



# Let the son shine

Leading interior designer Greg Natale takes his family's '70s-style house in western Sydney and gives it a modern edge, writes **Claire Bingham**. Photos **John Fotiadis**.



**M**other and son may seem an unlikely coupling for a house renovation, but not when your son is one of Sydney's leading interior designers.

The Punchbowl residence of Francesco and Michelina Natale – parents of Surry Hills-based designer Greg – has been the family home for the past 27 years and had remained unchanged until its renovation began in 2002. The house now looks gorgeous in a style one could call “’70s Italian contemporary fusion” and demonstrates how styles from different eras can unite happily.

Sharing the story of how the Natales came to Punchbowl, Greg relates how his father (engaged to his mother at the time, who was to follow shortly) came to Australia from Calabria in southern Italy in 1956, initially moving to Surry Hills, then further out west, attracted to Punchbowl for its big blocks of land and the then-Italian community.

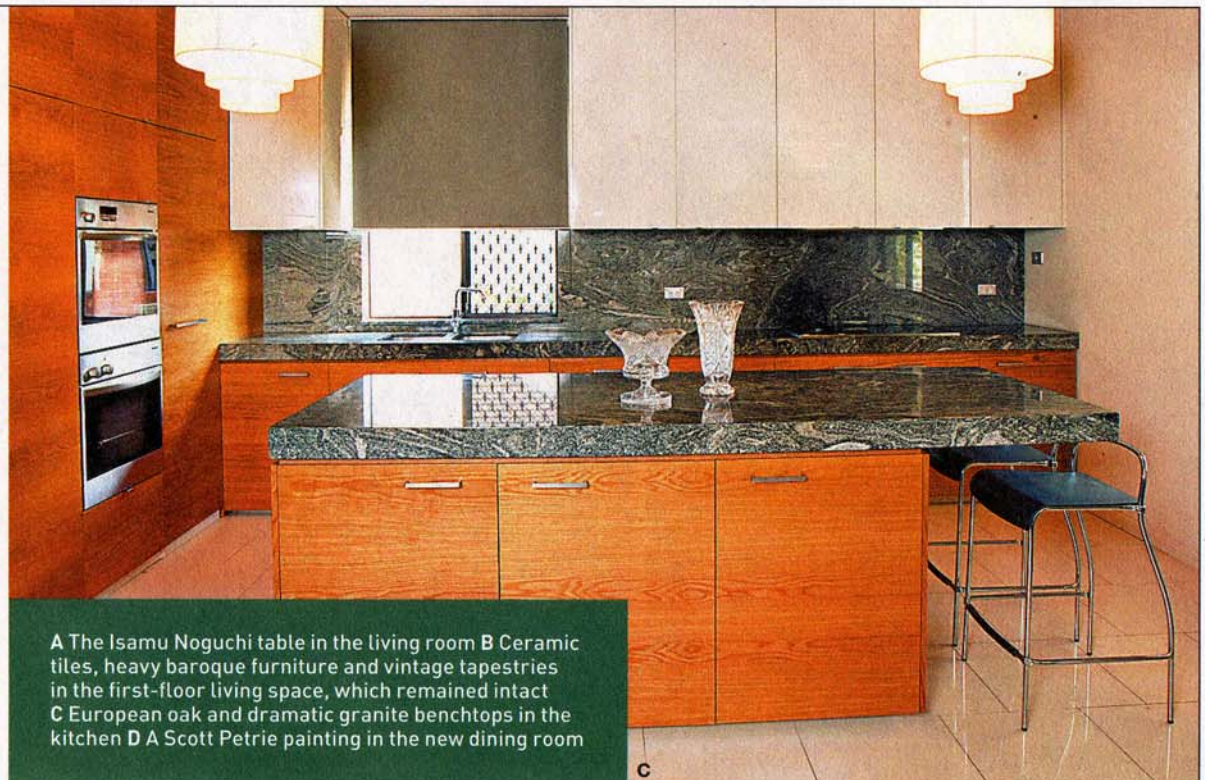
Of course, the family relocated during that time, and three houses (incredibly, all in the same street) later, they moved to No 53 in 1978 and have been there ever since.

Explains Greg: “My parents moved here in the late ’70s and the renovations began in 2002, taking about three years. For the past 25 years my mother has complained about the design of the house, with its pure ’70s design. They had no idea about interior spaces back then. It was such a bad era for design.”

## **Make it modern**

Rejigged with a look more in keeping with the Natale designer name, the main focus of the brief was to open up the rooms into a more expansive





A The Isamu Noguchi table in the living room B Ceramic tiles, heavy baroque furniture and vintage tapestries in the first-floor living space, which remained intact C European oak and dramatic granite benchtops in the kitchen D A Scott Petrie painting in the new dining room

“The '70s was such a bad era for design. They had no idea about interior spaces back then. For the past 25 years my mother has complained about how badly designed the house was”

and open-plan kitchen and living area, with lots of light flooding through.

“This used to be the kitchen,” says Greg, pointing to the sofa and the now non-existent wall which used to have arched doorways leading through to the dining room (now the smart granite-topped kitchen).

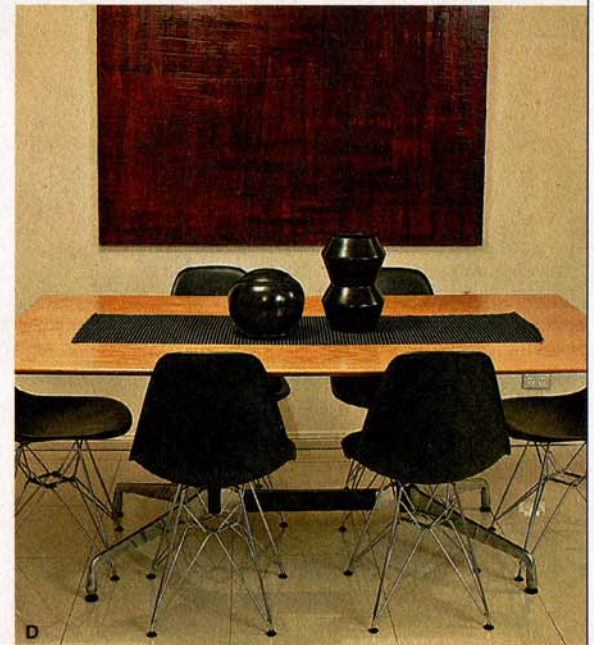
“This was the room that everyone would gravitate to, and my mother couldn’t handle all the people in such a small space. For 27 years there was only a small window in the kitchen, with a piece of furniture in front where the new french doors now stand. Also, the old dining room was so small – far too small for us. I have four sisters, three of whom are married with children, and that’s only immediate family.

“The old house was all dark-green carpet, dark-green tiles and dark-green laminate worktops, so besides changing the room layouts structurally, my mother wanted the house lightened up too.

“That was really the basic brief – to reorganise the house and go really modern. My mother was tired of dark, old furniture and wanted a bright house that was easy to clean.”

The house is now a creamy beige and white space with an ivory ceramic-tiled floor. In the kitchen, European oak and dramatic granite benchtops liven up the space and serve as a modern reincarnation of the original '70s vibe.

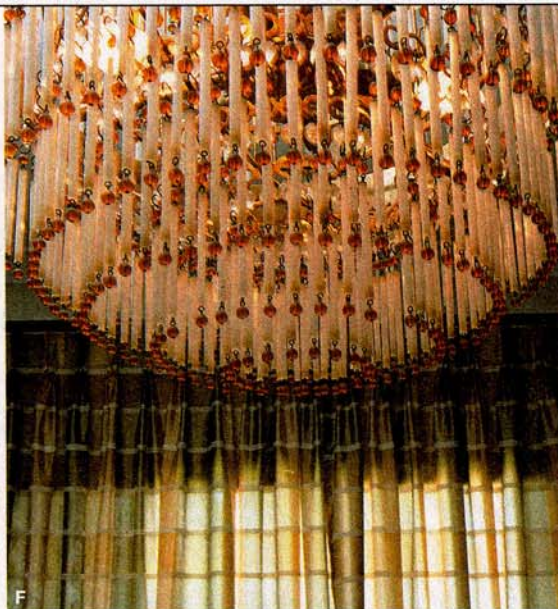
Following on with the change of materials, the furniture has also been revamped, →26







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E The seamless ceramic-tiled bathroom with built-in shelving F The ornate chandelier in the formal dining room, which has new checked curtains G The main bedroom, with brocade bedspread H A portrait of Greg's sister, Anna, hangs in the formal dining room



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with a mix of vintage Italian pieces contrasted with classic items such as the Isamu Noguchi (the Japanese-American artist and designer) table in front of the sofa.

"And my mother picked these," says Greg of the chairs in the new dining room. "She saw them in my office and loved them. The painting above the dining table is by Scott Petrie and the idea was to pick up on the colour in the rug."

### Higher calling

Maintaining that it's actually difficult to create and live with an all-white space (Greg's father jokingly refers to the new-look living room as "the desert"), Greg says the idea for bringing in the strong burgundy of the rug and in turn, the painting to go with it, was initiated after a visit to church.

"It took me a while to figure out the colour and this rug is actually a second attempt," says Greg. "Before we added the accent of red to the beige, the space was all looking a bit bland - hence my father's reference to the desert. The burgundy just worked."

"My mother went to church and came back saying, 'You know what? They had this red carpet in there and I think we could do the same thing here'. So we did."

"We went for the granite worktop and splashback, as the kitchen needed some punch. The problem is that when you create an all-white environment, there's a risk it can all end up looking pretty plain. You can just see everything, and all the room's flaws."

"It's a hard look to pull off, and it's certainly not as easy as everyone thinks."

"That was why we went with this granite, along with the fact that it has a lot of life and body to it. It's the type of granite [award-winning Australian architect] Harry Seidler always uses. He's a hero of mine."

### Mixing old with new

The ground-floor laundry was the first room to be renovated, followed by the structural repairs to the dining room and kitchen, finishing with the bathroom upstairs.

The rest of the house remains intact, including the formal dining room where the wedding portrait of Greg's sister, Anna, hangs, and the first-floor living space, where ceramic floor tiles, heavy Baroque furniture and vintage tapestries mix with contemporary ceramics, courtesy of Greg.

"The portrait of Anna was taken when she was 19," says Greg. "She's now 42 and still looks the same."

"We recently added the checked curtains, with the intention of picking up the colours from the furniture. The reason behind the sheers was that the curtains needed to let light through, while allowing for privacy at the same time."

Above the table are ornate chandeliers with delicate pencil-thin trimmings, an old family favourite. "My mother always thought I was a minimalist," says Greg.

"My uncle shipped over all our furniture from Italy, and a lot of the traditional, more flamboyant stuff got sold. In comparison to the kitchen space here, I went the other way with my apartment. It's full of Murano glass chandeliers and velvet-brocade chairs. All this traditional stuff is coming back in."

"I've just done the same thing for a client with a black painted armchair like the one upstairs, which I've re-upholstered in a fabulous Missoni fabric."

Mama Natale loves her new and improved family home, completed as a joint project with Greg, and without family conflict.

"It was really all down to her," says Greg. "She shaped it. She approved everything and she's much happier with it now." ■■■



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