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Heritage with an Edge

Text / Payal Uttam Images / Maree Homer

It feels like you're in a treehouse,' says interior designer Brendan Wong of the master bedroom of the Victorian-era home he designed in Sydney. 'It's on a more intimate scale to the rest of the house and the layering of natural materials creates a sense of retreat.' With simple walnut side tables, an ochre leather headboard above the bed and subtle linen drapery opening up to lush views, it's no surprise this is Wong's favourite room.

Creating a feeling of cosiness in the imposing 1890s residence wasn't easy. 'When empty, the scale and grandeur of the home is actually quite overwhelming,' he says. The two-storey property once served as a private hospital and later a 22-room boarding house with separate entrances. Wong was set the task of maintaining the grandeur of the 150-year-old structure while infusing the space with warm yet elegant furnishings for a family of five.

'The client was excited about the opportunity to pay homage to the existing architecture, yet inject a contemporary sensibility,' says Wong. 'It was clear we were not filling this home with faux Victorian antiques.' To create an element of surprise, the designer placed a striking faceted emerald green foyer cabinet in the entrance. Inspired by the large granite boulders in the rear garden, the glossy form resting on black Japanese floorboards evokes a sleek sculpture in an art gallery.

Wong describes the statement piece as 'unapologetically contemporary', a description that applies to many items scattered throughout the period home. A newly acquired landscape painting by Alexander McKenzie in the adjacent dining room complements the green colour palette of the foyer. 'The artwork is placed in such a way that it almost feels like a view to a distant landscape beyond,' says Wong. Matching dining chairs in emerald-coloured velvet by Lelievre Paris add a further sense of drama.

A near-invisible lucite desk paired with a vintage chair from Los Angeles forms a clean divide separating the dining area from the formal sitting room. 'The desk takes

pride of place, giving the owner who enjoys creative writing a powerful position within this grandly proportioned space,' explains Wong. Behind it sit two toffee-coloured armchairs by Oly San Francisco facing an inviting button-tufted sofa.

Perhaps the most unexpected pieces are the custom mirrors that evoke folded origami paper and appear to almost float above the two marble fireplaces. Wong describes the undulating pieces as 'modern artworks in their own right that offer reflections that are edited and unexpected'. Family heirlooms including a baroque piano offer a striking contrast and contribute an old-world charm. Wong explains that the room was intended to function like a traditional parlour: 'It's a place for conversation, enjoying the piano, reading and writing.'

Reminders of the home's history are subtle but ever-present. Framing the towering 3.5-metre-high ceilings are ornate over-scaled cornices that once serviced gas lighting. Wong painted the walls a soft grey to highlight these period details. The colour also offsets the white doorframes and skirting boards.

Asked how he managed to balance old and new in the home, Wong replies, 'The furnishings are not recognisable from any one period — heirlooms are mixed with contemporary bespoke pieces and also subtle hints at the 1940s and 1970s. This gives the feeling of an interior that has been assembled over a period of time — not just 'then and now' but everything in between.'

From shagreen finishes to hand-cast bronze detailing, every room is a tapestry of textures and materials. Wong explains that he hoped to create 'a rich immersive experience whereby finer details continue to reveal themselves.' This idea of exploration is a thread that not only runs throughout the home but also through Wong's practice. As a designer who is constantly pushing himself to venture into new terrain, he explains: 'I work across properties from all eras and enjoy the journey of discovery that comes with it.'



The light, airy entry of this Eastern Sydney home features a Spillray light fixture from AXO Light and flowers from Grandiflora



At the opposite end of the hallway, the emerald green custom-designed foyer cabinet resting on black Japanese floorboards gives the home an element of surprise



Custom library shelving is tucked beside the marble fireplace with a custom mirror that evokes folded origami paper



A custom lucite desk with a vintage desk chair from Los Angeles takes pride of place in the formal sitting room. Near the window is a pale grey button-tufted sofa



Two armchairs by Oly San Francisco upholstered in toffee-coloured mohair sit beside a baroque piano, which is a family heirloom

The dining room features a custom macassar, walnut and ebonised oak dining table by Brendan Wong with chairs in emerald-coloured Sultan velvet by Lelievre Paris. A newly acquired landscape painting by Alexander McKenzie adds drama to the space





The minimalist master bedroom with its leafy outlook is Wong's favourite space in the home



An expansive ochre headboard custom-designed by Wong takes centre stage in the master bedroom. The elegant walnut side table is matched on the other side of the bed

The bedroom has a calm colour palette, with a custom chaise by Wong and Hockney drapery fabric from Elliott Clarke

