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# The old and the new

With the spotlight on five-star renovations, it pays to use as much of your existing home as possible. By **Michael Green**.

**W**hen Matt Gibson and his wife, Annabel Talbot, decided to fix up their South Yarra home, they took a hefty task. "We wanted to recycle as much of the existing structure as possible," Gibson says, "install anything we could and use old materials from other buildings."

With careful planning, a renovation goes hand-in-hand with the other three E's: reduce, reuse and recycle. And Gibson is adamant that it doesn't mean lower-power design. "You can have a contemporary space by reusing the structure and using eco-friendly principles, without having a shag pile or stained-glass look."

The 16-year-old is standing at the front of his narrow terrace home, looking smug and ruffled in jeans and a blue shirt. As he speaks, 10-month-old daughter Matilda crawls to the courtyard at the red front door. "She loves it out here," he says, picking her up.

She's a wise judge. The small home feels spacious, thanks to clever use of natural light and mirrors. It also features a serene internal courtyard with an outdoor shower, opening from the master bedroom and bathroom.

The old house, built almost 100 years ago, had a bonapoch layout (lots of two previous extensions). The kitchen was hidden away and the toilet was



“

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”

stock in the lounge room. Despite the inconvenience, the couple lived in the home for two years before beginning their overhaul. When they did, salvaging the best of the existing structure seemed the natural thing to do.

"For me, I like keeping the old elements," Talbot says, sitting on the couch in the airy living room. She's been

Britain and her parents' house was built in 1942. "I don't understand having to pull everything down. In England you just don't have the space to do that, and the planning rules don't allow you to. We're quite used to reusing whatever we've got."

Although there were no heritage rules preventing demolition, the couple



decided to keep the existing period front and the bedrooms intact, along with the entire roof and all the walls. "There's a lot less embodied energy in revitalising the existing structure than in building it and starting again," Gibson says. They reshuffled the back part of the house by moving the bathroom to the middle of the home and creating an open kitchen and living area facing the back courtyard.

It's not just an environmental plus — the other big benefit is cost. The project outlay totalled \$200,000. Gibson estimates that they saved about \$100,000 by keeping the structure in place, and up to \$20,000 more by using recycled materials.

They redesigned their old glass roof to become a contemporary skylight and re-employed three large beamed mirrors

## SHOULD IT STAY OR SHOULD IT GO?

Up to 40 per cent of landfill waste comes from building, according to yourhome.gov.au, and much of it can be reused. Recycling not only cuts demand for resources, but also cuts your costs.

A renovation always means recycling, but just how much depends on the design. If you want to be green, see as much of the existing structure as you can and choose your materials carefully. Make sure your designer and builder understand your goals.

Doors, windows and cabinets are ideal for reuse, and look for bits and pieces with character — like Matt Gibson's braided mirrors — which could be re-employed.

Material-wise, almost everything can be reclaimed, from plasterboard, timber and glass, to steel, aluminium and copper. Even concrete, carpet, plastics, bricks and tiles are good to go around again — if not for you, then someone else.

It's easy to find second-hand suppliers of trade materials online. Try sites such as eBay, Trading Post, or Constructor Connected Australia.



Reducing and reusing. The small house in spacely (left), an easy living space opens out to the courtyard (below left). Floorboards were reclaimed from a demolished factory in Richmond (below right), and the main bedroom opens onto an internal courtyard.

PHOTOS: SIMON MURKIN / JOHN BREATHLY

**Your Home**  
yourhome.gov.au  
**eBay**  
ebay.com.au  
**Trading Post**  
tradingpost.com.au  
**Construction**  
Connect Australia  
connect.com.au  
**Matt Gibson Architecture + Design**  
mattgibson.com.au



### MATT GIBSON ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN

When Matt Gibson was a kid, he chanced upon an architectural blueprint. "I saw it and just thought it was so beautifully drawn," he says. "Once I saw that, I wanted to do architecture."

He started his own practice, MGA+D, in 2003 after working for other architectural firms in Melbourne and London. In 2006, Gibson's firm won Australia's Best Emerging Practice.

It has since expanded to include five staff. They work on new, retail and commercial projects, but specialise in existing residential buildings. Gibson says he is fascinated by the play between old and new, and storytelling through design features that occur through a home. "There's a thread running through our work, which is about vibration of light, continuity of forms and patterns of movement."

March 1, 2009

## SELECTIONS

### GLEAM

How many colours does it take to charge a light fitting? As many as it takes to transform it into a fun, funky must-have. Make company Aco's Muse



will lamp and pendant lights have been re-designed in an array of hues including orange, red, fuchsia, blue and pink. Each lamp has a metal structure and a covering made of renewable and elastic woven fabric. Aco is also releasing a new range of flat lamps and woven table fabrics. [aacobtable.com.au](http://aacobtable.com.au) or 021 9690 2067.

### VISIT

The house has everything an Agatha Christie fan could want — except a body in the library. The stucco Georgian villa in Devon, England, where the crime writer holidayed, is opening to the public for the first time after a £A12 million restoration, AP reports. Greenway is said to be the inspiration for *Dead Man's Folly*—Christie's whodunit in a Gothic in a mystery writer's home. The rooms in the 18th-century house, bought in 1938, have been restored but left much the way they were when Christie stayed there. For de-hair-dos of Christie — who died in 1975, aged 85 — one floor of the house has been turned into a five-bedroom holiday apartment, available for about \$4500 a week in high season.



### ENTERTAIN

OK, we know times are tough but living without the handcrafted timeless piece can be even tougher. And who else in the street can brag about the Aden fan (below) in their garden? ("You have a large terracotta urn? I win.") Aden and Cate Henning take quality homes styling from interior through to exterior with their furniture businesses in Sydney. The Design Establishment (doctors) and Vanshara (doctors). The emphasis is on key and unique collection pieces that stand out in any space, the outdoors range is heavily influenced by the Tucson, Arizona.

Pieces can be transported to Melbourne. [designestablishment.com.au](http://designestablishment.com.au) [vanshara.com.au](http://vanshara.com.au) or 020 8352 3888

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