



The Phoenix philosophy

Where the dumps and developers lose

By Sharyn Munro

Cars and trucks give it all they've got up the steep hill, racing to reach the freeway to Sydney. Gears grind, engines roar. They're too busy getting a good runup to notice the small sign at the turnoff: "The Old Brush Studio/Gallery."

It sends me two kilometres down a winding narrow lane, dryish eucalyptus scrub edging small farms and conventional homes, right through a grazing property, and I'm suddenly on the valley floor, in the green profusion of The Old Brush. Three fat cattle dogs waddle out from behind the wisteria-draped studio, barking dutifully, to attack my legs with their wagging tails.

Their owner, Robert Bignell, rescues me and ushers me round the "back", where he and part-time caretaker cum helper, Gary, are just having smoko. I'm given a coffee and a place on the broad bench seat: it's first class, ringside, at an

ever-changing watershow. Through the filtered green light and shapely frames of the surrounding trees, we are facing a large billabong of fantastic reflections and constant bird activity.

Water hens glide busily around the maned wood ducks, dozens of whom "...are a-dabbling, Up tails all!"; crimson rosellas and king parrots flash and chatter as they check out the many hanging birdfeeders, and more white-headed pigeons than I've ever seen at once display their subtle iridescence in the overhanging branches. It's a bird-watcher's dream, a photographer's fantasy... I turn to Gary: "It's a hard life: does he pay you as well?"

Spell broken, smoko over, we get to work: Robert talks, I listen, the birds carry on as usual. Robert bought the 40 acre property 18 years ago: a cleared flat with a few big inaccessible trees and a bit of brush along the creek, left

from logging 80 years ago. Bordered by the State Forest Sugarloaf Range, the valley enjoys absolute privacy. It's a world apart from the busy road just a few minutes away.

Robert has worked hard to preserve and extend what was left, and right from the beginning has shared it with the public. Over the years he has owner built, to various extents, several small cabins and sheds and a large studio/gallery for his photography work. The studio building is about to evolve into its next stage of residence as well.

He first erected a tent for himself and his toddler daughter to camp in on the block; when that disintegrated, a second, larger tent went up till it rotted away 3 years later, when he made his tool shed into the quaint cottage peeking through the trees nearby. He has lived there for 11 years, enjoying, as he says "the privilege of caring for it as well as earning his living" with his photography of weddings and portraits, the latter often set here in his studio or forest garden.

His photographer's eye is as evident as his Phoenix philosophy of new life from old in both his buildings and his landscaping. Slabs of sandstone from the original kitchen floors of Maitland Jail have been used to define areas and act as steps between the pebble paths that lead you from the studio to the timber decks of his tiny cabin "camped by the billabong, under the shade of..." a paperbark tree and several others!

It's like a pioneer's cottage, built of weathered grey hardwood slabs, but obviously a resurrected version with features like the stained glass windows





Photo: Robert Bignall

and the cutouts in the decking for the paperbarks to grow through.

The waterviews from here are even better, with an almost horizontal willow tree sweeping the water with its branches and a stone statue of Nefertiti's proud head adding vertical grace and contrast to the reflections. Robert obviously thinks so too, judging from the two comfy armchairs tucked under shelter, facing the copper hooded open fire on the verandah edge: so he can be warm while he enjoys the view in cold or wet weather and for cooking outside in summer. The dogs and the roos like it too.

Inside, the cottage is so small as to be almost hobbit scale: it began as 12ft square shed and verandah but soon sprouted small extensions and a sleeping loft. It has the distinctly comfortable air of having "grewed", like Topsy, instead of being designed or imposed. Robert moved from a 35sq. home in town to this 3.5sq. (including verandahs!) cabin.

Its interior is roughly divided with slabs and shelves into a cosy lounge room lined with packing case slats, with a wood fire and a great view of the rain forest through its low semi-circular

window; a kitchen with an ancient but very active fuel stove, a low fixed window to the lake framed like a painting in fancy gilt and lots of stained glass windows glowing with the forest light; and several large retirement home cages for geriatric cockatoos rescued from the big put down, who still manage a "Hello, cocky!" to passersby.

The low loft is reached by several step/rails up the kitchen wall, and I took Robert's word that it has a diamond-shaped view of the water. The kitchen sink, set into a bench of old fence rails, is undercover but outdoors, and the bore water shower is simply outdoors: a rose and taps tied to a tree and some pebbles to stand on!

Junkhouse jewels for the blessed poor

Everything was free or dirt cheap: the slabs were salvaged from an old local bakery that burnt down; windows ranged from free to three to ten dollars; floorboards were spotted stacked under someone's house. Robert has found that once you make it known that you're contemplating building a junkhouse, people start arriving with ute and trailer

Above: Rear deck of the "Versailles humpy" winds around the trees to the semi-outdoor washing up shelter (right).

Below: Fellow Old Brush residents often drop in to share the warmth of the verandah fireplace on cold nights or wet days, but they don't say much about the view.



Photo: Robert Bignall



Above left: Pioneer slab hut? Paperbarks and dogs on duty.

Above: A good bush cook's kingdom: who needs a microwave?

Left: Rustic and recycled meet in this kitchen corner to offer a wee drop and water views to the cook.

Below left: Cosy loungeroom with rain-forest views out the back.



loads of stuff that they'd been meaning to take to the tip. Or they start keeping their eyes open for you and spot other people's piles of "junk" or demolition happenings.

This "contemplation" stage is crucial. He feels that "It's a blessing to be poor when you get your block of land," and stresses the importance of these pre-owner building stages:

1. Camp on the block to discern over time and the seasons what its main features and aspects are and get the feel of your environment;
2. Put up a shed to store the building materials you are about to begin collecting;
3. Start scrounging and scavenging materials before you even begin to form ideas about what you might do with them.

Robert has built and furnished several small sheds or cabins for various purposes in this way. The one he rents out to visitors is clad in weatherboards that were bound for the tip, with a similarly rescued picket fence separating it from the main picnic grounds. It is meant as a real bush experience, with loft sleeping for the kids, cooking on the outdoor

campfire, and of course a verandah to overlook its own little dam. He's convinced "a mudhole" of any size is important near a dwelling, as even a small pond offers a surface that's constantly alive and visually fascinating.

A concession had to be made in the visitor's cabin with the installation of a septic system, and unfortunately the candlelit atmosphere inside is about to be superseded by electricity (run underground as elsewhere on the property), as too many city visitors did not understand that candles burn other things beside their wicks if placed in silly spots.

The cabins are on an appealingly intimate scale, which Robert became convinced was right for him after visiting Versailles. The Palace naturally impressed and overwhelmed him with its grand magnificence, until he came upon Marie Antoinette's village in the forest, built for her as a retreat, with its little lake and charming cottages of tiny rooms and verandahs. Then he knew that he would "...never hunger for a Versailles Palace, but for a Versailles humpy."

He feels that part of the appeal of small cabins like his is that every kid wanted a cubby house and adults still relate to that desire for the one-on-one scale in building. As a fairly small-scale person myself, his cubby by the billabong certainly gets me!

Studio plus built to last

Robert has been a professional photographer for 30 years: his studio/gallery has been purpose-built. It is a high metal structure of heritage red square section sides and silver Kliplok roofing panels over steel beams suspended on 10 reject telegraph poles, with a slab floor which carries offpeak heating. Housing his life's work as it does, he wanted it to be termite-proof, fireproof and, after the '89 Newcastle earthquake, safe from those too. (All his buildings have roof sprinklers.) Because of the studio's size and engineering and commercial needs, he had a builder do all the professional bits while he worked alongside as the labourer and kept the collected junk coming.

While the steel and cladding were new, most of the rest wasn't. The grand 6-paned floorlength windows are of cedar and plate glass and were once the sliding doors from a big old shop: they cost \$20 each! Other secondhand aluminium windows form arches and circles



Robert and helpers on "smoko" at the rear of the studio, in front of a \$20 floorlength cedar window.

for ridiculously cheap outlays. The various windows and doors have been given unity by the same dark green paint on all trims.

Inside, the first thing I notice are Robert's large and dramatic photographic collages: he's obviously no more classifiable as a photographer than he is as a landscaper. Both bear the individual stamp of the artist. There's something of

the Phoenix in these pictures too: photographs taken, then cut up and recreated into something bigger and more complex than the sum of their parts.

I finally look beyond them to the unusual roof and the walls: all insulated, with the walls lined in mini orb tin and the roof with secondhand (mostly free) corrugated iron, pre-painted in a seemingly random fashion with transparent patches of soft pastels: pink, green, lemon, blue, white. This is not just for aesthetics, as they combine with the skylights and big windows to create a beautiful, soft and evenly reflected

light that Robert says is perfect for photography. It feels rather like opening your eyes in clear shallow water.

Similarly pastel daubed are the unusual shelving stacks of open crates that mount the high walls in staggered and twisted lines, and free stand behind benches to divide the kitchen area from the main room. Robert had these crates made in several sizes at a sheltered workshop, painted them, screwed them together in the configurations he fancied and screwed them to the walls. They are strong enough and staggered enough to be climbed on so even the highest box is accessible. Many hold Robert's large archival photo albums.

The bathroom/W.C. and laundry/W.C. are entered by oddly narrow and tall (10ft) ledged and braced doors with gothic T-hinges, saved from an old convent in the throes of renovation. The porcelain handbasin is set into a grey tree trunk as pedestal, scored and weathered in beautiful contrast.

A massively thick dining table was formed from slabs of a giant white mahogany, ringbarked by the previous owner and left to rot on the ground. There were several piles of such vast logs, and Robert has had them all gradually dragged out to be used. I saw the first stage of one such project, where a semi-circle of them had been set in the ground near a natural amphitheatre, rising hugely vertical again as they once did and looking, at this stage, like Loughenge.

Out the back of the studio, you can see that there's still a lot of open space under the big roof. Lined with the same pastel painted tin, the unused area is about to be fitted with an additional massive central pole under the ridge to take a first floor for Robert's new bedroom, accessible from inside by an existing stair, with a cellar underneath, and a big upper deck at the front to bear the master's bathtub, placed where it gets the best view of the billabong and the moonrise.

Under this deck he will bolt enormous chest-high decorative wooden brackets, rescued 10 years ago when the local racecourse grandstand was demolished. "Don't buy building materials when you need them: it'll cost you a fortune! Buy them when you see them!" says Robert. The current cement floor out the back will be replaced with big stone slabs ... "like at Government House."

I ask whether he will miss his little cottage when he moves into the new bed-

room: "It's been a privilege living there," he says, "but I'm thinking of my old age." I recall the loft steps and I understand. Not that Robert doesn't have mod cons there: those rough loft boards hide a queen sized bed with an electric blanket, and it has air conditioning, but it is rather a leg up and for a while the pythons coming in after the bush rats were a bit of a nuisance. This leads him to confess his biggest mistake as a lesson for prospective owner builders in bush or rural areas: take the extra time to totally vermin-proof your place from the start, as even the rustic look is better without rats chewing through it.

Start small, stay solvent!

Robert waited 8 years to put the power on underground to the block. He's a firm believer in only doing as much as you can afford at a time: start small and extend when you can. For example, he makes lists of jobs needing a backhoe and when he has about a day's work he saves up the \$500 and gets one in to place big poles, logs and rocks, clean out the dams, etc.

Apart from building, his work has included: encouraging regeneration and extension of the natural ecosystems that remained; planting where necessary; using old logging tracks as walking trails to the best features; creating new dams to attract native birds and animals, planting some with waterlilies and irises, leaving others to ripple with reflections; piping from the creek to the existing billabong to make it more consistent for the plant and bird life; clearing the paddock of rocks to make it a mown park; adding other species and statuary as enhancements and contrast to the native brush; and placing isolated seats, picnic and BBQ spots in private places of beauty and tranquillity.

Robert's caring for the Old Brush has been a slow and sympathetic development of a place where others could come and find the inspiration and sense of values it holds for him: he has formed a company to ensure that it continues to benefit bushlovers and artists in perpetuity. People need such oases, especially one so close to major towns and cities, whether for a few hours or a few days respite from the manmade world of tar and cement and ordered suburban parks. Robert's little "junk-houses" similarly provide visual and mental refreshment from the slickly



Top: Custom built strong and self-stepping studio storage.

Above: Weatherboards headed for the tip made this bush haven guest cabin.

sterile gyprock and brick veneer environments of most town dwellers.

His battle against waste and vulgar and mindless development is not restricted to his own patch: he is often in conflict with authorities who can, for example, demolish their old town hall for a supermarket or issue licences to vignerons to shoot rosellas who dare pinch a grape. He is on the side of the Phoenix no matter where he finds it needing help.

Robert Bignell can be contacted at The Old Brush (near Cessnock, Hunter Valley, NSW) on (02) 4938 0288.