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Discovering the classics

Not long ago it wasn't fit for even a ghost to live in, but some clever work has this grand old residence looking better than ever



FACT FILE

THE BRIEF

To revive a long-neglected stately home and open it to water views

THE ARCHITECT

Clive Lucas, Clive Lucas, Stapleton & Partners

THE BUILDER

A & DR Illes



A The back door looking out to the veranda with water views just beyond **B** Heritage architect Clive Lucas

Of the thousands of people who go missing in Australia every year, apparently a few hundred stay permanently lost to their former lives.

If there was a parallel with lost houses, this residence on Sydney's North Shore could have been it.

Built in the late 1890s, it was home to the eldest daughter of a prominent North Sydney family.

Heritage architect Clive Lucas says the family, who financed the work to build the first property on the street, insisted on keeping the house in the woman's name because her husband had no head for business and they wanted her to have some security.

Puzzle with a view

Positioned on a peninsula next to a reserve once known as a fishing, camping and hunting site for local Aborigines, the site had harbour views to the north and northwest.

However, the back of the two-storey house was a brick wall with only one or two small windows giving glimpses of the waterways on its doorstep.

"It was a nice, tight plan with no

long, nasty corridors but it did not take advantage of the site," he says.

"The back of the house was a dark full stop – so that after you closed the door you could have been in Paddington."

Indeed, there are several elements to this three-bedroom house that even an experienced heritage architect such as Clive finds puzzling.

"This house is intriguing," he says.

"The drawing room should be the grandest room in the house but there is nothing on the ceiling. The dining room has the most elaborate ceiling and cornice in the house. I cannot understand the hierarchy."

However, when Clive first laid eyes on it, the lack of decoration was the least of his concerns.

When the last of the family moved out and sold the house sometime in the 1920s, it was used as a boat-building factory of sorts before being bought by a couple who lived in it for years until the husband died.

His widow continued on in the house as it slowly fell into disrepair until it was finally sold after her death to the present owner in 2007.

Clive says the state of the house was the most likely reason why it sat on the market for some time.

"People were terrified of it because there was some structural movement at the back, the roof had failed and water was pouring in," he says.

"It was an old slum."

That sinking feeling

Describing it as "the original haunted house", Clive says it had been fire-damaged by vandals, with uneven floors downstairs and resident possums and pigeons upstairs.

"There was a little bit of white ant damage and the hall floor had the original tiles," he says. "They were laid in sand and the floor had sunk like a mattress in a country hotel."

Despite its condition, Clive says he could see there was life in the old house yet with the possibility of sympathetically modifying the original design to take in the views.

"It was a well-built house and it was very intact, even though there was movement," he says.

"I don't know why it didn't sell earlier because it is a fantastic site."



Brought back to life

With the owner committed to reviving the house, Clive called on builders A & DR Illes to undertake the painstaking restoration work and create spaces that would capitalise on the property's waterfront position.

First order of business was an expansive new bay window for the impressive dining room, which would overlook a new hardwood veranda and the Harbour beyond.

Before this, Clive says the dining space was dark and oppressive with just a small window to the northern side.

He still doesn't understand why a veranda or large window was not a part of the original plan.

"The original occupant's brother paid for the house but I don't think it was ever fully realised," he says.

"Every window was built to take shutters, the stair window had canes in it to take leadlight but it wasn't done all the way through.

"The house is very well built so no expense was spared up to a point because you could not really look out on to the back."

Having been damaged over the

years, the kitchen was remodelled and rebuilt by master cabinetmaker Ian Thomson with kauri detailing inside the cupboards and drawers.

A modern touch

Despite its classic lines, the kitchen provides modern functionality with an island CaesarStone benchtop and an electric stove in addition to the traditional stove.

"The original occupant's brother paid for the house but I don't think it was ever fully realised"

Clive says the owner was interested in reconnecting the house to natural gas, which had been cut off at the top of the street 30 years ago, but at a cost of \$10,000 thought better of it.

The new kitchen leads on to a new sun-drenched meals area overlooking the garden that stands on the original foundations of the property's old laundry site.

The sunken corner of the house – the only part built on sand – was restored with new footings. Upstairs,

reshuffling of the floorplan allowed for two bathrooms, a small linen closet, three bedrooms and a library.

After restoring the staircase, Clive says a new stair runner was commissioned along with new wallpapers and friezes for the living areas downstairs.

Although he has resisted the urge to add decorative cornices or plaster ceilings to the drawing room and other reception areas, Clive says the final result is perhaps more pleasing than the original.

"They were a frugal family – I don't think they lavished money on it. It is probably finished in a much nicer way now than when it was built."

Robyn Willis

MORE INFORMATION

A & DR Illes 9440 4811, illes.com.au

Clive Lucas, Stapleton & Partners 9357 4811, clsparchitects.com

Ian Thomson 0408 925 113, ianthomson.com.au

FINDING THE RESOURCES

Restoring an old house can be a challenging and, at times, frustrating experience. Here are some great Sydney haunts for those wanting to track down original or reproduction items.

*** How To Restore The Old Aussie House**

Ian Stapleton, \$39.95, Flannel Flower Press

A great starting point for anyone who has just purchased an old home and doesn't know where to start. It gives advice on how to research your home's history and the importance of retaining original features. Author Ian Stapleton is part of the firm Clive Lucas, Stapleton & Partners.

*** Chippendale Restorations** 9810 6066, chippendalerestorations.com.au

This warehouse space has an extensive range of original and reproduction doors and windows as well as everything from handles, light fittings and hearth tiles to mantelpieces, fireplaces and tin panelling. A great one-stop shop.

*** Sydney Ceiling Restorations** 9798 7433, www.sydneyceilingrestorations.com.au

Finding the right tradesman for the job can be tricky given old homes often require people with long-forgotten skills. Harry Klarnett has 45 years experience restoring decorative ceilings and has seen everything from water damage to foot-through-the-roof disasters. He can make original moulds to any design required.

*** The Heritage Building Centre** 9567 1322, heritagebuilding.com.au

A wealth of products including secondhand gates, doors, windows, floorboards, reproduction and original garden features, light fittings and more. Whether you plan on tackling it yourself or you need someone to do it for you, this place can advise you how to do it or put you on to someone who can.

*** Terrace House Factory** 9660 6768, terracehousefactory.com.au

With its great range of iron lacework and columns, this place is a fantastic resource for owners of terrace houses. Other items include bathroom fittings along with a good range of original doors, windows and hardware. There are also a number of traditional stoves along with some covetable early Kooka stoves at reasonable prices.

*** The Recycled Building Yard** recycledyard.com.au

This Holroyd site is the place to go for secondhand building materials with everything from recycled timber and roofing materials through to a wide range of secondhand bricks and sandstone blocks. They even offer a demolition service where materials are sorted for recycling rather than tossed into landfill.

C The dining room with new bay window **D** Modern mixes with traditional features in the kitchen **E** Original tiles were relaid in the hallway



Photos: Justin Lloyd