



# Heritage home renovation

*With a small budget and grand aspirations, Smart Living Spaces architectural designer Sharon Robinson has achieved a stunning renovation of her Hayes Paddock home.*

Words Carolyn Enting. Photography Helen Jones

After a long search Sharon Robinson finally found the house of her dreams. A small semi-detached heritage home on the Waikato River. Armed with a limited budget she was crushed when her pre-auction offer was rejected but decided to go to the auction anyway. It paid off. She purchased the house for the very same price as her rejected offer.

For a couple of years she changed the

furniture around, thought about what she could do with the space, but then any thoughts of a house alteration had to be pushed aside when she decided to go out on her own and start her own architectural design company, Smart Living Spaces.

A few years into business, not ever expecting to be able to afford to do anything, it suddenly hit her what she could do to the house. "The spaces in this little house were cramped. My studio/office

was more like an oversized closet. The kitchen and living area had lots of wasted space and the interior décor was gloomy and very worn. It certainly wasn't a place I would show clients to nor invite into," Robinson says.

Her main criteria was to live by the design principals she had set for her architectural work and clients. "I wanted a warm, dry, light and clean space to live, that was healthy and easy to operate in.



"I wanted to also use every inch of the 60m<sup>2</sup> floor area, to give as much space to the office and living area as possible, given the bedroom space worked okay and would be too hard to change.

Storage also had to be considered, especially given there is no garage and only a little old shed on the property. Robinson also wanted to install a bath in the bathroom, which was already tight on space. She knew she'd have to be clever as to what structural elements she adjusted to keep her aspirations within her budget.

Key to Robinson's process was identifying what clearly wasn't working, and why, and also listing what did work and what could remain as it was. She listed what she could change, and separated out what would be nice, too, with the knowledge she would have to compromise on something.

"The biggest challenge in small spaces is to make every inch count," Robinson says. "This means the design has to be super clear and very carefully considered. In my experience, small spaces take longer to design than larger spaces, given there is little tolerance."

Robinson designed and redesigned the kitchen, considering how she would work in it, how it worked when entertaining, where the laundry would be, how it would work with the existing windows and doors. "I wanted a strong connection to the back garden, as I would often forget that I had washing on the line and never gravitated to that private space naturally."

The new dining room space had to also accommodate a table that would allow flow, connecting the hall, kitchen and living area. Robinson designed a suitably sized dining room table that reflected one of the design elements on the kitchen island.

Door swings were something she had to pay particular attention to. The lounge door had previously opened into the space which limited furniture. Robinson used two new barn sliders, one in the bedroom to allow better access to the existing closet

(queen sized beds weren't the norm in the 1940s) and also to use the existing laundry opening, which was uncovered without much structural alteration to free up functional space to the studio.

The bathroom door and glazed shower door had to work with each other and a hole in the shower door acts as a handle (and handy ventilation inlet, as the shower is glazed full height) to reduce intrusion into the space. "The basin and toilet had to be offset to allow the spaces to work but I managed to get the bath, shower, handbasin and toilet into the existing space," she says.

The new beam replacing the existing wall between the dining and kitchen areas has been expressed using a timber feature strip, made from the original shelving timbers from the old hot water cupboard. This feature strip has been

repeated to the sides of the kitchen unit. The timber benchtops have used approximately 20 per cent of existing studs, which once removed were de-nailed. The old nail holes have been filled in with black resin, to celebrate the recycled nature of the timber.

Lighting was carefully considered, especially to the kitchen, to give task lighting where required. The LED strip light to the tiled splashback blends in with the tiles so that when off, it's easy not to notice. All lights have been suspended from the ceiling to avoid penetrating the thermal envelope, and offering an opportunity to add interest with some pendant fittings.

"I wanted to use the exposed natural timbers as much as possible and contrast this with texture, rather than compete with colour. The colour palette is white on white with the timber and accents of black. I also didn't want the spaces to feel flat so I carefully chose textured wall paper and changed the cornice mouldings to give some expression to the hallway and existing ceilings," she says.

The hallway wallpaper was chosen as a paint over textural wall paper with

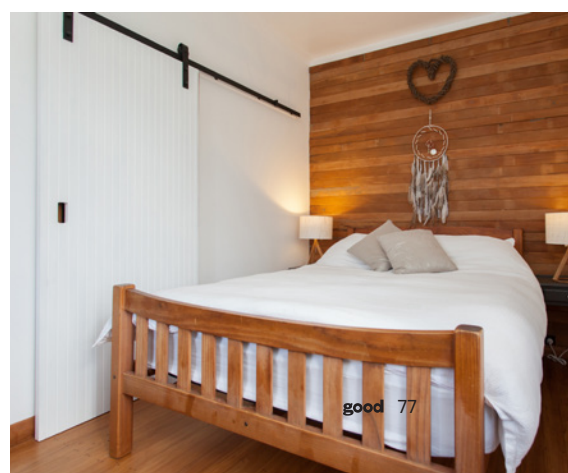
## "The biggest challenge in small spaces is to make every inch count,"

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### The stats

- A small, 60m<sup>2</sup>, semi-detached 1940s house in heritage area Hayes Paddock, Hamilton East.
- Heritage area rules limit what can be changed with the front and side faces.





One of the most important aspects of the renovations for Sharon Robinson was to use every inch of space.



**Before** Sharon Robinson took a 1940s semi-detached heritage home and with clever design ideas turned it into a beautiful functional home.

reference back to the 1940s wallpaper patterns, honouring the age of the home. The timber shutters in the kitchen add to the texture of the elements, playing on the vertically grooved country style fold-back pantry doors and barn sliders.

During the construction Robinson sanded back all the existing skirtings and rimu doors which remained or were re-used. She managed to destroy a couple of sanders with her efforts.

The old dirty green carpet was lifted up as was the vinyl in the kitchen and bathroom and the old rimu timber floor boards revived and oiled to give a natural warm healthy feel underfoot.

The exterior wall linings were removed and friction fitted Mammoth insulation installed. "It was now or never," she says. The ceiling and floors have been insulated, too. A new solar-ready hot water cylinder has been installed in the roof space, to free up floor area with access via an attic access hatch. Tongue-and-groove wall linings salvaged by the builders have been reinstated as two new feature walls and the original laundry wall lining, now located in the office, stripped back and blonded to be a subtle reminder of the original build.

The process, was supposed to take four to six weeks and cost \$60,000 maximum, says Robinson. In reality, it took 12 weeks and the budget almost doubled. "A stressful, busy and crazy three months," she says. "I have cried, learned, lost sleep,

celebrated, been amazed, been stunned and grown in confidence and knowledge through this process.

"The learnings and understanding of the challenges on building sites, the dynamic of tradies and how they affect each other, the expectations of timeframes and costs and the amount of energy and time it consumes as a client are invaluable for the way I now approach the process with my clients. It always costs more, takes longer and is more exhausting than the original perception, but is incredibly rewarding when I look around my spaces every day."

It's also been an opportunity for Robinson to walk the talk in her clients' shoes and prove to herself that strong independent women really can do amazing things. "The business survived the building renovation process, as did I. I hope my story inspires people, to believe it's possible, to not give up and remember the bigger picture when faced with day-to-day hurdles," she says.

She believes small smart spaces are becoming a more common housing typology in New Zealand. "They are more efficient to heat, easier to clean, harder to fill with clutter and just make sense in terms of our diminishing land and natural building resources. It's actually easy to live in a small space, it just needs to be designed to make the absolute most of what is available."



# Robinson's top 10 tips

## for building or renovating a small smart space

**1** Be clear on your 'must haves' and 'definitely nots'. The clearer you can be to your designer, the better considered your design solution can be

**2** Small spaces call for creative out-of-the-box thinking. Don't short change yourself by being stuck on a sketch or concept, be open to suggestions.

**3** Alterations surprise us with what's actually behind linings and new builds surprise us by what's actually in the ground. Invest in the appropriate pre-design tests and design reports.

**4** Have a realistic contingency and accept it is already spent before you start. The contingency is there to cover you for any surprises. It's like an insurance premium that you won't get back.

**5** Accept your timeframes are only your timeframes. You might want your project completed in a certain amount of

time, but you are using the services of professionals who have other projects on their workload and consent processes that aren't as quick as you would like them to be. Also be aware, you influence these timeframes as you are part of the team.

**6** Don't shop around for designers. You actually delay your project by shopping around based on price and timeframes. Designers are becoming more aware of this and starting to charge for fee proposal to avoid having their time wasted. Most designer costs are similar and if you get a radically cheaper price, ask what's been left out.

**7** Engage your designer or architect for site observation. This is an additional cost to the project, but legally a designer or architect doesn't have any obligation to you or your project when on site, if only engaged up to building consent stage. Any changes on site can be creatively tailored to work both with your

original design intent and any surprises solved using knowledge and experience from your builder and designer. What you spend on this may save you more overall.

**8** Accept changes are going to cost you more and the earlier those changes are made, the cheaper they are. Accept you made the best decision with the information you had available at the time.

**9** Any building project requires your input and time. Set aside time for it and be mindful that tradies and professional people generally keep regular working hours, so respect their time when they accommodate you outside of this.

**10** Enjoy the process. Remember what you're doing is something many people dream of doing and many more never think to dream about as it's simply not in their realm. After the stress has settled, remember the funny stories – they make great dinner conversation. **g**