



Modern Midcentury

In deference to architect Anatol Kagan's original plan for their home, a family in Melbourne makes the most of their midcentury house's modest footprint.

By RACHEL GALLAHER



OPPOSITE: The owners of this Anatol Kagan–designed house in Melbourne, Australia, requested that the living room be kept intact during their home’s renovation by local firm Kennedy Nolan. Vertical western hemlock slats reference the home’s midcentury roots. **THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT:** The dining chairs, chosen by the homeowners, are a 1960 design by Australian furniture designer Grant Featherston. Kennedy Nolan embraced a triangle motif throughout the house.

WHEN ANATOL KAGAN MOVED TO MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA, IN 1939, MODERN ARCHITECTURE HAD NOT YET GAINED POPULARITY ON THAT CONTINENT. An émigré architect originally from Russia, Kagan arrived via Berlin and London and worked at several established firms before he partnered with friend and fellow Russian émigré Yuri Blumin to form the firm Blumin & Kagan. Their collaboration was short-lived, as wartime restrictions soon halted new construction across the country, but the firm’s most lauded building—a brick box factory in the Brunswick suburb of Melbourne—prefigured the local boom in modern architecture, in which Kagan became a pivotal figure. In 1949, he launched his own firm, Anatol Kagan & Associates, and started to design the flat-roofed, geometrically stacked homes

that would cement his name in the architectural canon.

One such project, built in 1951 near Melbourne’s Studley Park, has served as home base for David and Janine since 2007. Clocking in at just over 2,000 square feet, the two-bedroom house felt a little cramped by 2018: over the years, David’s mother, three children, and two Siberian cats had been added to the household. The couple loved the history and heritage of their home and had no desire to move or demolish and rebuild, but it was clear that additional space was a pressing necessity.

“The challenge became how to transform the 1950s space into one that would meet the needs of our family,” David wrote to GRAY in an email. “The central conceit of Kagan’s design is that of a flat home consisting of different-sized

squares sitting on a sloping triangular block. We wanted to retain the angles of the home, as well as the footprint, to preserve Kagan’s carefully considered proportions.” The couple also wanted to redesign the kitchen to better accommodate appliances, improve flow to adjacent rooms, and bring in natural light. Outside, they hoped to add a patio and a pool to better unite the yard with the structure it surrounds.

After consulting with Janine’s brother and sister-in-law, both architects in Melbourne, the homeowners hired local architecture firm Kennedy Nolan to lead the remodel. “We weren’t seeking to create a 1950s museum but rather something respectful of the home’s 1950s origin,” Janine wrote. Kennedy Nolan had experience working with heritage houses, and founding director Rachel Nolan »

The homeowners drew inspiration for their kitchen from the full-scale model of Julia Childs's kitchen at the Smithsonian in Washington, DC. Kennedy Nolan used a sage-and-white checkerboard tile pattern to honor the era of the house's construction.



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understood the importance of retaining the spirit of Kagan's original design.

"When they were built, these houses were incredibly modern for the time," she says. "We tend to forget that because we look at them through the lens of the present. They seem old and quaint [now], but it was a really exciting time in [history]. There was an energy and positivity for the future back then."

It was also a time when people generally lived in smaller houses. To give the homeowners the space they needed, Nolan expanded one end of the house to add a third bedroom and a powder room. The kitchen and dining area were better connected by the removal of a door and the expansion of the opening between the two rooms. The kitchen gained square footage as well as a new banquette that, according to Janine, is

a favorite perch for humans and felines alike. It also received a boost of aesthetic inspiration from the full-scale replica of Julia Childs's kitchen at the Smithsonian in Washington, DC, which the family, who previously lived in New York, visited in the early 2000s. Its influence is seen in the pegboard storage on the southeast wall and the open shelving. A George Nelson Ball clock takes pride of place—it has been on display in every house the couple has lived in since they were married in 2005.

Taking a cue from the property's native plants and the homeowners' penchant for sagey greens, Nolan used corresponding hues as accents in paint and tile throughout the house and complemented them with warm-hued vertical wooden slats in the hallways, living room, and kitchen. A recurring triangular motif, most prominent in a

steel cutout in the streetside house number sign, appears around the house in various forms (a cutting board, a side table, a stair railing). Furniture, chosen mostly by Kennedy Nolan's interiors team, is neutral and streamlined, with a set of Scape dining chairs by Australian designer Grant Featherston tucked into a Carrara marble dining table by Antonio Citterio. Nolan notes that the bold graphics and wooden details capture the midcentury DNA of the house, while the contemporary furniture helps the overall look remain fresh rather than antiquated.

"A lot of people aspire to more, more, more," says Nolan. "But this family recognizes that what they have is very special. They feel like custodians of the architecture, so we helped them make this house the best version of itself." ❄

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