins: Apaiser; feature wall tiles: Signorino Tiles; LED strip lights: World of Thought

The main bathroom is accessible from the upstairs lounge area and radiates a sense of serenity and calmness. The free-standing stone bath tub takes centre stage in this room. The tiled feature wall with vertical stripes suggests an increased ceiling height. As in the ensuite, the architect installed a wall-hung oval double basin vanity with under-sink storage and a mirror above with slim-line LED lighting strips. There is also an abundance of natural light coming in through the floor-to-ceiling frosted glass window, reinforcing a feeling of spaciousness.

Haven stone bath in Diamond White: Apaiser; Luna bath spout and floor-mount bath outlet: Rogerseller