

## RENOVATION #5

A new studio was added to Emma Algotson and Scott Drimie's century-old Herbert Baker heritage house in Parktown, Johannesburg. The main addition to the original building is a cantilevered glass box that seems to float above the courtyard on a vertical garden (see Big Idea #1).



BEFORE

# modern history

THIS HERITAGE RENOVATION IN JOBURG'S HISTORIC PARKTOWN JUXTAPOSES OLD AND NEW IN A WAY THAT REFRAMES AND REINVENTS THE PAST FOR A CONTEMPORARY FAMILY LIFESTYLE

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Renovating a heritage house is a delicate procedure. How do you honour its heritage, preserve its historical features and, at the same time, make it livable? Emma Algotsson and Scott Drimie, the owners of this small Herbert Baker house in Parktown West in Johannesburg, described by the Heritage Trust as the ‘perfect cottage’, wished to transform it from what was essentially a one-person house into a family home for them and their two children, **names and ages**, while meticulously preserving and restoring its original features.

The house was built in 1910 for Irish cartoonist Denis Santry, who did work for *The Rand Daily Mail* and *Sunday Times*. He jokingly named it *Kleine Schuur*, a reference to Cecil John Rhodes’s *Groote Schuur*, also built by Baker. Santry had his studio upstairs in the roof and lived downstairs.

Scott and Emma approached architect Nabeel Essa of Office 24-7. They arrived at a plan to make the ground-floor bedroom usable as the main suite, which would involve clearing out dry walling and built-in cupboards to return the rooms to their original configuration and create space. They added a spiral staircase (‘like

an umbilical cord’) up to the children’s bedrooms and pyjama lounge upstairs. Nabeel designed a bed unit with an extended headboard to divide the space, and create a dressing room and bathroom behind. ‘The smallness of the rooms inspired a kind of European or Asian style needed to use space cleverly,’ says Nabeel.

The larger part of the brief, however, was to turn the cramped, old-fashioned servants’ quarters into a flatlet and office. They had been added by a subsequent owner in 1936 by Baker’s partner, Fleming, but were also under heritage protection. Nabeel ‘carved out’ an ingenious guest suite from the existing space, but most dramatically, added the beautiful jewel of a glass box for the studio that floats above the courtyard behind the house.

Nabeel, Emma and Scott decided that juxtaposing the heritage and modern architecture was the best way to pay tribute to the original house. It was a way to frame the original and enhance their appreciation of it. ‘The new office creates views of the old house that weren’t there before,’ says Scott

Part of the reason the addition works so well is that it complements the existing proportions of the house.▷

#### BIG IDEA #1

##### TELL A STORY

**Building onto a heritage house is fraught with difficulties. Apart from the usual considerations, an addition to a heritage house is an opportunity to create a narrative or a dialogue with the building’s past. Not only does this addition of an immaculately proportioned glass box respect the existing structure in its scale, but it also provides an interpretation of it by allowing the owners to look back at the house in ways that were impossible before. Scott also added a mural based on a cartoon drawn by the home’s original owner, animating the new structure with details of the home’s history.**

FROM FAR LEFT The glass walls of the modern studio addition create views of the heritage house that did not exist before, enhancing the owners’ appreciation of it and also creating a more contemporary appreciation of the sweeping views to the south; stackable doors and a Juliet balcony open the studio to the elements, creating a tree-house experience. The mural is an enlarged cartoon by Denis Santry, the original owner of *Kleine Schuur*. The table and chairs are from Vintage Cowboys.



The addition, Nabeel says, was ‘an exercise in smallness’. ‘We had to get the scale, proportion and texture right,’ she adds. ‘Herbert Baker was very detailed. We had to get the detail right.’

The box also touches lightly on the original. Nabeel deliberately made a gap between the old house and the studio, so you physically have to leave the old building for a couple of steps to go out to the new. ‘You feel the junction between old and new quite strongly,’ she says.

The sense of lightness is also emphasised by the way in which the studio’s support structure is rendered almost invisible by the vertical garden, designed by Brendon Edwards. ‘All you see is the floating glass box,’ says Nabeel. ‘It’s almost like a tree house floating on organic matter.’ Scott adds, ‘It’s indigenous and matches the garden as much as possible.’

Inside his new office, Scott added a wall-to-floor mural of one of Santry’s cartoons, to continue the dialogue between old and new. Just as the original house functioned as a living and working space for Santry, now, 100 years later, that original function has returned. Scott works in the studio where Santry’s work animates the space.

The result is a beautifully preserved heritage house that has been transformed to support a modern family lifestyle. ‘It is a way of looking at heritage in a sustainable way,’ Nabeel says. ‘It makes it a living heritage space rather than a museum frozen in time.’ ◻

FROM ABOVE LEFT Scott’s office studio is the only addition to the house, and, in keeping with the small scope of the rest of the house, is only 60m<sup>2</sup>; the original domestic quarters have been ‘carved out’ in architect Nabeel Essa’s words from cramped additions made in 1936 to make a modern guest suite or granny flat; attic space has been used to create a light, airy bedroom in the rafters.

**Juxtaposing the heritage and modern architecture was the best way to pay tribute to the original house.**



**BIG IDEA #2**

**GOING UP**

Working within a small space with no opportunity to extend rooms without compromising the proportions of the house, as Nabeel put it, inspired 'a kind of European or Asian style needed to use space cleverly'. One example of this is the spiral staircase leading from the dressing-room area to the children's bedrooms above. While this example has a modern look and feel, it's quite a timeless design, suited to modern and heritage spaces. And best of all, it uses a minute amount of floor space. Likewise, the room divider/headboard is a way of dividing the space without interfering with the original room.



**LITTLE BLACK BOOK**

**Architect** Nabeel Essa, Office 24-7, 011-880-0018, nabeelssa.com  
**Building contractor** MDC Construction, 083-305-6960  
**Carpentry** (kitchenette and guest bedroom) John Dyke, The Cupboard Company, 083-266-9016  
**Custom wallpaper mural** Jennifer Kherlopian, Image K, 082-776-7638  
**Spiral stairs** Lynton Dennill, 082-477-0469  
**Vertical garden** Brendon Edwards, Installation Artist Landscaping, 074-103-9886  
**Vintage furniture** Colin Davids at Vintage Cowboys, 082-555-9555.

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT The courtyard outside of the kitchen became an unexpectedly central part of the renovation. A bathroom addition made in the 1960s was removed, revealing the original stonework. The courtyard is used as a lunch area, and connects the garden, the house and the stairs to the studio, making it a hub of activity; in the main bedroom suite downstairs, a spiral staircase was added, which provides direct access to the children's bedroom and pajama lounge; drywalling additions and cupboards were removed from the main bedroom suite to create space, and Nabeel designed a wooden division to separate the bedroom area from the dressing room, bathroom and spiral staircase; Scott and Emma with their two sons, xxxxx and xxxxxx in the courtyard.



xxxx the cat in the living room of the main house, a cosy book-lined space with a fireplace, wooden floors and exposed wooden beams.