

THE **Owner Builder**

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STRAW BALE ♦ EARTH PLASTER ♦ STONE ♦ KIT HOME ♦ RETROFITTING



Retrofitting the suburbs

Our 1000m² plot, which we call Tree Elbow, sits on the edge of town, the Central Lake Reserve and the Wombat State Forest in Daylesford, Central Victoria. When we moved here nearly a decade ago the vacant swampy block had only two trees: an oak to the north and a willow to the east. Land was expensive then for young people, but not entirely out of reach like it is now as the wealth divide has escalated during this time. Over the years we have planted close to 150 fruit and nut trees, and many more on nearby public land. We have perennial and annual vegetable growing areas, a large chicken and duck run, and an anti-

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aviary containing almonds, hazelnuts and a Warré hive. We catch our own rainwater in a series of tanks and once it's used, recycle it through our garden swales.

Pre-fab start

The main house is a small modern pre-fab that was constructed in a factory in Melbourne and brought up on a truck. It unfolded on hinges like origami and

we moved in after a few flurried weeks of painting, laying floorboards, deck building, installing water tanks and a 1kW solar system. We would do it differently next time. Although the house is north facing, fully insulated, and the windows double glazed, the house lacks thermal mass. However, being on stumps on a sloping block has meant we have been able to build an undercroft on the east side using rocks unearthed from our vegetable beds.

As well as the main house, there are six other dwellings that dot Tree Elbow. There is the chook and duck house that provides shelter for 12 fowl. The Acorn is a

double-storey tree house nestled around our oak tree from which is suspended a zip line that Woody, our five year-old, uses to travel to the main house when we call him and his friends in for dinner.

The Permie Love Shack, our AirBnB abode, is replete with two composting loos, (an internal sit-style commode for urine, an outside squat toilet for humanure), and a shower room filled with warmer climate fruiting plants. The shower water hydrates our berry bank.

The Love Shack was the first building on the property and was initially built as a shed to store our belongings. Patrick built it using salvaged materials and then retrofitted it into a habitable dwelling using more up-cycled finds.

Mentoring and sharing

There is the Cumquat, a small dwelling built by Zephyr, our 15 year-old son and James, under the tutelage of Patrick. James came to us initially as a SWAP (Social Warming Artists and Permaculturists), our version of WWOOF (Willing Workers on Organic Farms). He came for a week then stayed for six more to be part of the build. Zephyr, who was in year eight and struggling with the confines of a rigid school environment, took six weeks out to learn to construct the tiny house – to collect materials by bike: from the tip, various skip bins around town and from friends' sheds. Then to work with the pre-loved materials to help shape them into a new story. The aim was for Patrick to mentor James and for James to mentor Zephyr, and to foster a sideways learning between the two young men, 14 years apart.

Now the Cumquat is home to Connor and Marta, two permanent SWAPs who have been with us since the start of 2017. Connor answered our callout for a mentor to live with us for a year, to help Zeph navigate this tricky time of adolescence. Marta came from Poland as a week-long SWAP then she and Connor fell in love and have made our small neo-peasant compound their home.

We have another full-time SWAP too, Jeremy Yau, who did an informal apprenticeship with Patrick to build his own small garden dwelling, the Yause, also made from reclaimed materials. It is insulated with gifted alpaca wool and



contains a double futon mattress and a chest of drawers, and features a small deck out the front with two citrus plants on either side. All the windows open out onto the garden.

Between the Yause and the Cumquat is a composting toilet for the SWAPs, which is also made from reclaimed materials.

The final small building on our block has had many incarnations. First it was a raised garden bed, then a double-storey

cubby house, a composting toilet, a hot house, a pet cemetery (where we buried a neighbour's cat that had been hit by a car), and now it is the Cookhouse: a four person wood fired sauna Patrick built out of local macrocarpa and insulated with sheep's wool from the tip. Every Friday night in the cooler months we fire it up and invite over family and friends. Everybody brings a dish to share and a towel if they wish to have a sweat.





having money, which means we are able to prioritise our quest for materials. We hitch our trailers to our bikes and ride to the tip and to building sites we have seen around town with skip bins out front. As opposed to prioritising our income earning jobs so we can then afford to buy new materials. We make a habit of visiting our local tip shop every week and have a designated place under our house to store the provisions. Our local buy-swap-sell Facebook page is also a goldmine for people who do not want to buy new materials.

Community participation

To ensure our permaculture communitarianism expands past the compound of Tree Elbow we organise various community projects and events. Meg initiated and runs Culture Club, a fermentation group that meets on the first Saturday of each month. She organises free workshops: cheese making, sourdough baking, cider and vinegar brewing. And she teams up with local growers who supply veggies for community making days: lacto-fermented pickles, kraut and kimchi. Patrick facilitates Daylesford Community Food Gardens. Apart from monthly working bees, composting and pruning workshops, he organises events such as the Bruce Pascoe and David Holmgren public meeting in our Town Hall in 2015.

The five community gardens in the town that we helped establish with friends around the time we went car-free are important sites for public food. The gardens were started either by guerrilla tactics of public land reclamation or through collaborative partnerships with the Neighbourhood and Health Centres.

The same goes for the extensive forest land to the south of our home. Over the years we have foraged 15 edible species of mushrooms there, blackberries, wild apples, hawthorn berries, rosehips, native cherry, elderflowers, countless edible weeds, and snared rabbits and gleaned fallen wood. We make sure we don't over harvest this renewable resource so as not to interrupt the processes of decomposition required to keep the soil alive and giving.

However, under-harvesting also causes a serious threat to the forest. Every several years the fuel load builds up to



Why reclaimed?

So why did we choose to build all six out buildings from reclaimed materials?

1. Because we are environmentalists and for us it doesn't make sense to buy new what we can source second-hand. Our culture of disposability throws away far too much. By valuing and making use of resources that are available to us, nothing goes to waste.

2. Because using reclaimed materials creates an interesting finish.

3. Because we are a low-income family and we don't want to spend money if we don't have to.

4. Because we want to be in relationship with everything we do. We wholeheartedly agree with Charles

Eisenstein who, in his book *Sacred Economics*, writes that 'the distant origins of our things, the anonymity of our relationships, and the lack of visible consequences in the production and disposal of our commodities all deny relatedness. Thus we live without the experience of sacredness. Of course, of all things that deny uniqueness and relatedness, money is foremost.'

The biggest tip we can give others wanting to build using reclaimed materials is to give yourself lots of time in the lead-up to the build to source your supplies. If you are truly committed, you won't want to go to your local hardware to buy timber off the shelf when you need a piece a particular length. For us, having time is far more valuable than

what the CFA, and other land authorities, deem unsafe for the town, and they set the forest on fire. Each time this occurs, the ringtails (who have built their dreys in the hawthorns to protect themselves from powerful owls and foxes) and many other critters who have long made their home there are burnt out, the forest humus is once again destroyed and the soil put into a greater state of drying. By harvesting the excess fuel, pruning out deadwood, chopping and dropping woody material into small, quickly decomposing parts and stomping down the dry, fire-prone blackberry canes (keeping this soil-stabilising plant as a groundcover so other species can push up through and eventually shade it out), we give to the forest. Our activity helps to create an ecology that has plenty of humus-building material and thus water conserving properties for biodiversity to flourish while reducing the fire risk. This work is transformative as we go outside the typical limitations of anthropocentric modern life into a deeper realm of creaturely know how, plant wisdom and mycology, to be, in effect, in service of the forest that in turn keeps us warm and bears us fruit.

Deliberate transition

While this particular gift – giving and receiving economy of sacred proportions is specific to ours and our neighbours' environment, these kinds of more-than-human relationships can occur in any homeplace.

We eat over 100 species of autonomously growing foods from our homeplace, our walked-for commons. We garden dozens of annual and perennial vegetables at home and in community. We grow, glean and forage fruit nine months of the year, bartering and swapping bounties with neighbours, friends, community gardeners and the broader community. We butcher unwanted broilers and roadkill from around the town, and as a rule do not eat abattoir-killed meat. Most of the energy we use and the food we consume has an origin point that we know intimately. When we eat meals together, with our children, SWAPs, friends and people who have come to learn our methodologies, we take in the life-giving nourishment of our loved locasphere and with it in



our bellies help establish the grounds for recreating ecological culture.

The dominant economic system can only be composted by critically observing where its harm derives – cars, supermarkets, indulgence tourism etc. Turning our backs on an irresponsible economy, one household at a time, means making some big decisions. This takes courage, will and a whole load of hard work. While the way we live is just one response to the predicament of the times, culture change can only occur if households and communities begin to map out their own place-specific plans to disentangle themselves from the drudgery, bargaining, guilt, stimulants, tricks, glitz, infotainment and mass destruction of cultural capitalism.

In whatever form this occurs, an abiding, tangible relationship with one's local land (be this a farm, forest, suburb or industrial wasteland) and the continued or repatriated flowering of it must be at the heart. In other words our central ideology must shift from total extraction to songful regeneration. This, at least, is what we have learned over a decade of deliberate transition. It's the details that matter, and the flowering earth of your loved homeplace will show you the way. ♦

Meg Ulman and Patrick Jones are two fifths of the collective Artist as Family, and the authors of the ABIA nominated book 'The Art of Free Travel: a frugal family adventure.'

This article is a version of a case study that first appeared on retrosurbia.com



Links & resources

◆ Artist as Family

We are a family who belong to a bloody great community and therefore we're much more than the sum of our parts.

theartistasfamily.blogspot.com.au

◆ Culture Club

Regular get together for fermenters of all passions and experience.

relocalisehepburn.blogspot.com.au

◆ Daylesford Community Food Gardens

Committed to a community food system enabling free, just, and organic food.

justfreefood.blogspot.com.au

RetroSuburbia

RetroSuburbia: the downshifter's guide to a resilient future

By David Holmgren

RRP AUD\$85, ISBN 9780994392879

Melliodora Publishing (2018)

This book describes how Australians can downshift and retrofit their homes, gardens and communities to be more self-organised, sustainable and resilient into an energy descent future. It will be launched on February 10, 2018 at the Sustainable Living Festival in Melbourne.

www.retrosurbia.com
www.holmgren.com.au