

Shape shift

Designer Peter Downes gave an old fibro cottage a dramatic new roofline, setting the tone for a striking transformation, writes **LILY ZDILAR**



When faced with a fibro house long past its use-by date, many home owners would simply decide to demolish and rebuild. Their options would usually lie at two extremes – an expensive architect-designed house or a project home.

The owners of this northern beaches home took another approach, transforming the original two-bedroom fibro cottage into a contemporary dwelling that meets the expectations of a modern lifestyle and has that elusive “wow” factor.

The metamorphosis started when Janet and Grant Dargue approached designer Peter Downes about an extension. The result is a stunning family home that defies the trend to knock down and rebuild – and all within a budget of \$270,000.

“This house is on just an average suburban block and it proves that you can have good design without having the \$2-million-overlooking-the-ocean type of house,” says Avalon-based Downes. The design won Downes the award for Best Addition and Alteration over 80 sq m in the 2002 Building Designers Association of NSW awards.

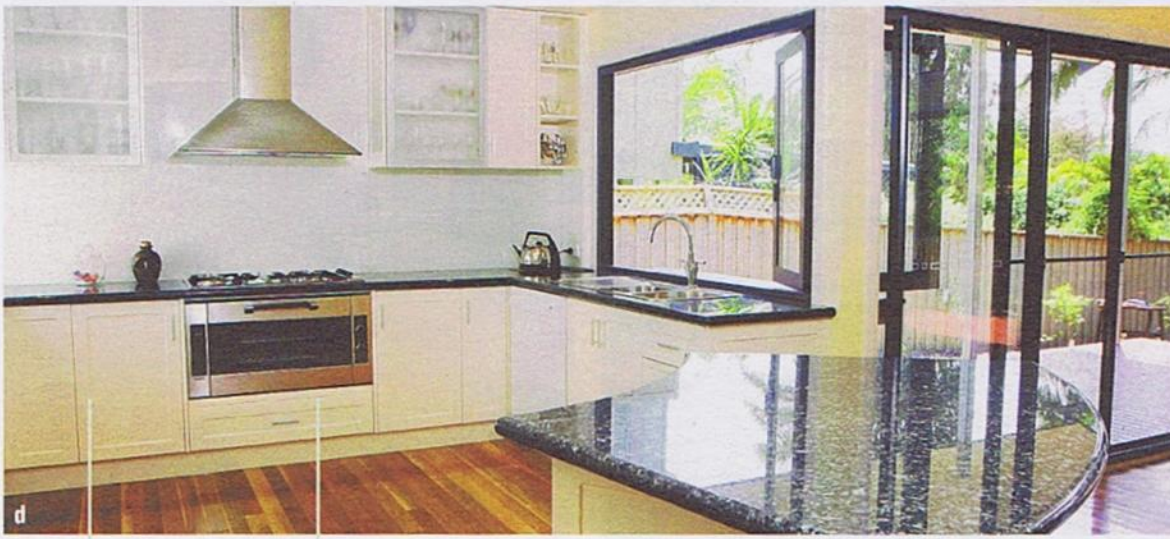
With its dramatic shapes, roofline and spacious, light-filled interior, the house – clad in Weather-tex and with a Colorbond Custom Orb roof – is striking in its simplicity.

“The idea with all my designs is to use relatively cheap materials but assemble them into interesting shapes so you don’t have to spend a fortune on fit-out,” says Downes.

The transformation of the house was based on two important decisions: the first was to replace the enclosed rear of the house with an enlarged living area and covered veranda opening to the north-facing back yard. This resulted in a perfect connection between indoor and outdoor living spaces and also produced the best result for solar efficiency.

The second decision was to remove the conventional roof and give the house a dramatically different roofline, combined with a first-floor addition to accommodate the children’s bedrooms.

“The idea is to integrate the indoor and outdoors. Rather than having an abrupt change from one to the other, you have a gradual, seamless transition,” says Downes, who included multifold doors and wide overhangs in the design to maximise the openness and ventilation throughout.



[a] The spacious, light-filled interior opens to the north-facing back yard [b] The fibro cottage as it was [c] The transformation gets under way [d] A sleek new kitchen has an open feel [e] Owner Janet Dargue [f] The home's striking curves and angles are attractive from the street.

If you design a house by logic, you'll always come up with something interesting.

The eave overhangs, up to 900mm deep upstairs, shade the house from direct sunlight in summer but let in warmth and light, almost through to the front door, at the height of winter.

"You have to design the whole block of land, not just the house," says Downes, who maintains the character of a house is largely determined by the design of the roof, making it the logical place to start when making a significant change.

"A lot of these old houses haven't been designed to accommodate a first-floor structure," explains Downes, who considers timber-framed houses more flexible to work with.

"The benefit of Colorbond Custom Orb is that it's very light, about one-tenth of the weight of a tiled roof. And when you build from a combination of steel framing and steel roof cladding, you can have any shape you want."

With regulations about height limits, pitched roofs become restrictive, he adds.

The wide, bow-shaped roofline gives privacy from both the street and back yard and its curve is highlighted internally by bright feature walls in the children's bedrooms.

Downes based the interior layout on a zoning system, which includes the main living area at the north-facing rear of the house; a separate living space for the children (a television/games room), home office and parents' bedroom and ensuite downstairs; and the three children's bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs.

"Everything a 400 sq m house does, this 220 sq m one does in less space," says Downes, who included wide hallways and high ceilings to increase the sense of space.

Owner Janet Dargue is happy to live without the typical formal areas of modern homes.

"We had already built a huge house in Melbourne a few years ago so we put certain features in our criteria," she says. "In Melbourne we never used those areas - I just cleaned them anyway."

Janet and Grant and their three children, Nicky, Jason and Jackie, rented a house during the 18 months the home took to complete.

"Because of the restraints on how much we could build on the land, and also the budget, we couldn't have the typical formal areas as well," says Janet. "Pete [Downes] came up with the concept of putting the eating area at the back so we could dress it up and turn it into a formal area if we needed to."

Downes had some valuable advice for the Dargues before the design process even started.

"I ask clients for a wish list and ask them not to think about how it's going to happen - if they do, they start thinking about limitations that might not even be there," says Downes, who spent 20 years as a project draughtsman in the mining and engineering industries before following his passion for residential architecture in 1997.

"Every site is different," he says. I'm doing a house at North Curl Curl at the moment - north is towards the street, so we've pushed the whole house as far back as possible and then have all the living areas facing north.

"I also have a check list I work through. I call it 'parametrisation' the site, where I consider council rules and regulations, whether it's north-facing,

overshadowing, privacy, view-loss and street noise ... by the time you methodically analyse the site you start to form a picture of where the house will end up."

"Once you've applied all those things, including height restrictions, you don't have many options on what you can do."

"In other words, the house is designed entirely through logic, not through creative brilliance. If you design a house by logic, you'll always come up with something interesting."

 Peter Downes specialises in the northern beaches areas and can be contacted on 9973 3312 or visit www.peterdownesdesigns.com.au

