

**THE SPACE**  
SUE GREEN



# Carlton's little shop of surprises

**AN OLD 'RABBIT WARREN' HAS BEEN BROUGHT INTO THE 21ST CENTURY.**

It's a conundrum: how to reinvent the dark and dingy spaces of an inner-city dwelling, yet retain its character, make it bigger and lighter within the same footprint, and not upset the neighbours or the council.

When Michael Bula bought an old, triangular corner shop in Canning Street, North Carlton, a double-storey rabbit warren of oddly shaped rooms, not content with those existing complexities, he added more.

Bula, a lawyer handling French property sales for Melbourne and an actor/producer with the Melbourne French Theatre, wanted to reinvent the rundown building. Not only did he want architects Linda Simons and Justin Holman, of LSA architects, to include living spaces, with an apartment for overseas visitors, he wanted to entertain up to 80 people, even to screen movies and hold cooking demonstrations.

"It was an unbelievable brief, a very complicated brief," says Simons, with heritage requirements for the building, dating from about 1890, making it extra tricky.

Says Bula: "I wanted to push the envelope and get as much as I could, but in such a complicated space that is not easy."

He describes the architects' work as "like a jigsaw puzzle", constrained by the street on two sides and a neighbouring building attached on the third.

The result: rabbit warren becomes La Maison de Maitre (the lawyer's house), three levels of cleverly interconnected, multipurpose spaces — comfortable inner-city living, workspaces and rooms for everything from cocktail parties to theatre rehearsals.

Simons and Holman used every inch



— built-in drawers tucked under stairs, a small study in the apartment entrance, storage under banquettes. And the building was extended upwards by 1.2 metres to accommodate the extra level, cleverly disguised as a parapet to meet council regulations that no extension be visible from the street.

The result: an enviable inner-city abode in which nothing is quite as it seems. It culminates in a balcony open-

ing from the apartment's kitchen/living area, capturing the superb city views not visible from the old shop.

Double doors open from the street into a high-ceilinged, triangular room, windows on two sides, a small powder room and storage area where once the shopkeeper stored ice-creams. Two vast, red drum pendant lights are a focal point, a blast of colour in this white, light space.

This large room, created from two by

**OWNER MICHAEL BULA (TOP LEFT) AND ARCHITECTS LINDA SIMONS AND JUSTIN HOLMAN IN THE VIBRANTLY RECONFIGURED HOME. PICTURES: PENNY STEPHENS**

removing a support column, is where Bula entertains and his actors rehearse.

Walk, Alice-like, through this room's rear door and, across a small hall, glass doors open to a red triangle of a room, the kitchen-diner area, four glass side doors opening to the street.

From the hall, with its own street entrance, dangling red pendant lights draw you up the original winding, red-carpeted staircase to a large living area (it would make a gorgeous bedroom), with attached study and powder room.

Down a few steps is a small laundry and the apartment's bed sitting room, study and bathroom. Then a bewitching climb up new, timbered stairs to its small kitchen and dining/meals area, the glass balustrade reflecting the sparkle of the Pluto light fitting by Studio Italia which fills the void and the mirrored splash-backs in the kitchen above.

Bula says the way the space has been used goes beyond the reincarnation of the old shop: "It has celebrated this area and what can be done with these buildings."

**DESIGN TIPS**

Use colour not simply to decorate a room, but to help define it, to enhance its purpose.

Paints and wall finishes, floor and window coverings and textiles such as cushions make a statement about you and about your home. Don't simply choose the fashionable or eye-catching — think deeply about your house and its history, your lifestyle and the rooms' purpose, how you want them to make you feel when you spend time there. Do

you want your lounge room to feel warm and enveloping or cool and uncluttered? Will a room be peaceful, a place for relaxation or quiet hobbies? Or will it be lively, filled with music and people? Colour choices — warm or cool, vibrant or quiet, cutting-edge or heritage — can help create this feel.

"This ox-blood red makes it a very intimate space," Linda Simons says of the Canning Street kitchen/dining room.

But the colour was not chosen in

isolation — it was part of a scheme for the entire building, with paint finishes, carpet, light fittings and banquette cushions relating to the house's history and to owner Michael Bula.

"A deep red starts as the interior focal colour, complemented by dark browns, warm bronzes and crisp whites," Simons says. "The rich colours nod to both the building's Victorian heritage and the client's artistic and theatrical pursuits, whilst visually linking the various spaces."

