



# Amazing design

JENNY BROWN

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## Digging down gives new life to Newtown house

Architect Eva-Marie Prineas excavated under an 1890s terrace to connect the living areas and garden.

In amending and adding to old houses we've gone every which way: out the back, up the top – including into roof gables – to the front, the side, we've even taken over garages. Very occasionally, we've gone down. While European inner cities preserve at least the outward appearance of historic houses that have eye-popping per-millimetre price values, by digging down – and in London some basements are now three levels deep – in Australia it's been a rare move.

**'It's a really special house.'**

Eva-Marie Prineas, architect

But in a respectful adaption of a gracious 1890s terrace in Newtown's Hollis Park precinct, Eva-Marie Prineas of Architect Prineas, burrowed back, in, and under a three-level house to insert a totally contemporary kitchen/diner that steps up to a smartly appointed living area on the same level as a palm-planted courtyard. The resident family had asked Prineas to invert the former floor plan and to put the living areas at the rear-garden level rather than the street front. "That involved a judicious excavation under the two grand front rooms," she says. Across the garden, the house also gained a lane-facing garage with a studio flat above that has been made to look unobtrusive behind a timber screen. The flat's kitchen, bathroom and a red-cedar battened "little balcony", and the semi-subterranean new rooms in the big house, demonstrate deft, present-

tense design with a Scandinavian flavour. Of the ply-lined walls, Prineas says: "The strategy was to insert a plywood volume that serves to define the two-storey space. The panels conceal plenty of storage and make everything feel more streamlined and bigger." Under the wide new stair, she snuck in a pantry. And somewhere in those ostensibly blank walls, "is a door that opens into a service area with a bathroom, laundry and cellar", she says.

Mindful of how valuable the authentic fabric of the house is, and because "it is good heritage practice", in the many other ways she amended or introduced new amenity, Prineas has, in the main, kept clear of the walls. She has instead emphasised stone fireplaces, Baltic pine floors, the tessellated tiling of the main hallway, and in places, has restored skirting boards and cornicing. In eliminating an upstairs bedroom and converting it to the main en suite, she created a mirrored and glassed central pod. "The design intent was to keep as much of the existing character of the room as we could," she explains.

What Architect Prineas has done here is exemplary: "It has given the house a different personality, perhaps for the next 100 years."

But built into that change is a longer-term vision, "that is about being socially sustainable". "It's a really special house. "And someone in the future might want to live in it in a different way? The idea was that whatever we did could be reversed."



Looking out from the excavated area under the house, above and right. Original walls were kept largely intact, below left, and a battened balcony. Photos: Chris Warnes



## Flat chat

JIMMY THOMSON

## New strata laws won't tip the balance

Resident owners paranoid about tenants taking over strata schemes don't need to go to the barricades just yet.

There's a fairly big hole in the government's laudable plans to give tenants a voice in the running of unit blocks.

No, it's not that they won't have a vote, or that they can be excluded from discussions on anything "sensitive" such as financial statements, levies, debts, strata renewal proposals or any other financial matters listed in the regulations – although all of those conditions apply. It's the fact that a huge number of the people who help you pay your negatively geared mortgage don't officially exist.

Some strata professionals estimate that half the tenants in strata are never officially registered, and since tenant representation depends on 50 per cent of the residents of a strata scheme being registered renters, very few buildings will achieve the threshold.

Both the current and incoming strata laws require new tenants to be registered with the owners corporation within 14 days, or risk a fine of up to \$550.

But it is one of the most frequently ignored strata laws, partly because private landlords and many rental agents don't even realise it exists and owners' corps don't pursue

breaches (if only because many of them are controlled by investor owners).

"Only about half the rental agents bother to register their tenancies," a highly experienced strata manager told Flat Chat.

"And only about one in 10 private landlords do it."

If those figures are correct, even schemes that have the vast majority of their units

tenanted won't qualify for tenant representation as they will need more than half of the units to be occupied by registered tenants.

"There won't be a scheme bigger than 10 units that has tenant reps," says the strata manager, bluntly.

Under the new laws, there's an incentive to pursue landlords who don't register their tenants. Owners' corps will be able to have fines paid to them, rather than the money going into the public purse.

But if the majority of owners are landlords, are they really going to vote to fine themselves?

The tenant representation plans could be one of the great wastes of space in strata legislation.

Even without the registration fiasco, who wants to be on a committee where you can't even listen to the critical issues, let alone vote on them?

There's more on this on the Flat Chat website.

