DREAM TEAM

Finally making this expansive house into the home they always wanted was a labour of love for these owners.
The owners of this house on a double lot in Melbourne’s Toorak — a couple passionate about art and design — clearly recall the first time they set eyes on it in 1981, when they drove past almost by chance.

“We stopped the car and I said, ‘If we ever move, this is the type of house I’d absolutely love,’” recalls the husband. “It almost had something of a fairytale feel about it.” Dating from the 1920s, it was designed in the Tudor Revival style by architect Robert Bill Hamilton for the director of Victoria’s electricity commission. Serendipitously, a week later it came up for sale.

Back then, it was in a sorry state. A downpipe at the front was broken, there were issues with rising damp and an unsightly 1970s-style flat roof extension had been added to the back. But that did nothing to deter them. “One of the themes by which we live our lives is ‘contagious optimism,’” says the husband. “We saw the problems, but we dreamed of what we could create in the future.”

It ended up taking some time to realise. Initially, they conceived plus bedrooms for their two children, but other parts of the house remained unfinished as they focused for decades on building up their businesses. “Our room almost looked like we were at university,” quips the wife. “Part of the walls weren’t even painted or wallpapered,” adds her husband.

Then, 12 years ago, they decided to embark on a complete renovation which turned into a labour of love. With local firm, CATT Architects, they knocked down the 1970s addition and created a new extension, designed to fit seamlessly with the original structure at the front. Great pains were taken to make everything, from the balconies to the lanterns, look almost identical. Inside, however, the new part is much more airy and spacious. As their interior designer, Thomas Hamel notes, “It’s like Alice in Wonderland. You go through this little door at the front and it’s just scars of growth.” Attention was also paid to sourcing fine materials. They took months until they were satisfied that the new clinker bricks they had made would match the old ones. They also imported paving stones for the garden from an English village.

The process was both lengthy and bled with adversity. It took two years simply to get the plans through heritage. At one stage, the project was put on hold for a further three years after the wife was diagnosed with a serious illness.

Then, in December 2013, their chosen decorator, Stuart Rattle, died. By then, the interior architectural detailing had been completed and the strikingly
colourful rugs ordered. Their designs were inspired by magnified images of iris of the eye. The husband even travelled to Nepal where they were made. "I spent a day looking at these great looms," he remembers. "One of the looms was almost as high as our house and I got a giant ladder to climb to the top."

It was a friend who recommended Thomas Hamel and it turned out to be an inspired choice. "Everything came together so effortlessly," says the wife. "He gave me a lot of freedom to explore what I wanted to do." He particularly encouraged her to source furnishings internationally and one of their first shopping trips together was to Los Angeles. "My contract was the first day, she was literally loving it," recalls Thomas. "She was so excited by the options and what was available." An early purchase was the quirky Jean-Louis Deniot coffee table in the family room. A particular accent was also placed on craftsmanship in deference to the Arts and Crafts spirit of the original house, as witnessed by a ceramic chair by Korean artisan Lee Hun Chung and the globes of the dining room chandeliers, specially commissioned from a Melbourne glazier.

Art is an essential component of the house. The owners have a collection of some 1200 works that have been accumulated with the help of Sydney-based advisor, Michael Keid. "It was not like anything was chosen to fill the furniture," says Michael. "My clients and I are of the opinion that strong stand-alone things work together because each has a special magnetism." Scattered works include photography by both Bill Hemsen and Christian Thompson, and Looking for Struggling, a C.952 photograph of an Australian farmer by Eileh Rux Nicholas. Another of the owners' favourites is the John Brack painting, Donnees in Blue, above the fireplace in the family room. "There's a vibrancy to it," says the husband, "and we want people to feel that sense of excitement when they enter our world."

That work extends to the garden, which was reconfigured with the help of landscape designer, Paul Bangay. One of its most quirky features is a putting green with PGA-quality turf. "I didn't just want grass. I wanted the best grass in the world," says the husband. And now, he'd love a driving range too. "I'd like to be able to hit balls over the property into the tennis court," he says. "But, do you think my wife has authorised that?" Apparently, not yet.!!

For more go to thomashamel.com; paulbangay.com.
A Melbourne couple, passionate about art and design, bought this expansive 1920s-designed house in 1983. For the first few decades they were busy with work, and did not focus on the renovations until 11 years ago when they embarked on a major overhaul. They initially engaged interior designer Stuart Randle, but when he died, turned to Thomas Hamel to continue the partially finished work. Thomas encouraged the owners to source furnishings internationally, while an expert Michael Reid helped in their choice of art – of which there are many wonderful pieces.

Landscape designer Paul Bangay added his particular flourish to the property, which includes a POA-quality putting green.