

HAND IN GLOVE

A couple of enterprising developers show how a tricky heritage renovation can be handled successfully with a bit of cooperation – and kid gloves.

STORY GABRIELLE BAXTER PHOTOGRAPHY JOHAN PALSSON STYLING GREG SUKENDRO





LUCKIEST FIND? Rob says he saw the lumps of original sandstone disappearing off down the road and headed for the landfill and was determined to save them. “Those blocks have only ever been used for 100 years – including the quarry – and they’ve barely moved 20 m

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Rob Bird and Carl Hinton are business partners in Urban Impact, a development company they started when they came to Australia three years ago, bringing with them well over a decade of construction experience in the United Kingdom. “Saving old buildings is something we’re quite passionate about,” says Carl, “especially coming from the UK

on than Australia does, but Carl still feels more could be done to preserve what there is here. However, it’s perfectly understandable that people shy away from revamping a heritage house or home unit simply because of the structural restrictions they are bound to come up against, but Carl and Rob’s experience with this brilliant renovation is a superb example of what can



THE 'RAW' MATERIAL

What they had to work with was one dwelling in three units – two upstairs and one down – in Pittwater Road, Manly, on Sydney's North Shore, and it was the streetscape that was heritage-listed, not the house itself. "We got a heritage report done," says Rob, "and historically, it was probably built around 1890 with a little cottage attached. Then, in the early 20th century, it was divided into two units, but we don't know when it became three – apart from the correspondence from Manly Council saying it had to be converted back, because 'we haven't approved this!'" The project therefore also involved restoring it to dual occupancy.

"There are actually three separate buildings," Carl takes up the story, "the original one with the sandstone cottage

ugly facade in front of it and extended at the back at the same time. We had to keep the facade," he adds, "because that's part of the heritage streetscape."

Rob describes the structure they were faced with – diplomatically – as a 'bit tired'. "Because it was built in three different phases, the architectural style obviously wasn't consistent throughout," he says, "so we had to enhance the various characteristics of each era it did have and use every feature that was already there."

The whole thing was clearly assuming monumental proportions even in the early stages and one wonders what would have happened to it if these 'heritage crusaders' hadn't taken it over.

"That was exactly the argument we put to the Council," Carl grins, "because what we had taken on was quite 'modern' in a

weren't able to do something like that – and it hadn't gone ahead – the building would have just fallen into disrepair ... "

"... further disrepair!" Rob chimes in

HERE COMES THE CAVALRY

Enter another – renowned – 'crusader' in this field, Dr Terry Metherell, who chairs the sub-committee that considers heritage

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new' Art Deco 1932 facade, and I include it in my Pittwater Road heritage walks."

Although they had an initial concept in mind, there was a fair amount of evolution as it progressed because, the structure had to be brought up to current Australian building standards first. "That meant every single wall, floor and ceiling," says Carl, "and between the two levels, there are actually three ceilings. It also had to meet fire regulations," he goes on, "and because it was so old, we had to be quite inventive with procedures to maintain the integrity of the safety standards – yet without compromising the look of it."

But 'evolution' is something of an understatement to describe the changes of plan that were brought about by the radical upgrade of the building, because it uncovered 'treasures' in the form of original features Rob and Carl simply weren't aware of – and the stunning sandstone walls are a good example.

"At the time the place was built, this style of sandstone was considered very low-grade," says Carl, "so it definitely wouldn't have been on show. It was all covered by render – and had been for 100 years."



THE LOVE
VICTORIAN
BELIES THE
BEDROOM
MODERN



we
 second bathroom in," he beams. "We just had to move things around a bit to fit it in."
 Sadly, limited space here precludes more tales of wonder about what they found, but a final one has to be recounted – the water feature on the deck. When they were halfway through the project, the place next door was being demolished. "It was just a fibro cottage," says Carl, "and the demolition team found that the original footings underneath were solid concrete"

these huge blocks were lifted off the truck with the JCV and dropped over the fence into our backyard."
 They then got a stonemason in and he reckoned they must have been cut from the local quarry – which, in the 1890s, was right across the road. "It's not there now obviously!" Carl laughs. "Anyway, we had them cut up to make that water feature. There's even what they call the 'sparrow-riking' marks on the face of the stone slabs"

Clearly, they both take great delight in the details, and one feels it should all be documented or labelled somehow so that people appreciate it.
 "It was a concern of ours that we were going to all this effort and people may very well not realise what's been done," Carl admits, "but everybody involved has been very excited about it all – and it's definitely been worthwhile." So, even if full recognition isn't forthcoming, their own

BIGGEST CHALLENGE: "The sand
 "and trying to design something that worked
 it. In a modern building, you can cover any m
 or architraves," he explains, "but when you e
 nothing you can do to hide anything untoward
 the ceiling was serving as a 'structural memb
 the wall first to make it self-supporting, and t
 structural membrane working through the sta