

A metre here, a few extra millimetres there: how an inventive renovation of a Nelson family home yielded big results.

Small change

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Arresting additions at either end of the 1960s modernist home create cause for passersby to double take.

Left By cantilevering the kitchen out to an existing eave, 600 millimetres in width secures a kitchen with a return bench.

Below Jeremy acknowledged the home's limitations and celebrated what his predecessor did with the house.



There's a side to architect Jeremy Smith that enjoys sowing confusion. How else to explain his delight when passersby stop in surprise outside his family home? An example of 1960s modernism set on a plinth above a quiet Nelson street, it has been transformed by Smith into a genuine "double take" house by two arresting additions.

Crowning the garage at the southern end is an obviously contemporary black steel and timber box, about two metres wide, darkly glazed and ambiguous. Housing for a stairway, perhaps? At the other end, and equally at odds with its conventional façade, the little brick house is framed by... well, by a frame, a rectangle

of industrial-scale steel suspended below the gable. Seen from the road, its function isn't clear at all.

In fact, both additions are entirely purposeful, necessary elements of the architect's clever rearrangement of a much-loved but too-small house into a home for a family of five.

Funnily enough, when Smith and his partner Genevieve Morrissey bought the Alex Bowman-designed house in 2009, its bijou scale was part of the attraction, despite having three daughters – Bonita, 14, Scarlett, 11, and seven-year-old Coco Plum. Bowman, who virtually single-handedly introduced international modernism to Nelson in the 1960s, had designed this

one for a retired couple. He set the home small, brick and slightly brutalist against a neighbourhood of enormous heritage villas.

The Morrissey-Smiths admired Bowman's plan and crafted detailing; they liked the way he'd glazed it heavily to the western street-side and north, while maintaining privacy elsewhere, and they loved the elevated site. But even after converting the original twin studies into bedrooms, they were still one short. Lack of direct access to the garden was another issue.

Smith's plan began with an acknowledgement of the limits. He didn't feel inhibited by Bowman's status as a prominent local architect, but he accepted

– celebrated, really – what his predecessor did with the house.

"Alex Bowman didn't intend this house to get any bigger," Jeremy says. "That's why he made a small, very contained brick building on a plinth. So we really needed to find a way of elongating it and creating space, without it appearing bigger."

The circuit breaker was the addition of a new bedroom – that mystery box sitting on the garage, appropriately a 13th birthday present for Bonita. Viewed from outside it seems too narrow, but inside, Tardis-like, it doubles, comfortably accommodating a bed, desk and window seat.

In response to the intense Nelson light, interior tones have become increasingly darker and moody.





Left The thoroughly modern rectangle is a Tardis-like bedroom, housing a bed, desk and window seat – a welcome retreat for a teenager.

Below The steel structure supports artfully irregular concrete steps that open the dining area to the garden.



It's the simplicity and economy of all these gestures that impress. Jeremy has played with Bowman's creation without upstaging it. The additions read unambiguously as new elements, but also as being clearly secondary to the old house

"People are always standing down there looking up at it; I don't know what they think it is," says Bonita, who made the risky but inspired choice of painting her room "Gravel", a deep, dirty gray that sets off the pink magnolia tree framed in the eastern window, and emphasises the room's cocoon-like feel. "It's a space I can retreat to and relax in."

The next step was to reconfigure the entrance to the other girls' adjacent bedrooms, creating shared access and a pool of light at the end of what had been a dead-end corridor. Combined with the removal of an internal wall to the kitchen, it has produced a view all the way through the house.

Far left Originally designed for a retired couple, with Jeremy's clever adjustments, the family of five is no longer stretched for space.

Left The 60s bathroom has been divided up so there are no more 7am queues in the corridor.

Below left Box-like from the street, Bonita's tall, long and narrow room is painted in Gravel, a deep grey that draws attention to the brilliant pink of a magnolia tree.

Below An internal wall has been removed to open direct access to the kitchen and views to the outdoors.



"The place feels much longer, even though we've only added a couple of metres," says Jeremy, whose other big play is at the opposite end of the house, where he has opened access to the outside from the dining space. And at last, the penny drops as to the point of that massive steel frame: it's there to support concrete steps to the garden. There's no deck, although a wider, platform-like step immediately outside the dining space provides a comfortable spot to enjoy a drink in the sun.

Meanwhile, Smith has reworked the house's eastern side by cantilevering the kitchen and bathrooms out to the existing eave. In a case of playing small for big results, he's added just 600 millimetres

in width to secure a kitchen with a return bench, plus much-needed separation of WC, bathroom and shower – meaning no more 7am queues in the corridor. "None of it had been changed since the 1960s, so we've taken the chance to update kitchen and services," he says.

They have also introduced a darker palette, adding carbonated ash joinery and muted wall tones. "The longer we live in Nelson the more we are aware of how bright the sun is here, and this little house has a lot of glass. We've actively been making it darker and darker."

Genevieve also made a happy discovery when she found that shutters to the west-facing living room

windows were not follies, as she'd suspected, but useful features. They've been retained and produce a lovely diffused light at the end of the day.

It's the simplicity and economy of all these gestures that impress. Jeremy has played with Bowman's creation without upstaging it. The additions read unambiguously as new elements, but also as being clearly secondary to the old house. New windows are left unframed, and the dark ash joinery effectively highlights the warmth of the original rimu. "We were always keen that you would be able to easily tell what was here first," says the architect. "The old house still feels more important than the things we've done to it."

Genevieve remarks that visitors tend to be amazed at how much has been achieved inside, because the façade is essentially unchanged. "For the kids to have their own space is fantastic. They're involved in our lives endlessly, but now there's some space for them to do their own thing."

And she has a nice take on the relationship of old and new, likening what they've done with Bowman's creation to the collaborations that architects constantly engage in.

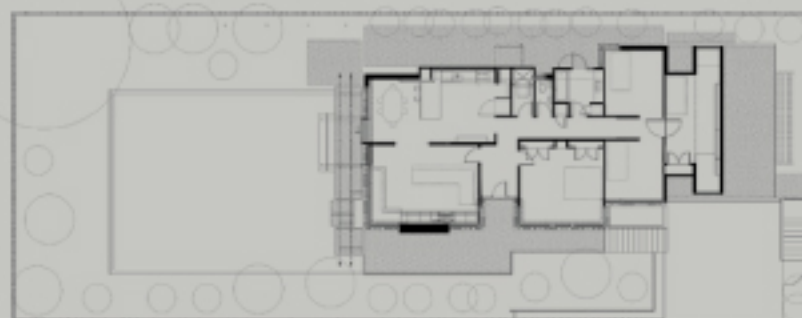
"We came in to this house and we worked with the ideas that were already here – so, in this case, it's been a collaboration over time." ■

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DESIGN NOTEBOOK

Q&A with IMO's Sam Haughton and Hannah Brodie

The design duo on their successful furniture business and creating

Design-wise, what's your favourite era?

Probably the Victorian era. I don't go for modern things, and I think the apartment is industrial enough, without the furniture being stark as well! I also love deco. My favourite hotel is the Chateau Marmont in Los Angeles, because the way they've kept the place is perfect.

What was really important to you?

After the kitchen and bathroom, just having it how I liked it. Getting the right which is not really done in New York.

What's it like to live in such a multi-purpose space?

My studio is not huge, but it's big enough to work from. If we have a really big job, it spills out into the hallway, but then it all goes away again.

Because I have the table, this is the place that everyone comes around to hang out at, whether I cook or not. I like people to be around for William, because he's an only child, so it's good that he can have play dates here and they can have lots of space to run around if it's a rainy day.

