

Like living in the `70s

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Given the decade-long feeding frenzy on mid-century or modernist houses that drove their prices through their skillion roofs and their images to renovation cover status, it's remarkable how long it has taken for the market to popularly discover their stylistic descendants, houses from the latter 1960s and early 1970s.

Yet, as this masterful transformation of a Doncaster house displays, such oversight may be about to change.

Asked by owners who'd been resident for 10 years to reinvigorate "a tired, cold, not really working house", Lachlan McArdle, project architect with Steffen Welsch Architects, tells how a house that might have been demolished was reprised "through a series of minor moves that achieved big outcomes".

Yes, the building was skinned of roof, floor and plaster wall surfacing to better insulate it. A modest rear addition of a dining room and a 1.5 metre extension to allow the master suite to move location and extend slightly into the back courtyard has also made a great difference to use and performance.

But McArdle and project colleague Donie Coffey count as the biggest compliment the fact that visitors can't find the seams where the old leaves off and the new begins.

That's because all that is new was done "in the same language of an archetypal, modernist and quite charming '70s house", McArdle believes.

"Although none of the house was left untouched, we didn't dictate or abandon the language. We changed what was outdated or antiquated."

Rezoning to separate parents from children – whose bedrooms remain at the front of the house – and introducing high-performance and, in many cases, custom-made, wood-framed German windows (Das Fenster) "that strategically opened (the back) of the house up", made a major difference to the indoor/outdoor flow.

"The house now has a continuous flow from the front to the back," says McArdle.

Constructing two new rock walls and tiling the dining area in bluestone made a huge difference to the thermal performance of the living zones.

And it's in this quietly contiguous dining addition that you can most clearly see how perfectly the aesthetic idiom is dialoguing – so comfortably and convincingly – across almost half a century.

The blackbutt timber-lined ceiling is lifted above the rock blade walls by strips of clerestory windows "so that it appears to be floating. And the timber also makes it a more intimate space", says the architect.

The rocks in the wall are the real thing and not a thin skin: "Peninsula Stonemasons were on site for weeks and weeks. And the rocks also refer to the language of the era. They were heavily used in the '70s."

In all, McArdle says, "it's a continuity that is gradual and ambiguous".

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