

DON'T MOCK FEDERATION

By Jeanette Leigh

The Age newspaper, Domain section

Heritage architects visibly blanch at the mention of mock Federation. Slap on a finial or a gable, create a band of coloured brickwork and voila, you have 'Federation'. Spec home builders try with limited success to imitate the style. Original Federation homes reflected the way of life of early Australians, the character of a newly emerging nation and the building materials that were then available. Nowadays these homes are highly sought after period pieces. Around 40 years ago you couldn't give them away, now the cost of a heritage home, be it Californian Bungalow or single fronted cottage, is exorbitant.

Part of our nation's early search for an identity included its architecture. Climate and the need to create a style of building design that was more Australian led to the creation of the Federation style. There are a relatively small proportion of original Federation homes left around Melbourne and a plethora of mock Federation homes being built on housing estates. For purist heritage architects like Daniel Meszaros, this is architectural anathema.

'These spanking new buildings are supposed to be like the 100-year-old ones. They come in kit form and need no design expertise whatsoever. They have a few gable ends with timber slats. When Federation houses were first built they were a new style. Those architects had the guts to do something different as we should be doing,' says Meszaros.

The Federation style (spanning 1888 to 1918) was more asymmetrical in form than Edwardian. The style was applied to everything from charming cottages you see around the northern and western suburbs to luxury mansions in areas such as Camberwell, Hawthorn and Canterbury. They're a mixture of Queen Anne, Victorian and Californian bungalow styles, which are characterized by quirky roofs, terracotta Marseilles roof tiles, tuck pointed red brickwork, gables, finials, turrets, ornate timber work, picturesque lead light windows, and often Australian flora and fauna is patterned into timber and glass work.

The homes were practical for the turn of the century lifestyle. An endearing idiosyncrasy of a Federation house is all the little nooks and crannies that were created often to house certain pieces of furniture like writing bureaus or a piano. Fireplaces were a focal point of a room because they were the main source of heating. This does not generally suit our modern style of living.

'A lot of these old houses aren't practical for current living so people build on additions. The old spaces were set up with formal living and dining rooms, master bedrooms and 2 or 3 other bedrooms, a bathroom, laundry and kitchen. People nowadays don't use formal living rooms. They're looking for extra space; the open plan and family room at the back and a study,' says architect Peter Barton.

A heritage architect takes a different approach to creating an extension on a Federation house believing that creating a slavish copy of the original home can give a poor result. Certain characteristics are maintained to complement the style. The rooflines will be similar and similar roofing materials employed so they blend in and often full-length picture windows replace the small box windows favoured in those days so there is plenty of light and a great view of the garden.

Architect and Managing Director of Archicentre, Robert Caulfield says old style houses have a number of drawbacks.

'They can be dark and hard to heat. A better aesthetic can be achieved by employing a modern aspect that blends in. Using modern materials in the right way, in the context of the old way means you can't quite tell where the renovation stops and starts. One part of the home looks newer than the other part, but the bricks all match, materials match reasonably, but you've got all the comforts of the modern house, open plan living and central heating without any of the extension laughing at the old part,' says Caulfield.

Rather than trying to replicate a heritage house Robert Caulfield believes a better result is achieved by extracting the essence of the style, understanding the aims of the original designers and applying them to modern materials.

'When I'm designing a new house to fit into an area where there are a lot of Federation homes I like to think about it this way; if the designer in the 1920's had modern building materials and dishwashers at their disposal, how would they have designed the house. I take their philosophies, apply new materials and planning systems and create the requirements of a modern home.'

Dan Meszaros likes to maintain the feel of the old style in an extension while combining the contemporary by adding a bay window, creating little nooks or having articulated rather than straight walls. He says it costs a bit more but it's nice to do.

Developers create lots of hybrid styles like Colonial or Tuscan however the interior is no different to any other modern home. The selling point is that people are buying a new home with 'character'. Like fashion, architectural styles are revived but cost and dedication will dictate the effectiveness of the representation.