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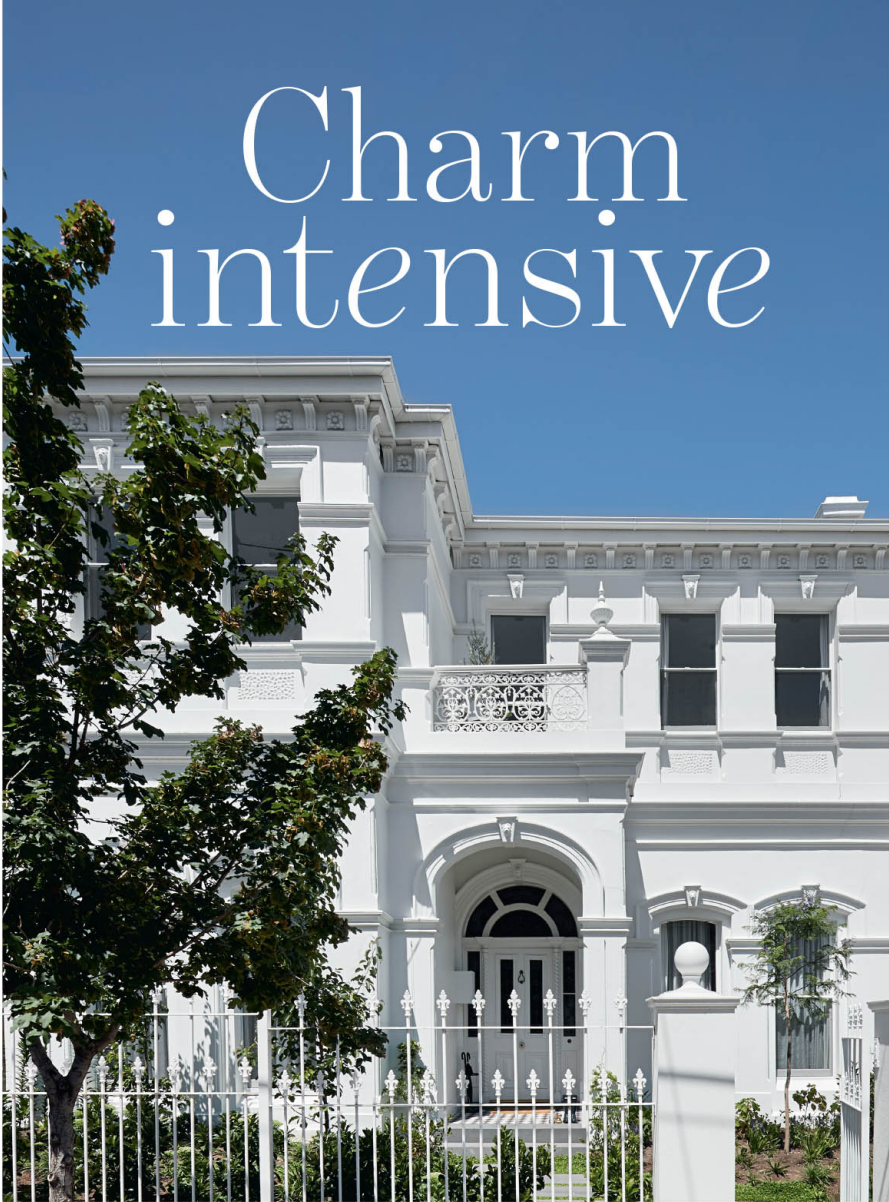
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## Sand castles

Blissful abodes with all-blue views



# Charm intensive



Playing for keeps, the owners of this Victorian manor called on Robson Rak to lavish all the love and attention it needed to stay theirs forever.

Photography **SHANNON McGRATH** Words **CARLI PHILIPS**

Melbourne HOME

This page Lighting up the entrance hall are the Vibia 'Flamingo' pendant from Koda Lighting and 'Dioscuri' wall light from Artemide. Adding to the warmth is the French oak flooring from Woodcut and the coloured Sean Meilak block sculpture from Niagara Galleries. Baxter 'Summer' upholstered bench and Gubi 'TS' marble-topped console with black steel frame, both from Criteria. Opposite page The facade of the grand Victorian-era home was "nursed back to life", says interior architect Chris Rak of Robson Rak.







Working on the renovation of this Melbourne grande dame in South Yarra was oddly fortuitous for Kathryn Robson of architecture and interior design studio Robson Rak. "My best friend was also interested in the property so she was bidding against the couple who eventually became our clients. So it happened that within a few days we were signed up. It's a small world," she says.

The house's classic beauty appealed to the homeowners who bought with the intention of reinstating its features – albeit with alterations conducive to contemporary family living. The architecture, Italianate facade and soaring ceilings charmed the family, who were moving to Australia from London where they had also lived in a period residence. "Despite its size it always had a lovely warm feel with beautiful light throughout and a sense of calm, even given its inner-city location. It just felt like a home," recalls owner Natalie, who lives in the house with her husband and three children. "I said to my husband on the day of the auction, 'Someone is going to buy this house and do something amazing with it. I think it should be us'."

As the couple had only viewed the property a week before and weren't optimistic about a successful bid, they confessed to not having done their due diligence in terms of structural inspections. On face value, it was in good shape, but after commencing works things started to unravel. "There were quite a few surprises and it actually proved to be a rather unhealthy Victorian in some parts," says Chris Rak of major

walls that almost turned to dust when new openings were created. On the roof, slate tiles unexpectedly crumbled upon minor works and termite damage was uncovered throughout.

"There was a lot we had to rebuild," says Chris. "Some people get seduced by grand Victorians but our clients understood it was a big place and because it had been sitting there for quite a while they knew there would be surprises. You just never know what you're going to find." Chris and Kathryn applaud the young couple for taking it in their stride. "Once we were underway there was not much to be done but push on," says Natalie. "Honestly, we loved the renovation process, the opportunity for creative expression and of course the privilege to restore this beautiful house to its former glory. The only negatives were the financial stress and the extended program – though that is long forgotten!"

The original entrance with its stained glass and elegant proportions remained but were updated with Vibia's 'Flamingo' pendant light and new French oak floorboards that line the length of the hall. The beauty of these occasional front rooms was reinstated as balancing decorum with everyday living was key to the brief. "Our clients are quite modern and sophisticated people so they didn't want the Victorian aspect to take over, but they do love a sense of formality," explains Kathryn.

Hinging off the central axis, to the right, is a guestroom with an adjoining ensuite previously only accessible from the corridor. To the left, two once-independent rooms are now connected by steel-rimmed glass doors for the sake of transparency and light. Facing the street is »



“Despite its size it always had a lovely *warm feel* with *beautiful light* throughout and a *sense of calm*.”

This page, from top The fireplace delineates the kitchen and living space and operates as a zone for the family to sit and chat around the hearth. In the main ensuite, a Parachilina ‘Aballs’ table lamp from Ke-Zu and Sean Meilak sculptures from Niagara Galleries perch on the custom joinery in Woodstock Grey Birch from Briggs Veneers. Encaustic floor tiles from Byzantine Design. Robson Rak designed hinged mirrors so the window behind could be opened and closed for privacy. An artwork by Kwong Man Chun from Niagara Galleries hangs over the ‘Jacqueline’ bed from Poliform with linen from Bedouin Societe in the main bedroom. George Nelson ‘Apple’ pendant light from Luke Furniture. Castiglioni ‘Gatto’ lamp from Euroluce. Ligne Roset ‘My Dear Sofa End Table’ from Domo. **Opposite page** View from the pool to the new rear extension and kitchen. Rather than create steps, Robson Rak added wide ledges to double as seating. Pool decking in silvertop ash from Britton Timbers. Adam Goodrum ‘Trace’ sofa and scatter cushions from Tait.



« the sophisticated sitting room, outfitted with a soft, pale-pink rug from Armadillo & Co and velvet Gubi ‘Stay’ lounge chairs from Criteria.

The library behind has been skimmed in a pale timber veneer inspired by the mahogany walls that traditionally might have wrapped an old reading room. “We wanted to stay true to the original style of the house,” says Natalie. “And while the front rooms may have a formal look, they still feel very relaxed and tranquil. The glazed doors can either flow from the living room, or be closed off into a cosier space.” Further on, existing poky rooms were reorganised to accommodate a connecting powder room with laundry, and compact study overlooking a courtyard.

A series of steps leads down to the vast open-plan rear wing, organised in an L-shape with dining and living areas and a pared-back kitchen with views to the swimming pool. A brick fireplace has been designed as a “psychological delineator to create different zones within the open plan”, says Chris of the central hearth. Upstairs, one family bathroom originally served three bedrooms so the floor plan was reallocated to accommodate four bedrooms with redesigned bathrooms and walk-in robes.

For better connection with the garden, dramatic bi-fold doors now open out flush onto a terrace. A set of wide ledges double as seating, dropping down to the mosaic pool and new landscaping by Mud Office. “There’s a young, formal funkiness to this family,” says Chris. “They are living in a classic, classy house but in a young urban way.”

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#### SPEED READ

» Robson Rak took on the challenge of restoring a classic but crumbling Victorian residence in South Yarra, respecting its heritage but updating and reconfiguring it for a sophisticated couple with three children. » The design studio's signature steel-framed glazed doors bring transparency and maximise light within and create an easy connection with the garden and swimming pool outside. » The elegant stained-glass entry hall was retained but updated with a glamorous pendant light and warm French oak floorboards. » Leather, limestone, steel and timber elements characterise the interiors of the new rear extension that houses the kitchen, dining and living areas.