When John Cox and Georgina Philips bought a “scungy” 1857 Fitzroy terrace back in 2005, complete with “nasty” ’70s renovation and a sunroom devoid of sun, it was clear a complete overhaul would eventually be required. When the time came to renovate in 2012 they waited for architect friend Rema O’Neill to become available and set about reorienting and reviving the place with genuine sensitivity not just to the site but to the neighbourhood and its place in Melbourne’s recent history.

“(The house) goes deep into the history of white settlement in this place,” John says. “And Fitzroy is a remarkable place in Melbourne because of all those layers of history, and communities that flourish and decline and get forgotten. I suppose in a way we are custodians of some of that history and those networks of relationships. It’s a place that’s layered with stories for us.”

Reflecting some of the stories embedded in the original house by recycling materials (and restoring historical detailing like a crumbling bluestone feature wall) was critical to the clients. So, too, was redesigning the dark, cramped interior without extending the home’s footprint, encroaching on the privacy of neighbours or sacrificing the small north-facing garden to the rear.

A power of difference

Geothermal heating and cooling is just one clever feature of an unassuming Fitzroy renovation, writes Kath Dolan.
Rema’s design retained the building’s façade but reprogrammed the interior. The original front bedroom became guest quarters, and the old living room was transformed into a large, sundrenched bathroom with views to a side courtyard beyond. A steep, ladder-like staircase was replaced with two sets of stairs, allowing easy access throughout the ground floor to the new, sundrenched spaces above: a spacious master bedroom, a large study lined with floor-to-ceiling bookcases, and a delightful roof garden with seating and a bar-style ledge of recycled spotted gum and views over local landmarks. With deliberate playfulness the roof garden is accessed via the study’s large operable window. A north-facing door leads to a secluded upstairs living room, which overlooks the rear garden and links to the dining spaces below via timber stairs.

John and Georgina have chosen not to own a car, TV, dishwasher or microwave for years. They were keen to reorient living spaces for maximum light and energy efficiency, and to do away with fossil fuel technologies. They wanted comfortable accommodation for guests, a sunny bathroom, a rooftop garden, and an underground cellar for storing food and reducing their reliance on refrigeration – the major power guzzling appliance in most homes. “The fundamental thing was we wanted it to be as environmentally ideal as possible, maximizing design features, orientation, air flow, light in and out – all those sorts of things,” Georgina says.
The 4.5-metre-wide roof could only accommodate a 4kW solar system, which powers the home’s lights and appliances like the electric stove. In an unusual move for a narrow inner city block, geothermal technology was used for heating, cooling and hot water. Ceiling ducts and long copper pipes that extend 35 metres below ground suck cold air from the house in winter and exchange it with warmer air from below ground. In summer it’s warm air that’s extracted. “It was like a cool oasis in here on those stinking hot days,” Georgina recalls of their first summer in the house. “It’s working beautifully I have to say. I love it. And it does the hot water too.”

Their tips for anyone contemplating a renovation? Georgina says their biggest mistake was not removing their gas metre while building. They received hefty bills for six months until the Energy and Water Ombudsman resolved the impasse.

On the ground floor, service areas that had previously blocked solar access and garden views at the back of the house were relocated. In their place are a central dining room with the aforementioned bluestone feature wall – well lit despite its dark surface by the side courtyard opposite – and a sunken kitchen and meals area that opens directly onto the garden. This features a handsome, studio-style shed made from corrugated iron salvaged from the roof and an edible garden planted in wicking beds to reduce water requirements.

Below ground is the large cellar, accessed via a trap door and ladder, which initially posed some challenges for food storage due to water leakage and humidity. John and Georgina describe it as their tribute to the survivalist bunker and say it’s now functioning better but admit it’s a work in progress.
Their major recommendation is to be ambitious and think long term. “We would certainly recommend pushing ideas about energy,” Georgina says. “Really challenge yourself with energy use and getting rid of fossil fuels. If you’ve got the money it’s worth investing in that for the long term.”

Specifications

**Ceiling Insulation**
45mm polystyrene to outside of core-filled brickwork.

**Wall Insulation**
R2.7 wool acoustic insulation to framed walls.

**Floor Insulation**
Double sided Concertina foil under all ground floors.

Foilboard to underside of decking over cellar reflective side up.

Foilboard to cellar walls and to internal face of plant room.

**Existing Walls**
R1.5 wool insulation to battened out sections of exposed existing walls.

**Windows**
All new and existing windows double glazed.

**Photovoltaics**
4kW solar system.

**Heating and Cooling**
18kw ground source heat pump supplying heating and cooling via a fan coil unit in the roof and hot water service in the cellar. It also powers a chiller unit in the cellar.

**Recycled Materials**
Recycled messmate flooring, recycled spotted gum bench-top in kitchen and to roof garden seats and windows made from recycled Kodak factory hardwood.