



Hardly slumming it

A dad-and-daughter team have designs on Melbourne. By Alison Barclay

Jeff Provan may live in “the slum part of Toorak”, but his house is a work of art – truly his own. The founder of development group Neometro designed and built it himself and daughter Nina is happy to go home for reasons other than a good feed.

“I can always tell a Neometro building, even if it’s a project I am not familiar with,” says the newly minted interior designer. “They age so beautifully. Even in a large complex like this” – she’s in the cafe of Neometro’s new and grandly groovy Harper Lane apartments in St Kilda – “it doesn’t feel like you are living in one of 60 apartments. Something about it feels comfortable.”

Nina’s favourite home – a DIY disaster in Hawthorn that Jeff magicked into a *Belle* house of the year – inspired her to complete design studies at RMIT, while Jeff and his team did what Neometro has always done best – bringing odd, noisy, inner-city scraps to residential glory. Founded in 1985, Neometro’s love of “abject” materials such as polished

concrete and unpainted brick, spliced with exhilarating colours, was considered bonkers in that gilt-ridden decade, but soon set a new standard for cool.

Jeff enjoyed the ’80s “because you could buy a site that no one else was looking at, and unlock its potential”.

“Whether it was down a back lane, along a railway line or near a canal, we have done all that,” he says. “If you had the design skill to take a risk, you could add a lot of value to it.

“We did a couple of warehouse conversions, we got exposed to that young professional market, and all these people wanted warehouse conversions too. Warehouses were hard to come by, so we built some properties that resembled the warehouse feeling – lofty spaces, open plan, pushing the boundaries of where the bedrooms were.”

Neometro now has \$70 million worth of projects in the works. Among the newly-mades are Harper Lane, finished last April; sleek townhouses at 279–285 Bank Street, South

Melbourne; and South Yarra’s 10 Darling Street flats. The firm is also building Panama House in Smith Street, Fitzroy.

But for every solid success, there’s a netherworld of the never-made that Jeff has learned to live with.

“The site you want you never get,” he says. “You go through all the studies, you miss out on it, but then you’ve done your research for when something else comes along.”

So when a site near his Toorak home popped up, he pounced. Six Brookville Road – to be built next year – will have five two-bedroom, single-level apartments and one three-bedroom penthouse. The dwellings will range in size from 105–226 square metres, plus terraces, with prices starting from \$1.475 million. The \$13 million project will have a swag of Neometro’s low-maintenance favourites, such as hefty columns, brick masonry, natural sand render and timber shutters atop bluestone window-sills. Most of the dwellings will face north – Jeff has always been big on passive



solar benefits – and private courtyards or terraces will ensure good indoor-outdoor flow.

“The interiors are more pared back, with a softer palette, from what we normally do,” says Nina, who worked on the design. “If they are downsizing they might have a large library or a lot of stuff. We have to provide a lot of storage. They might have extended families over for Christmas, so they need flexible space.” Hence sliding doors will join studies to living rooms, walk-in pantries will flow into laundries, porcelain bedonia tiles and Miele appliances will keep kitchen fuss to a minimum. However, the Neometro quirk will persist, this time in the form of black veneer fireplaces and wild parquetry.

Jeff says downsizers are the likely buyers, but he hopes families will take a look, too.

“It’s close to Hawksburn [shops], and it’s a more affordable entry into the Toorak–South Yarra market.” ■

For details on Six Brookville Road, visit neometro.com.au