

space

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Words **Sandra Killen**

**This renovated suburban cottage opens out to merge seamlessly with its leafy yard.**

**F**rom the outside, this delightful cottage doesn't stand out from its unrenovated neighbours in its narrow street in West End, inner Brisbane. Neither imposing nor grand, it blends in and complements them.

A side pathway, pleasantly overgrown with old-fashioned foliage such as mother-in-law's tongue, jade plant and native grasses, welcomes visitors to the entry – and from there the house unfolds.

Architect Mick Hellen of Aardvarc Architects in West End has opened up the rear to bring the lush green back yard inside. When the timber-framed glass doors are open, the delineation is barely distinguishable. It's all very



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Maximising space ... Glass doors (previous page) let the garden in; (left) architect Mick Hellen makes himself at home in the open-plan living room/kitchen.



subtropical, very Brisbane, very West End. Hellen was builder as well as architect on the project, and his aim was minimal wastage. Piping from old copper water heaters forms lightshades, the balustrading on the stairs is fibreglass sheeting offcuts, and leftover timber has been used for awnings, bookshelves and seating. In the cubbyhouse, slats from wooden blinds form louvre walls and an old flagpole supports the structure.

Downstairs is a cool space for a couple of spare bedrooms, a bathroom/laundry, cellar and office, while upstairs is the main living and sleeping area for the owners and their three young children, aged five, three and six months.

"It took me seven months of weekend work to build the extension, with a bit of help from Johnny who owns the fish and chip shop nearby and neighbour Bob, a retired builder," Hellen says. Much of the appeal is in the rudimentary nature of the work. "I like exposing the joins, dowels and everything to let it speak out. You can see how things are done instead of glueing and nailing and hiding everything. It's a functionalist approach."

The house was raised 1m to accommodate

the downstairs rooms and better connect it to the rear of the site. It's a cosy-sized home, so furniture has to be space-saving and multi-functional. A stainless steel kitchen bench on castors, for example, can be a bar, storage space, a table or food preparation area.

While the interior is homely and inviting, it's the landscape that has the greatest pull. Framed through windows and doors, it draws you out into it. "We just love the plants," say the owners. "We let them go feral." While it might look jungle-like, it's a lovingly created wilderness with bamboo, banana palms, cactus, succulents, tiger grass and palm trees under the canopy of a huge South American fig tree. A plunge pool and outdoor fireplace complete the picture.

The cubbyhouse, at the rear of the block, is within view of the kitchen, and an adjacent platform can become a dining area, a spot to admire the city lights, or a stage for the children. The result, says Hellen, is a property with "heart and soul". ➔ *This house is a Small Projects entrant in the Australian Institute of Architects' Queensland Regional Architecture Awards (Brisbane).*



The world's a stage ... The cubbyhouse and platform (above left) utilise recycled materials while the multi-purpose kitchen bench (above) is a moveable feast.

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