

Let's think inside the box

Rather than extending, a couple have reconfigured what they already have, writes **Carolyn Boyd**.

FOR home owners wanting extra living space, the tendency is to increase the size of the building. But sometimes you need to think inside the box, instead of out of it.

That was the dilemma facing Neutral Bay residents Paula and Nick Fletcher when it came time to updating their family's ageing red-brick house on 481 square metres.

The couple have two energetic sons, aged four and eight, and "needed a decent-size garden" for them, Paula says. But they also wanted more room to move inside their house.

The form of the double-storey house did not make the most of the site. The original living areas were broken up into a series of small rooms that felt poky and dark and the house was cold in winter.

The solution was simple. "We basically tore the insides out," Paula says.

The couple engaged architect Melonie Bayl-Smith from Liquid Architecture to design the makeover. "The project was all about completely reconfiguring openings and the interior spaces," Bayl-Smith says.

While parts of the garden were bathed in sun in the old house, that warmth and light "never got into the house because it was a series of just rooms; there was no interconnection", the architect says.

The new three-bathroom, four-bedroom design tied the living areas together and provided a more open-plan space, while also allowing for light and cross-ventilation.

The former main bathroom was rededicated as an en suite for Paula and Nick, who also clawed back enough space in the house for a walk-in wardrobe.

Included in the new design were two studies – a larger space for Paula



and a smaller homework area for the children.

Small windows on the northern and eastern sides of the house were replaced with big sliding doors that "allow a real interconnection with the outdoor space and the indoor spaces", Bayl-Smith says.

"That was important, too, from the point of view that it's not a very large sort of backyard."

The only new construction outside the existing shell was a garage. "The new garage is within the existing footprint," Paula says.

"We demolished the old one,

which had a pitched roof that was just a huge void."

To create more outdoor space, a 26-square-metre terrace was built on top of the new garage.

Paula says it is one of her favourite areas: "It gets full northern sun ... just bliss."

SPECIAL REPORT

Extra living space



Enjoying the bliss ... from left; Paula Fletcher and her son, Angus, 4, relax on the terrace; the kitchen is also sun-drenched. Photo: Anthony Johnson

'We've never looked back'

AFTER the Fletchers had their renovation plans drawn up, the inevitable question hit them – should they really go ahead with such upheaval, living through the reconstruction, or would they be better off selling and moving to something new or already renovated?

"I guess everyone does it before they're about to spend a huge amount of money renovating," Paula says.

The terrace was the perfect way to carve out more entertainment space and its private nature was quite a coup given that, as Bayl-Smith puts it, the house is "absolutely crowded in on all sides".

"It's very cheek-by-jowl in that particular part of Neutral Bay."

A second, smaller deck was added on the south-east end of the house, off what had been a dark rumpus room. The natural light in the south-facing room could then be increased by adding east-facing doors leading to the deck.

A seven-metre by three-metre

The Fletchers looked at other properties on the market. "We did all the open houses and we came to the conclusion that ... we'd still have to change them a little bit and we didn't want to," Paula explains. "And we wanted to stay in the same area. The street we live in, it's so close to the city but it's a no-through road. It's just great."

So was the renovation worth it? "Honestly, we have never looked back," Paula says.

pool was squeezed alongside the house, on the northern side. Bayl-Smith says it increases the light refracting into the house in winter as the sun reflects off the water.

The pool also provides a cooling mechanism during summer.

"The north-easterly winds come

Tips for internal alterations

THE ARCHITECT'S TOP FIVE

- ▶ Simple alterations such as changing windows to doors, widening existing openings and replacing windows can make substantial improvements to natural ventilation, natural lighting and solar gain.
- ▶ Consider your current and potential future needs so any alterations allow for a measure of flexibility.
- ▶ A well-designed open-plan kitchen will modernise an older dwelling and will allow for a greater sense of space, even in smaller houses.
- ▶ Do not be afraid to use paint colours to introduce light and interest into rooms, as well as using colour as a tool to connect spaces and furniture.
- ▶ Think about consolidating general storage into a utility room (rather than having lots of little cupboards) or making your storage and service areas do double duty. For example, can a full-height bookcase incorporate a built-in desk?

THE OWNER'S TOP FIVE

- ▶ Make a list of what does and does not work in your current space.
- ▶ Make sure you know how you want to use the space before you start your project, otherwise it can get expensive.
- ▶ The more information you share with your architect or designer, the better the results.
- ▶ The space should be appropriate when it is being built but needs to be flexible and not fall victim to current fashions.
- ▶ Any space can be made beautiful but if it is not practical, its beauty will diminish quickly.

across the pool into the house," Bayl-Smith says.

Functionality aside, having a pool is a lot of fun. "If people ask me where was your money well spent, I think now I would say the swimming pool," Paula says. "With two boys, it's just a great thing to have."

The Fletchers are very happy with the renovation, which was finished 18 months ago. The original budget was \$500,000 but the project ended up costing considerably more.

"Melonie has made use of every available space," Paula says. "There is nothing in the house where you could say, 'Oh, if you extended this a little, you could have used that.'"

Paula, who put together the interiors of the house using blackbutt flooring downstairs, an orange highlight in the kitchen and purple, red and charcoal tiles in the bathrooms, has recently gained a Certificate IV in design and hopes one day to become an interior designer.

The former accountant says living in the house for two years before embarking on the renovation gave the family a clearer idea of where they were headed.

"We planned it that way because I wanted to live in the house to get a good feel for it first before we renovated," she says.