



Courage under fire

Defying the critics and following her heart paid off for the owner of this hideaway bushland retreat, writes **Robyn Willis**. Photos **Katrina Tepper**.



For a private person, the owner of this house has an awful lot of guests. Set among bush land in the Southern Highlands south of Sydney, the home has the kind of tranquillity celebrities pay thousands of dollars a night to find. "I was looking for a house to buy and this [site] was very beautiful," she says. "It was all bush and it was close to town. It's like a little piece of heaven."

But not everyone saw the potential when she first found this sloping block in a bushfire zone that didn't even have an access road to its credit.

"I just wanted a house that fitted in with the land, but the slope and the bushfire zoning really drove it," the owner says.

After commissioning one architect to design a house she didn't like, the owner invited local architect Martin O'Toole to have a look at the site.

"Martin came up with his camera and I liked him because he was young and enthusiastic," she says.

Used to designing more traditional houses for his clientele, Martin saw opportunity in taking on such a challenge.

"When she bought the land everyone said she was crazy. At least until we got the road in," says Martin.

Instead of designing a traditional house with brick facade and a pitched roof common to the area, Martin let the site dictate the shape and structure of the house.

"We didn't have to cut into the hill. We worked with the site and apart from a little road noise, you feel like you're in the middle of nowhere."

Council initially wanted the house at the front of the block but the owner felt it worked against the quiet retreat she was hoping to create. Instead, a short but undulating path leads visitors to the modern tri-level house.

Burning issue

Clad in Colorbond steel to comply with bushfire regulations for non-combustible building materials, the exterior works well with the surrounding environment, blending with the blue and green tones of the bush. Rooftop sprinklers provide extra protection against fires from the valley below.

The possibility of burning debris getting under the house was also a consideration, says Martin, making it necessary to enclose the space directly below the property.

But bushfire compliance was not the only concern. Some of the foundations of the house had to be secured to sandstone directly ➔

A The roof of the house takes on a natural arc to blend in with the bush environment **B** The owner was intent on making the most of the views, building a deck upstairs to draw the eye closer to the bush

TIPS

- ✓ Try to work with the natural attributes of the site
- ✓ speak to your local council for information on zoning and fire safety before buying

underneath and there were also issues with the creek that runs through the property.

"The creek flows into another creek that runs into Sydney's water supply so my waste water had to be specially handled," says the owner.

Despite the challenges involved, the owner says it's a small price to pay for the uninterrupted views of gum trees that populate the few acres the house sits on.

Back to nature

Rather than work against its natural setting, Martin chose instead to use it as inspiration. In keeping with the vertical but unprecise lines of the gum trees, he has created a series of "funky angles" inside and outside the house while the roof takes on a natural arc.

"The way the roof was done was to relate to the slope," says Martin. "The front door is not square to the ceiling and in the house we have all these funky angles going on to relate to the bush site. You can go really contemporary because you don't have to fit in with the street."

The balustrades and handrails on the outdoor decks also have a life of their own, with Martin

commissioning David Ball, a local artist, to work in "weathering steel".

"He drew some rough drawings but really, it was all in his head and I took a gamble," says Martin. "When you look at the bush, something that was rigid and covered was not going to look good."

Tough as nails, the steel takes on a weathered or rusted look without corroding. And though the owner is not entirely convinced by the slightly rusted look, she loves the way the steel mirrors the bush beyond.

"The handrails have a rhythm and they tie in with the bush," she says.

Indoors, David designed and built a curved staircase for the centre of the house out of black-bean timber and steel. It connects the sun-drenched living spaces downstairs to the upstairs bedrooms, which are frequently occupied by family and friends.

"The western sun here is not a problem. We don't get the heat and not for as long," says Martin. "The winter afternoon sun is just beautiful – it comes in low and soft."

Again, making the most of the setting has been the primary concern, with views from all bedrooms and a small balcony off the upstairs landing.

"If you got upstairs and you didn't have the deck out here it would feel more claustrophobic," says the owner.

"This draws your eye. You can get outside and closer to the bush."

And while Martin describes it as "living amongst the trees", the owner says the house often disappears when she takes the dog for walks in the valley below.

"I didn't want the house to be intrusive," she says. "When you're walking out there it is really hard to find this house." ■■■



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C The space below the house is enclosed to prevent the threat of burning debris **D** The steel handrails have a rusted look **E** The curved staircase in the centre of the house is made of black-bean timber and steel

MORE INFORMATION

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