

HOLDING *Court*

REINVENTING REDCOURT: A STATELY YET DECREPIT 1888 MANSION IS RESCUED AND GIFTED WITH MODERN RELEVANCE INSIDE ITS VIGNETTED ROOMS.

PHOTOGRAPHER **EARL CARTER** PRODUCER/WRITER **ANNEMARIE KIELY**



THIS PAGE: dedicated to meditation, the White Room was conceived as a colourless space in which the mind could easily empty. The universal blanching of object and art includes Poltrona Frau's 'Vesta' leather chaise and 'Regolo' leather end tables (available through Corporate Culture), an Edra leather 'Brenno' sofa from Space Furniture, flokati floor rugs, custom-made velvet floor cushions and a ceiling installation, *Sissinghurst* (2011) by artist Naomi Troski.

OPPOSITE: John Warwicker's white-on-white painting *Vita* (2011), hangs above a white-washed fireplace, the mantelpiece of which serves as a plinth for a sentry line of all-white antique chess pieces. **Details, last pages.**

Conjuring a mood of dark introspection, owner/investor Adam Garrison and his creative director John Warwicker amplified the original effect of the Great Hall by painting the timber panelling black as pitch. They decorated it in the dialect of an eccentric English manor: Spanish Art Deco club chairs competing with Louis XV tapestry chairs; a Chinese opium-bed coffee table; a 1960s Italian brass trumpet lamp; a vintage 'Delphi' sofa by Erik Jørgensen; 'Etch' brass pendant lights by Tom Dixon (available from Dedece); and two digital print and oil on linen works by artist John Young, *Figure Study XXXI* and *Figure Study XLII*.

Seemingly at odds, the phrases 'preserving the past' and 'building the future' form the defining mantra of Melbourne investor Adam Garrison, a publicity-shy doer who creatively rescues old buildings from the bulldozer. To those now conjuring a mental picture of a tweed-wearing National Trust zealot intent on freeze-framing architecture in the era of its inception, stop! Garrison is not the type. Rather, he affects the unassuming air of a Silicon Valley software mogul (neat sneakers, hoodie and jeans) and makes big business of the late art critic Robert Hughes's belief that it's better to recycle what exists, to avoid mortgaging a workable past to a non-existent future.

Before ripping into the backstory of Redcourt, the landmark Armadale residence that Garrison spent four years and untold millions rescuing from the ashes of ignominy, let's get acquainted with his brand of adaptive reuse. He bankrolled and creatively briefed the redevelopment of Melbourne's neo-Renaissance GPO into a thriving retail hub. He co-founded socially responsible restaurant Fifteen with celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, and is currently creating a six-star eco-resort (with Vue de Monde owner/chef Shannon Bennett) out of the Art Moderne mansion of Burnham Beeches, a 1930s estate, originally home to Aspro magnate Alfred Nicholas, on the edge of Victoria's Sherbrooke Forest.

Yes, Garrison is a *bon vivant* with a brilliant eye and a social conscience, but he doesn't think a structure is good because it is old — he thinks it is old because it is good, and thus preserves character without compromise.

So, back to Redcourt, the mansion built by glass and timber merchant Edward Yencken in 1888 to the design of architect Joseph Reed of Reed, Henderson & Smart, the firm famous for the State Library of Victoria and the Royal Exhibition Building. According to historic records, Reed's exuberant Queen Anne architecture — a confection of Tudor-style half timbering, turned porch posts, ornamental spindles and stained glass — passed through the hands of a series of eminent pastoralists, politicians and mining entrepreneurs (all coincidentally owners or breeders of racehorses, one of whom, BHP founder W.R. Wilson, named his horse Redcourt after the residence). In 1935, the property was repurposed into a guesthouse, after which it was bought by the Ministry of Education for the residency of music students, before slipping into abject neglect and ultimate government sale in 2009.

Garrison recalls his first walk-through of the once-glorious structure, set in a near-acre of neglected garden, that had been deconstructed into 18 miserable bedsits. "Probably 800 to 900 people turned up for the first open for inspection, at which one well-known property investor eye-balled me and said, 'Adam, this is all yours.' I replied, 'No way! It's too far gone even for me.'" Sitting in the restored Great Hall of the building he now calls home, reflecting on his backflip, Garrison says that many of his creative friends suggested he could work his magic with it, while many of his business fellows advised that he'd be an idiot to do so. "At some point I obviously jumped into the 'creative crazy' camp," he says. "The house just had such a strong emotional pull."

Rollcalling the artists and craftspeople who were thrown the brief of 'preserving the past and building for the future', Garrison identifies John Warwicker of London art and design collective Tomato as the project's creative director. "I walked around with him dozens of times, absorbing each room before deciding on an overarching theme," Garrison recalls. "The central concept was to achieve a universal language, but to create different dialects within each space, then add the layers of creatives."

With his refined Japanese aesthetic, fashion designer Akira Isogawa conceptualised the music room as an exotic Bedouin tent, designing around an Edison phonograph that had belonged to Garrison's great aunt (a protégée of Dame Nellie Melba). >



The Active Room is so called for its stimulating mix of media and multicoloured art. **THIS PAGE:** two pigment prints from John Warwicker's series of digitally abstracted photos of cities, *Time/s/pace* (2011), hang above a B&B Italia 'Athos' storage unit in glossy anthracite from Space Furniture, set with two glazed orange Chinese jars. **OPPOSITE:** the large abstract expressionist work, *Redcourt Boogie Woogie* (2011), by artist and Redcourt creative director John Warwicker, determined the saturated brights and Modernist tone of the furnishings: a Vitra 'Polder XXL' sofa by Hella Jongerius and B&B Italia 'Series Up' chairs by Gaetano Pesce (all from Space Furniture), plus Bonnie and Neil hand-printed cushions.



THIS PAGE: against the south wall of the Great Hall sits a large antique console supporting a 13th-century statue of the Buddhist deity Guan Yin, from Graham Geddes Antiques. Above hangs John Warwicker's black-and-white photograph, *Clouds of Unknowing* (2011), a composite of 18 images. This vignette says much about Garrison's spiritualism and his quest to reinhabit the house with soul. **OPPOSITE:** a feature of the Eastern-inspired, first-level music room, styled by fashion designer Akira Isogawa, is a 1920s piano roll, given to him by choreographer Graeme Murphy. Isogawa's studio embroidered the roll with flowers and birds, photographing the result and printing it onto silk for coordinating floor cushions.



LEFT: the study counterpoints the ethereal White Room with muddy blacks, leather-bound books and a wall of gilt-framed Dutch-style still-life paintings. **ABOVE:** artist David Bromley's garden sculpture of leap-frogging children serves as ghostly reminder of the many lives lived within this landmark estate. **BELOW LEFT:** the master suite's luxurious marble bathroom is one of owner Garrison's contemporary concessions to modern life. **OPPOSITE:** the 'Bromley Bedroom' is by artist David Bromley, who drew from the nostalgic visual vernacular of *Boy's Own* annuals to create this dreamscape, filled with art, furnishings and objects customised exclusively for Redcourt. **Details, last pages. For more information on some of the pieces in this house, see Sourcebook on page 219.**

< British-born, Australian-based artist David Bromley spoke in the nostalgic language of the *Boy's Own* annual in a children's bedroom, painting Enid Blyton-esque narratives in dreamy dust-jacket blues and greens. Warwicker also drew on his UK heritage, steeping the Great Hall in the visual vocab of the eccentric English manor — all dark panelling and decorative cross-pollination.

The off-shooting spaces aesthetically respond to the activities within: "The White Room is just that," says Garrison of the quiet space in which shape, surface and structure dissolve for the mind-emptying purpose of meditation — "nothing to over-stimulate, just room to reflect". Its climate of contemplation is enhanced by Naomi Troski's ceiling installation of cord-strung white netting gathered into shapes suggestive of cumulus clouds. The adjacent study counterpoints the White Room's ethereal effect with space-swallowing black walls, one of which Warwicker swamped in gilt-framed, Dutch-style still life paintings sourced from op shops and the odd auction sale. The Active Room — named for its focus on lively conversation, loud music and television viewing — features Warwicker's wildly coloured abstract art, the dominant colours of which determined the 'brights' of the room's Modernist furnishings.

"Every single item, in every single space, needed to speak the dialect of that room," says Garrison, singling out the dining room as a very Melbourne conversation of multiculturalism and sport: John Young's Chinese-infused artworks preside over a 16-seat dining table made from timber (reclaimed from the Ponsford Stand at the Melbourne Cricket Ground). "It's had Heston Blumenthal, Thomas Keller, Ferran Adrià and other world-famous chefs sitting at it." And, of course, Shannon Bennett, who customised a Redcourt menu and catering facility that feeds off an on-site cellar, preserving room, cheese and meat-curing room, and organic garden.

"I wanted to create an environment that fostered a cultural and artistic exchange," says Garrison, who is legendary for hosting jazz afternoons, gourmet evenings and poetry readings by such Redcourt regulars as actor Jack Thompson. "Some people don't care about old buildings, but they are defining, contextualising and encase the character of a civilisation." Or, translating from the truisms of Danish philosopher Kierkegaard: Life must be lived forward, but it can only be understood backward. **VL**

