





BEHIND THE GLASS CURTAIN

A glimpse of cool mid-century savoir faire in unflappable Adelaide. **Story by Mark Scruby Photography by Sam Noonan**

AS A RESIDENT of Melbourne’s rapidly gentrifying inner-north, I’m constantly confronted by questions of heritage protection and neighbourhood character (not to mention the apparent challenges of pushing space-age prams over jarring nineteenth-century cobblestones). You see, despite this time of economic woe, an awful lot of new architecture still gets stitched into the urban fabric. But it’s hidden from view – invisible from the street by order of the council. God only knows what’s growing back there. Imagine if we called all these alt-and-adders to account; if we could see exactly what they were getting up to back there; if we could say, “If you can’t retain the spirit of the existing residence without mimicking it in some horrid retro pastiche, you’re going to be stuck with the original outside loo ‘till the end of your days.” Maybe we’d end up with suburbs full of beguiling contemporary architecture like this Adelaide extension by Noxon Giffen.

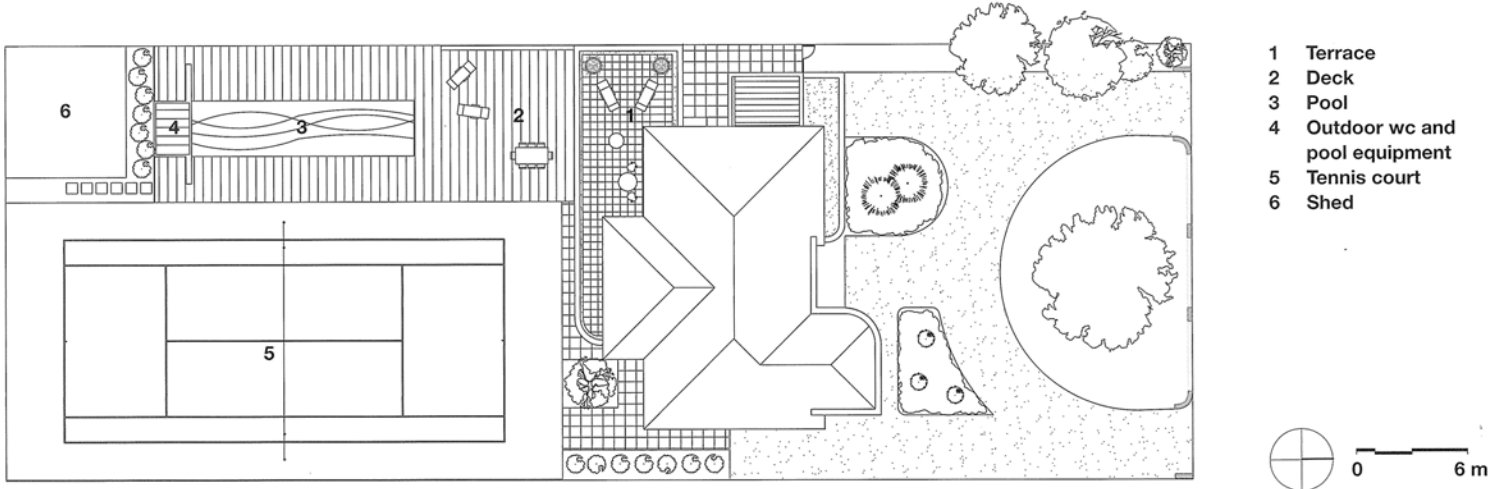
To describe the facade of the original double-storey house as grand would be hyperbole, but it certainly has presence. Blessed with distinctive mid-twentieth-century blonde-brick curves, it’s something of a landmark for locals in salubrious Leabrook. When it was acquired by the current owners, however, it had been neglected for some time. The run-down interior was complemented by a “garden” of gravel and rubble with a few straggly shrubs around its perimeter. What’s more, the characterless rear elevation didn’t allow for any real connection between the interior spaces and the backyard. Its only concession to decorative embellishment was a network of unglamorous pipework.

Enter Sydney architects Justin Noxon and Darren Giffen. “Our first thought was, it’s got a lovely quality about it so let’s not mess around with it too much,” Justin says. “It’s a large building and the spaces were scaled accordingly. The floor plan was cellular, but we said, let’s revel in that for the night-time and support spaces, and open the house up to the rear.” Ceilings and sawdust insulation were removed and updated, walls painted and bathrooms refurbished, and work began on the new extension – an open-plan kitchen-dining-living space looking out to the tennis court and pool. The overarching strategy is far from revolutionary, and Justin is the first to admit it. The key was not so much the concept as its thoughtful and elegant execution at the hands of the architects.

The new extension is light and open – twenty-first century Australian family-living *par excellence*. It provides a refreshing contrast to the massive, double-brick construction and regimented layout of the old residence. But there is no conflict between the old and the new, due largely to the shared geometry of the front and rear elevations. The curve of the front facade is repeated in a massive plane of glass at the rear, with the two forms joining to trace a neat “s” in the floor plan that guides visitors through living and dining

OPPOSITE: Inspired by the porthole on the art deco facade, an oculus skylight throws a shifting circle of sunshine onto the cement floor. **PREVIOUS PAGES:** The full-length glass wall becomes a screen on which night-time family activity is played out for the entertainment of swimmers.

Site plan





areas to the kitchen. That art deco radius is the x-factor that gives the house much of its character, and the beauty of Noxon Giffen's iteration of that curve is that it retains this character without replicating the original aesthetic. Solid brick becomes floor-to-ceiling glass; the impenetrable barrier at the front is re-imagined as a lens between indoors and out – allowing the clients to keep an eye on their four young sons' constant backyard adventures. When viewed from the outside in, it creates a stage-set upon which the family's daily life unfolds. If the house's street-front persona is Old Hollywood, this hidden face is more suited to Broadway. It's especially dramatic after dark, when LED lighting transforms a translucent full-length curtain into an ethereal veil.

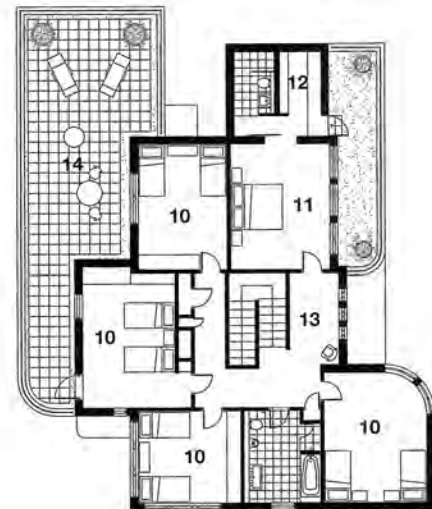
The glass wall references the original design in other ways. According to an uncorroborated but plausible story from the builders, the window to the sitting room was, at the time of original construction, the largest single piece of glass in Adelaide. It was high-tech, 1940s-style. In the new structure, modern technology takes shape in high-thermal-performance glazing – a requirement for moderating the interior temperature, given the extension's south facing aspect and limited exposure to solar warmth. The thermal mass of concrete slabs on both the floor and the roof terrace above offer even more temperature control. Without a need for deep eaves or other shading devices, the architects were free to echo the flush facade of the original house without compromise. The volume has been engineered, however, to admit plenty of natural light. Strip windows above the kitchen joinery add sparkle at certain times of the day and a circular skylight, inspired by the porthole in the front wall, channels a pool of light that moves across the floor as the sun arcs through the sky. "It gets a beautiful flash of morning light and, in the afternoon, a lovely, soft golden illumination filtered by the trees to the west," Justin says wistfully. "It's a great spot for a cheeky gin and tonic after work."

In a clever programmatic manoeuvre, the kitchen extends to the western boundary creating a concealed service court between it and the original garage. It's a pragmatic alcove for storing bins and hanging laundry, and saves the seamless rear yard from the dowdy indignity of a Hills hoist. The only vertical poles to be seen are the slim, load-bearing metal columns that spare the glass wall from clunky structural interruptions. Painted to match the bright red of a single steel column at the front door, they add a vibrant, if subtle, element of colour to an otherwise completely white interior. The revitalized house feels natural and intuitive, as if the new extension has grown out of the original structure. It shows the potential for a home renovation to be more than just a box at the back with a deck and bi-fold doors.

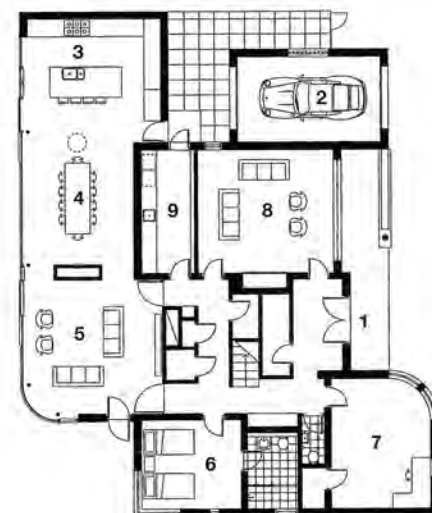
We're just lucky you can see it in *Houses*; otherwise, it would be hidden from view, for friends and family only. And that would be a shame. H

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|-----------------|---------------------|
| 1 Entry | 8 Sitting room |
| 2 Garage | 9 Laundry |
| 3 Kitchen | 10 Bedroom |
| 4 Dining | 11 Master bedroom |
| 5 Living | 12 Ensuite and robe |
| 6 Guest bedroom | 13 Landing |
| 7 Study | 14 Terrace |

First level



Ground level



OPPOSITE: A panoramic glazed wall is a transparent reiteration of the curved deco-style solid brick facade. Slender red columns bear the structural load, negating the need to clutter the glass wall.



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PRACTICE PROFILE
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BUILDER
 Owner/builder with Monterra Constructions and Peter Schwetlik

CONSULTANTS
Engineer Connell Mott MacDonald and Nigel Hallett & Associates
Landscaping by client

PRODUCTS
Roofing Trafficable concrete roof to ground floor extension with membrane; Lysaght Klip-Loc 406 to ensuite extension with roof insulation **External walls** Double brick rendered and painted (ground floor); colourback glass on stud wall construction with Bradford R1.5 insulation **Internal walls** Plastered and painted brickwork; plasterboard painted Dulux 'Antique White USA' **Windows** Capral 400 Series aluminium frames and aluminium channels. Single glazed ComfortPlus thermal performance glazing **Doors** Sliding doors fitted with KABASLA sliding door automated mechanism for pool fence safety requirement; painted solid core timber internal doors **Flooring** Insulated polished concrete floor slab 'Boral Stone in Snow Drift'; DEVI slab heating; Sikafloor epoxy resin in white **Lighting** Perimeter LED internal lighting; compact fluorescent fitting by owner **Kitchen** Miele appliances; Oliveri undermount double sink; Laminex Freestyle benchtop in 'Kosciuszko'; 2pac joinery with Blum mechanisms; integrated fridge by owner **Bathroom** Taps, basins and WCs by Rogerseller; white wall and floor tiles; glass showerscreens; Stormtech slot drain **Climate control** DEVI slab heating, evaporative cooling by client, radiant ceiling panels by DG Australia **External elements** Landscape and tennis court by client; in-ground concrete pool with solar heating by client; timber deck by client

FLOOR AREA
 378 m²

TIME SCHEDULE
Design, documentation 6 months
Construction 24 months (staged)

OPPOSITE PAGE: Blond brick curves in the original facade are echoed in the new rear facade. LEFT: Thermal ComfortPlus glazing prevents heat loss.