In a tranquil Victorian country setting, a doctor's former home that is now almost 100 years old has been carefully and lovingly restored back to life.

Photography Patrick Redmond

In 1917, Eltham, Victoria was just a small rural village close to the Yarra River. Lidia Jane Bradbury purchased an original Crown allotment from solicitor Robert Lindsay Wingrove. One of her sons, Ron, had a medical practice on Main Road and Brougham Street, Eltham. His two-storey gabled residence was a typical Californian Bungalow, surrounded by a beautiful tree-filled landscape and positioned to capture views to the distant northern ranges. Fast forward 75 years and in 1992, Gayle and Bryan Cole, of builders B & G Cole, purchased the property and set about making it their own — not only as their residence but an office for their business.

“We have always loved the old original period-style homes and have taken this passion into our profession as builders of reproduction period-style homes. After building two new homes and establishing two new gardens for ourselves, I longed to renovate a property with ‘fine old bones’ that had established gardens,” says Gayle.

“We stumbled on the property that was being auctioned later that day but could only peer over the paling fence at the front,” says Bryan. “We returned to the auction and Gayle found herself bidding, as we had both fallen in love with the property from the moment we walked down the driveway and saw the cherry tree in blossom. It was passed in to us and we purchased it later that evening.

“Through Harry Gilham (of the Eltham Historical Society), we were introduced to Geoff Bradbury, who was then in his 80s and had grown up in the house. He gave us some photos, which prompted Gayle to trace the history of the house.”

The original Crown grant at Lot 11 Lavender Park Road was made in 1873. The home, originally built in 1917, was ‘updated’ to an Alpine look in the early 1970s, and then totally renovated by Bryan and Gayle, its new owners, from 1993.

When it came time to consider the future look of the house, many designs were considered but the one that inspired them the most came from a house they had seen in Unley, South Australia several years prior, hence the turret and double gable.

“We were locked into the levels of the existing house and the orientation. There was also a large gum tree that we worked around and the existing entry points so we eventually decided to put a garage at the back of the house which resulted...
We also wanted to keep the basic structure of the garden at the front which had stone walls and steps — eventually Bryan re-laid a lot of the walls because of the changing levels on the driveway, so we could accommodate a hard surface rather than the existing Lilydale toppings,” says Gayle.

“Our home was to be unique — not able to be reproduced exactly — because of the items and materials we put into it, and the love that was poured in by Bryan’s labour and my selections and research.”

When it came to the home’s layout and design, Bryan and Gayle had some clear ideas, generated through their years in the building and design industries. “Bring our own home, we wanted a kitchen and meals area but no family room attached, as we disliked the idea of having a television in this area,” says Gayle. “We wanted a separate family room—come—rumpus room, a formal lounge and dining room (as it turns out I have long outgrown formal entertaining), a large study in which we utilised an existing fireplace, and a master bedroom with ensuite and large walk-in robe (me being a hoarder). Also, there were to be three other bedrooms (one which would be utilised as another TV room), a bathroom, powder room and laundry.

“We also wanted to take advantage of the roof space for possible later development and used some large beams that we sourced cheaply to span the area — we have approximately four or five squares up in the roof. As our home is on a slope, we also wished to utilise the footing as under-house storage and a gymnasium.” Bluestone pitchers have been used as the footing, with reclaimed original handmade bricks in an apricot blend as the dominant wall facing. Rough-finish stucco, ornate hard plaster mouldings, made-to-order eave brackets and Colorbond roofing complete the exterior picture.

“Bryan loved bluestones and we bought some large pitchers from a man who also had a similar dream, but it hadn’t come into fruition. Bryan built the entire footing from bluestones and used an engine lifter to get them into position,” says Gayle.

Each room has many unique items, as the couple has included a host of original touches in the renovation such as original leadlights and pine four-panel doors and recycled Baltic pine and jarrah flooring, which all add to the home’s story. They also chose to maintain the original flooring which still has some Black Japan stain — fashionable at the time. “We purchased some original Baltic pine floorboards which were quite expensive, but when we went to lay them we noticed some had signs of boer. We panicked and started burning loads of it only to find out that the boers had well and truly ‘left the building’ — an expensive mistake,” says Gayle.

“When we stained the timberwork, I liked the honey colour of the old Baltic pine with just a clear stain, but I also loved the red mahogany of the red pine. Wanting to have both, some of the rooms featured one or the other. When we opened the meals area to join the lounge room we didn’t use, there was the problem of tying in the two stains on the timber reveals of the opening. We wouldn’t suggest doing that again.”

The sitting/rumpus room is their favourite part of the home. “The ceiling has been modelled on the Maryborough railway station (although it is much simpler) and we used the original lining boards that we found under the house to line the ceiling. Then we repeated the unique design and had some lining boards machined up in oak for the kitchen. The double-entry doors to our sitting room are from the State Savings Bank of Victoria and feature the original glass with the emblem ‘guaranteed by the State Savings Bank’,” says Gayle.

“This room boasts dark wooden floors, wonderful old double-hung colonial sash windows with transoms to three sides, two pairs of French doors to the outside, a reproduction fireplace and overmantle built from recycled timber from a Maryborough antiques dealer.
with original bevelled mirrors. I have made it my African room, with the interior design inspired accordingly. “The warmth and ambience created in this room — when the fireplace is burning on a cold winter’s night — is luxurious and comforting.”

The lounge room ceiling, although repainted, was inspired by the original design. The kitchen is new and features an original box leadlight window which has been painstakingly restored. “We bought a box window from Steptoe & Son and when we stripped it, some was different timber to the predominant red pine — as we wanted it stained, we had to replace these sections. We also had to do a lot of hand sanding to get the window to stain quality and then the diamond leadlight had to be re-done because it was buckled; however, our leadlighter, Kathy, was able to re-use the glass which was original with air bubbles in some pieces. We also had to have one sash re-made because it wasn’t original — if all costs and labour were added up it would be very expensive in today’s market. We also had to do a lot of hand sanding to get the window to stain quality and then the leadlight and see where it has been previously built a house for. I am sure he was thinking ‘where does this go?’”

“We have installed a larger-than-average period entry front door to house a leadlight and side lights. The original entry door featured a Kookaburra leadlight with the property also being named ‘Kookaburra’ — although it had long since been replaced with a more modern glass door.

“We have a mixture of reclaimed originals and some made by local artists who pour passion and soul into their work.”

The main bedroom’s coromice combines a Victorian gutter with a frieze to produce a unique design which, when I explained what I wanted to the plasterer, he just looked at me and said ‘you are realizing my dream’. The ceiling roses were hand-painted by a client of Bryan and Gayle’s, who they had previously built a house for.

The ensuite features a six-foot-long original cast-iron bath which cannot be called ‘claw foot’ as it has feet that are more like hoes! This is flanked by an original leadlight from an old hotel. “I can sit in the bath and study the leadlight and see where it has been patched up before we bought it,” says Gayle.

The main bathroom houses an old sideboard from Ballarat converted to a vanity and English tiles from Full Circle, Hawthorn. The study boasts an original fireplace surround and a brassleder ceiling — another idea Gayle had to ‘introduce’ to the plasterers.

The journey to this beautiful home was not all smooth sailing — living in the home while renovating on such a grand scale required tree removalists to control traffic and experienced periods of torrential rain required tree removalists to control traffic and experienced periods of torrential rain. Bryan says Gayle.

“I had no roof covering over the lobby area between the bedrooms and the living rooms and experienced periods of torrential rain that the carpenter, Bryan, could not cope with, hence it was very wet and cold. We had no heating except the little gas coal fire inserts during winter as the hydraulic heating hadn’t been installed yet. “On another occasion I arrived home before Christmas with a big Santa Claus and went to put it in the lounge room. The plaster was cutting corners in the dining room and plaster dust had spread throughout these rooms so that they appeared as if they were in a fog. My heart sank as I realised all the decoration work was ruined.”

“The corner window and position of the door in the TV room makes it hard to close the door, so this was a valuable lesson on planning for furniture placement. Because wisdom is acquired with experience I have no doubt that, should I have it over again, things would be different, but it is all part of the journey,” says Gayle. “I realise what an epic project this home has been, even down to removing 14 huge Cypres trees along the front boundary which required tree removalists to control traffic along the road, and then the subsequent erection of the fantastic brick and wrought-iron fence which we designed and Bryan built.

“Our home is a creative expression of our personality and we have done this just like an artist who pours passion and soul into their work.”

To view all the images above, go to www.bgcole.com.au

FLOORING

Lounge, dining, bedroom one and study: American oak with individually-crafted turned posts and fretwork detail in oak.

Dado panels with lining boards on walls.

 Doors: Some original Baltic pine framed doors, some made by a Ballarat joinery.

Tiles with a discontinued border.

Splashback: American oak with a mixture of reclaimed originals and some made by Bryan and Gayle.

Lounge, dining, bedroom one and study: Period American oak with individually-crafted turned posts and fretwork detail in oak.

Lounge, dining, bedroom one and study: Period American oak with individually-crafted turned posts and fretwork detail in oak.

Tileings: Tiled to dado height with borders and caps and dividing tiles, tile panels with borders.

Bedrooms: Minimal panels using original timber from entry, dressed with a frame to each panel.

KITCHENS

Cabinet doors and panels: American oak with individually-crafted turned posts and fretwork detail in oak.

Benchtop: Black granite.

Splashback: Tiled with a discontinued border.

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