

# HOME STYLE

**JOHANNA LEGGATT**



## Down to earth

This traditional home's modern extension is made from a surprising material

**R**UTH Rengasamy grew up in a rammed-earth home in Melbourne's Yarra Valley and loved the way it was so well insulated — it was delightfully cool in summer and warm in winter.

"My parents had a handbook and they built the rammed-earth home themselves," Ms Rengasamy said. "The home always had such a nice feel to it."

As the name suggests, rammed earth is made up of natural raw materials such as earth, chalk, lime or gravel.

When Ms Rengasamy and her husband, Raja, started to plan the renovation of their down-at-heel California bungalow in Brunswick, in Melbourne's inner north, they were determined to include some rammed-earth walls.

Architect Steffen Welsch, of Steffen Welsch Architects, was only too happy to oblige.

"The whole idea of a home is that it is a shelter; it protects you from the outside world. And the rammed-earth home has that quality," Mr Welsch said. "It's very solid. Whatever happens on the outside, you feel protected."

### EARTHLY DESIRE

An old lean-to at the rear of the bungalow was knocked down to make way for the new extension, which features the rammed-earth walls.

The earth was gathered from a nearby quarry and mixed with lime to add stability.

"The closer the quarry is to your house, the more contextual the renovation is. The colour of the soil relates to the place the soil comes from," Mr Welsch said. "And as you dig the earth out of the ground and put it together to make the walls, the process is very low impact on the environment. It's less processing than for concrete."

The walls add a sense of raw beauty and natural texture to the extension, which features the main bedroom, a study, a laundry, and the kitchen, meals and living area.

It's not only the materials that are somewhat unusual, though; the extension's shape is, too.

"We didn't want a box on the back," Ms Rengasamy said. "The backyard faces south and so to capture more of the morning light, we added a curved extension that curls around the yard. Now, we have this beautiful morning sunshine."

### FRESH LOOK

The front of the home has also been given a facelift, which was no small feat.

"It was a bungalow needing a lot of love and it was pretty rickety when we bought it," Ms Rengasamy said. "All the character had been stripped out."

The couple, who share their home with their toddler son, did consider tearing down the house, but were concerned about the impact on the streetscape.

"There is a bunch of bungalows in a row and they all match, so we thought there was a lot of value in keeping that street frontage," Ms Rengasamy said.

The house was restumped and the original weatherboards replaced.

Mr Welsch said the front of the house, which faces a cul-de-sac, was opened up.

"We put French doors on to the front spare bedroom so you can easily access the front yard," he said. "It was about connecting the home to the neighbourhood."



Photos: Rhiannon Slatter

### HOME IMPROVEMENT

The house now includes spaces for children, guests and parents, and has communal and transitional areas.

The new extension is marked by a difference in flooring, which changes from timber in the old part to polished concrete in the new.

The new kitchen is one of Ms Rengasamy's favourite spaces. It features a big island bench, Corian countertops and expansive views to the outdoors through windows galore, including a curved bank of glass doors.

"I used to dread cooking," she said. "We were living in a rental before this renovation and we had just had a new baby. I felt like I spent so much time in the kitchen and I couldn't see outside. Now, in this kitchen, I don't even feel like I am inside."

She said even on a dark winter's day, the new living zone was bright and cheery, and she was "more than happy" to spend the whole day at home with her toddler.

"He can be outside happily playing and there are so many vistas, you don't feel trapped or contained," she said. "We are so lucky to be able to live here."

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