

MODERN GREEN HOMES

Sanctuary

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BACKYARD
BUILDS SPECIAL

BACKYARD BONUS

Garden rooms,
studios & home offices

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PLUS

Flood-resilient extension
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Family affair

LOCATION Preston, VIC • WORDS Rachael Bernstone • PHOTOGRAPHY Daniel Fuge

This flexible new backyard studio in Melbourne's inner north has already accommodated singers, artists and musicians, and will continue to support living and learning into the future.

Even though this backyard studio is only a year or so old, it has already hosted various people and uses, living up to its flexible and adaptable design. Built in the garden of a house owned by Helen Soemardjo in Preston, Melbourne, it is currently home to a musician friend of the family; Helen's daughter – who lives in the main house – also uses it for studio recording, and in the future Helen plans to host large multi-generational dinner parties here.

Helen and her family came up with the brief for the studio project together, with Helen overseeing the build and the whole family benefitting from having access to the space. She approached Nicola Dovey of Drawing Room Architecture, impressed by an extension that Nicola had completed nearby, and was glad to discover she was interested in undertaking

such a small-scale building.

Originally conceived as a music, textile and massage studio for her daughter and son-in-law's businesses and creative pursuits, the range of possible functions has expanded since it was completed. "Since I moved over to this side of town I've been immersed in the work of singers and musicians, and I thought it would be lovely if the studio became a venue for people to stay and practise and teach. We've had several musicians staying there," Helen says. "It's a very flexible space, and I'm looking forward to being able to use it myself for short-term stays and slow dinner parties." The surrounding garden has also continued to evolve, allowing the new structure to settle into its setting and look like it has been there for many years.

At Helen's request, and in line with Drawing Room Architecture's ethos, Nicola incorporated sustainability and accessibility considerations into the design of the 60-square-metre studio, which is located on the footprint of the home's former double garage (it was removed and largely recycled). The site, nestled into a rear corner of the block on the northern boundary, was chosen



At a glance

- 60m² all-electric studio with a range of uses
- Creative design for solar access and daylight in an unfavourable spot
- CERES Fair Wood recycled timber cladding



↑ Floorboards are FSC-certified engineered timber over an insulated concrete slab. Cupboard doors lining one side of the small kitchen and dining space conceal a laundry and storage.

to avoid encroaching on the established garden and chook shed. Unfortunately though, the house next door blocks access to northern light, meaning this was the least ideal location from a passive solar point of view.

“Helen wanted the studio to have lots of light, a lofty ceiling and a sense of space, even though that would be a challenge due to its location and the small available footprint,” Nicola recalls. “But we were both committed to making it work.”

The final design draws in daylight through high north-facing windows set back from the boundary, as well as from windows to the east and south. “It isn’t ideal to have western windows in a small space as they let in late afternoon summer heat, so they were kept to a minimum,” explains Nicola. “We also limited southern windows and double-glazed them, which

along with highly insulated walls and roof creates a well-sealed building envelope.”

In keeping with this strategy that sees the southern half of the building flooded with natural light, Nicola placed the bathroom, storage and tucked-away ‘nook’ space on the northern side and located the main space to the south, playing with ceiling heights to create different spatial qualities in each area.

“When working with a building volume, you don’t need to make the whole area lofty; one half can be cosy with lower ceilings,” she says. “It then becomes a game of contrasts. In Helen’s studio, one side has compact 2.4-metre ceilings while the main space ceiling reaches up to 3.5 metres. The main challenge for the project was ‘Where does the sun come from?’, and once we worked out that geometry, we could start solving for everything else.”

It’s a spatial arrangement that works equally well for creative pursuits and for Helen’s future uses. “The nook is long and narrow and the ceiling is lower, which makes it a cosy area,” Helen says. “The main room feels delightfully big, and the beautiful windows show you the garden.

“One of the most important things in a small space is storage, and Nicola has given us masses of cupboards,” she continues. “Plus, the studio only needs a small amount of furniture to set it up for a variety of different uses, keeping it open and light.”

Having agreed upon the design and chosen the building materials – including a simple pitched roof that gives the studio an almost agricultural shape, and reclaimed rough-sawn timber for the external cladding from CERES Fair Wood – construction started in May 2020. Covid



← North-facing high-level windows admit light to the main portion of the studio, and allow for the venting of warm air at night in summer. A built-in plywood storage unit keeps the tucked-away 'nook' behind it private.

→ The nook and bathroom along the northern side of the building have a lower ceiling, creating a cosy atmosphere.





↑
Reclaimed macrocarpa boards from CERES Fair Wood were used to clad the studio. They have been left to weather to a silver-grey.

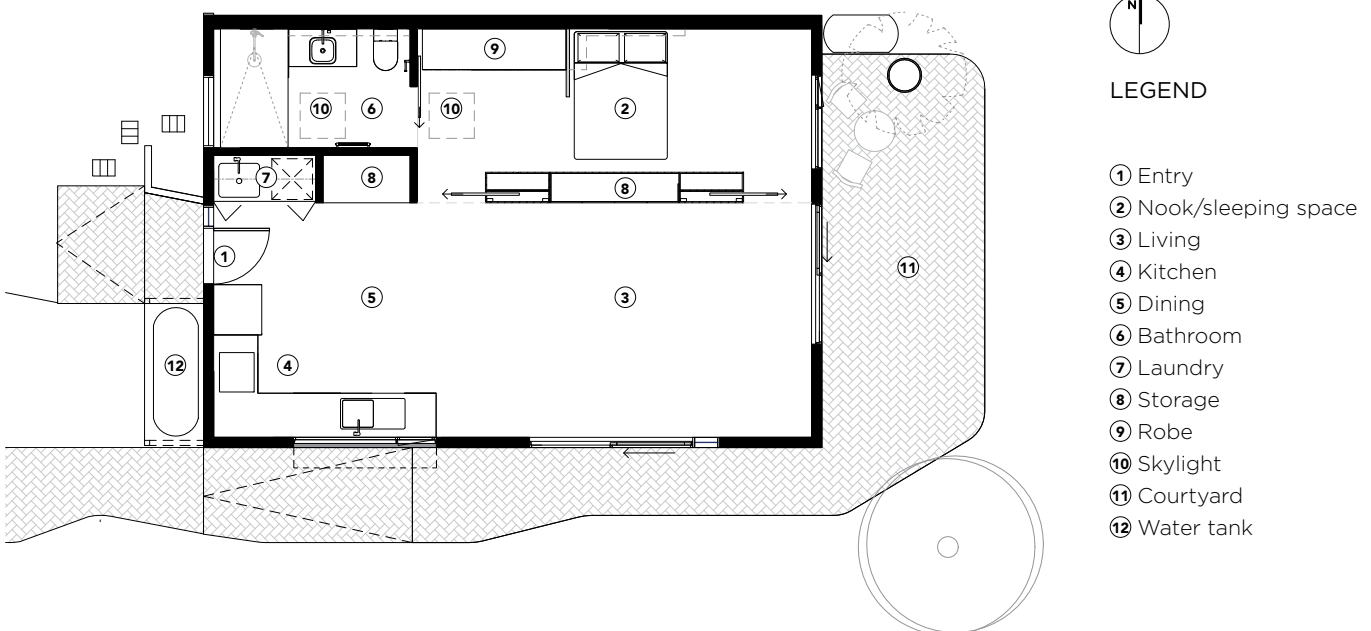
impacts delayed the original construction schedule by about three months, but Helen says that despite this, the build was smooth.

Since the project was completed in May 2021, Helen's daughter and son-in-law have overhauled the surrounding garden with the help of local landscaper Rodney Afif, including removing the concrete driveway and reusing the pieces to create stepping stones and crazy paving. And the studio's timber cladding is weathering to a nice grey, so it blends in. "Now, when you are inside the studio looking out, it's just gorgeous; it's worked out very well," says Helen.

Visitors are also impressed with the space, she reports. "Everyone says the same thing: 'It's so calm and peaceful', and it is. A lot of that is due to the garden outside, the high windows, and the colours, including the blonde plywood.

"The peace and quiet in the studio is something really special, with the beautiful lighting work by Nicola, and the outlook to the sky," she continues. "It's opened up whole new ways of living in and using the backyard, which we are all really enjoying." 5

FLOOR PLAN



HOUSE SPECIFICATIONS

HOT WATER

- Rinnai Hot Flo 80L electric hot water system

RENEWABLE ENERGY

- 5.94kW solar PV system on main house

WATER SAVING

- 2 x Aquaslim slimline rainwater tanks (3,000L total)

PASSIVE DESIGN, HEATING & COOLING

- High-level north-facing operable windows set 2m back from boundary, to bring in daylight and purge warm air; roof designed to shade windows in summer
- Only one western window for bathroom ventilation plus a small pane next to the front door
- Skylights to bathroom and nook space
- Design for cross ventilation
- External awning and small wall shield entry door from weather and hot western sun

ACTIVE HEATING & COOLING

- Daikin Alira 6kW reverse-cycle air conditioner
- Whitehaven ceiling fans

BUILDING MATERIALS

- Timber frame construction
- Concrete slab floor with Havwoods engineered floorboards (FSC-certified)
- Colorbond Klip-Lok roof
- CERES Fair Wood reclaimed macrocarpa rough-sawn cladding boards
- MaxiPLY birch plywood joinery and wall linings (FSC-certified)
- Insulation: Knauf Earthwool batts to ceiling (R5); HD batts to walls (R2.5); PIRMAX PIR panel insulation under slab (R1)
- Smartstone engineered stone benchtops
- Tiling kept to a minimum; leftover tiles from architect's recently completed project used
- Reclaimed red brick and reclaimed concrete from old driveway for garden paving, seating and ramps

WINDOWS & GLAZING

- Binq PEFC-certified Victorian ash-framed double-glazed doors and windows; frames sealed with Quantum Aquaoil
- Velux FCM double-glazed skylights to bathroom and rear nook space

LIGHTING

- Ceiling-mounted downlight cans, wall-mounted lighting and pendant lighting with directional shades, all LED
- LED external lighting with motion sensors

PAINTS, FINISHES & FLOOR COVERINGS

- Wattyl and Dulux low-VOC interior paints
- Linseed oil to plywood walls and joinery

OTHER ESD FEATURES

- All-electric studio
- Compact structure on footprint of existing double garage
- Structure sited to minimise impact on established garden



DESIGNER

Nicola Dovey, Drawing Room Architecture

BUILDER

Daniel Chowne, DC Building

PROJECT TYPE

New build

LOCATION

Preston, VIC (Wurundjeri Country)

COST

\$400,000

SIZE

Studio 60m²
Land 650m²

ENERGY RATING

6 Stars

ENERGY ASSESSOR

BEAC

INSIGHTS

“The only available space on the block for the studio was along the northern boundary, so there was no way of having north-facing windows at ground level. What was possible was north-facing high-level windows set two metres back from the boundary, to bring daylight down into the main living area. This was the driver of the roof form: the roof pitches upwards towards the north where high windows run the length of the building.”

Nicola Dovey, architect