



TO THE MANOR BORN

Rob Mills Architect's reverent addition to a grand country homestead near Victoria's Yarra Ranges plays second fiddle with aplomb but is an architectural gem in its own right.



THESE DAYS, IT SEEMS unusual when architecture is subservient. This is a time when just about any shape you can think of can be created on a computer and realized in built form. Grand architectural gestures are found everywhere, and entire cities can stake their reputations on extravagant architecture. So it is unusual to find a design brief asking for a new building that plays second fiddle to an existing one.

Such was the case, though, with this addition by architect Rob Mills to an 1889 homestead near the Yarra Ranges in Victoria. Located about two hours east of Melbourne, the original house is grand, dominating the expansive property on which it sits. It has been in the family of owners Anna and Gavin for decades, but with the birth of their third child pending, the time had come for expansion. Undertaking a relatively major construction project with two young children around and another on the way was a significant act of courage for the couple.

Anna and Gavin had considered extending the house before. The local council rejected a previous proposal – which would have replicated the existing Federation architecture and incorporated an adjacent cottage once used as maid’s quarters – so the couple sought a different approach. They called on Rob, an old family friend, for assistance. So it was that the near-transparent modernist addition was born. “This addition pays respect not by replicating the original style,” Rob says, “but by being contextually harmonious with the existing building.”

It’s this harmony that makes the addition so sympathetic. The house is visible from the main road that reaches beyond the front fence of the property. Inside the main gate, a long and curvaceous driveway meanders through thirty majestic oak trees and curls around the back of the house. Glimpsed through the trees, it’s not even immediately apparent that the addition exists, despite it being around the same width as the original building to which it is appended. The new structure is finished in dark tones that make it recede into the landscape. The rise of the land is visible through the new building’s glazing, further diminishing the visual impact on the original built and natural environment.

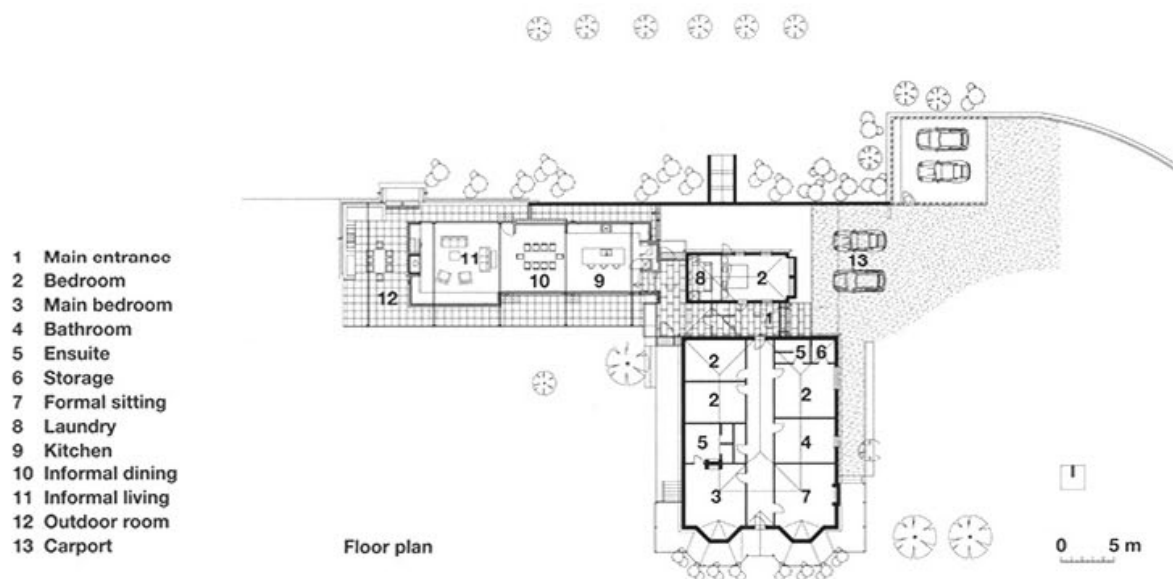
The full extent of the addition’s visual sorcery is apparent inside. The original homestead, grand though it is, has small windows that show little of the sweeping views on offer. The transparent quality of Rob’s design stands in sharp contrast: the lightness that allows it to hide in the grass also allows it to breathe in the surrounding vistas. There is a touch of Dr Who’s TARDIS at play here. From the outside, the building hardly seems to be there. From the inside, it seems as big as the outdoors.

At the top of the driveway, a two-car garage has been built on a grit-surfaced car court, reinforcing the visitor’s sense of arrival. By removing an old lean-to kitchen and laundry and covering the area between the homestead and the maid’s quarters, Rob has created a surrogate front door for the property and a warm and contemporary space that welcomes residents and visitors to the house. Bluestone tile has been laid in the reception area beyond the new front door, and what was the exterior of the cottage is now an exposed brick wall in the entrance. The maid’s cottage is now a bedroom for one of the kids.

An elbow in the entrance portico obscures the new addition from the front door. Once you pass this chicane, the glass pavilion reveals a new kitchen, dining and living area with a fireplace and a day bed that doubles as storage for the kids’ toys. Natural light fills the room. The program’s deceptive simplicity further emphasizes the design’s lack of ego. The story here is about the sweeping landscape beyond the glazing and the accommodating embrace the house gives its occupants.

The kitchen is an all-white affair with stainless steel appliances and a ceiling-mounted rangehood. A beautifully scaled central bench acts as a preparation area for the cook and as a meeting place inside the pavilion. The refrigerator is integrated with the storage behind American oak joinery that is matched in the living area’s joinery and day bed. To achieve the desired milky effect, Anna limed the oak and then painted it white. The joinery is exemplary and indicative of a great working relationship with a local builder. The run of the grain is consistent across joins, giving a sense of seamlessness to the room, freeing it of distraction. The floors are also American oak, lightly stained. A custom-made timber dining table accommodates family and visitors and sympathetically echoes the hues of the floor and wall.

Ultimately, this house is about relationships. There are the relationships between the homestead and the addition, the family and the architect, the house and the land, and between light and white, heavy and dark. The resolution is impressive: rigorous and considered, yet elegant and uncomplicated. Successful execution of the program here has changed the focus and function of the old homestead. It still stands as an imposing edifice on the hill, staunchly surveying all around it, but its main role is now to house sleeping quarters and a recently renovated bathroom. Rob Mills’s modernist box, echoing the spirit of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, is now the centre of life and energy in the house. It’s the focal point for a young family, but also an appropriately respectful nod to a grand old lady of the district. **CHRISTOPHER MOORE**



PREVIOUS PAGES: The new pavilion projects from the flank of the old homestead as a single flat plane. **THIS PAGE, TOP:** A muted, earthy colour palette reduces the visual impact of the addition on both homestead and landscape. **BELOW:** The roof extends beyond the walls to create a deep verandah.









ARCHITECT

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PRACTICE PROFILE

Medium-sized practice focusing on high-end residential projects.

PROJECT TEAM

Robert Mills, Katie Cromie

BUILDER

Hedger Constructions

CONSULTANTS

Engineer TD&C
Conservation Nigel Lewis

PRODUCTS

Roofing Steel post-and-beam frame; Bondor polystyrene cove panels **External walls** Steel portal frame; rendered brick **Internal walls** Plaster; American oak **Windows** Commercially framed sashless windows with Pilkington ComfortPlus glass **Doors** Solid timber doors lined with American oak; Gainsborough Architectural door furniture **Flooring** Honed bluestone; American oak **Lighting** Clipsal C-Bus automation system; downlights; selected feature lighting **Kitchen** Smeg ovens and induction cooktop; Qasair rangehood; Albedor Kacey cabinet doors in Wilsonart 'Designer White' laminate; Wilsonart 'Designer White' benchtops; Häfele drawer systems **Climate control** Mitsubishi aircon; open fire **External elements** Bluestone retaining wall; natural concrete paths; brick and rendered barbecue area **Other** American oak day bed and feature wall; custom sideboards in 'Black' Laminex Lamiwood with Häfele track system

TIME SCHEDULE

Design, documentation

3 months

Construction 7 months

FLOOR AREA – NEW ADDITION

162 m²

PROJECT COST

\$375,000

PHOTOGRAPHY

Shannon McGrath (pp. 14–17)

Tim James (pp. 18–20)

PREVIOUS PAGES: The shelf on the left of the picture conceals drawers for storing toys and can be converted into a day bed. **THIS PAGE:** Minimal detailing and neutral colours inside the pavilion serve to emphasize the delightfully bucolic outlook.