

A carport penthouse

Space and tin used to advantage

BY SHARYN MUNRO



For years Robert Bignell's photography studio by the billabong had a large open carport cum storage space under one end of its high angled roof. He'd always meant to do something with it, as evidenced inside the studio by a flight of steps that led to a door that led to nowhere.

The studio had been built to withstand fire and earthquakes, steel framed around ten reject telephone poles, new tin outside, insulated, and lined with old tin inside. The high open roof space made a light and airy studio, with its big secondhand windows, and the tin painted in a kind of montage of pale pastels, to reflect the light and beautify the tin.

Robert decided to try and squeeze two levels into the carport space. He hired a bobcat to excavate to a depth of between two and three feet under the roof space and slightly beyond on the uphill side. This area was then professionally edged with timber sleeper retaining walls, which had built-in hidden drainage to ensure runoff flowed to the billabong where it belonged instead of into the lower level new room.

Undercover steel

A slab was poured, as well as a metre high cement retaining wall against the existing studio, for extra stability. He found a couple of resourceful blokes who erected steel frame houses as their day job, but were willing to do a bit of fiddly extra work, and employed them to construct the basic infill of the carport.

Robert had consulted a structural engineer, who recommended the size of steel posts needed to support the whole

Naturalistic landscaping unites the building with its billabong/bush environment.



Above: Deepening the original carport.

Right: The steel bones of the structure.

Mid right: Penthouse takes shape as the outer wall to the deck goes up.

Below right: Birdfeeder attracts many varieties of birds as well the odd wallaby.

Below far right: Altogether now - original studio and new carport infill meet by the billabong.



structure without the need for posts intruding into the usable space. This involved four 75mm square steel vertical posts, and steel RSJs to fully support the upper room and cantilevered deck.

The steel frame went on that, with 'C' channels under marine ply as the basic upper flooring. Robert drew on his extensive 'stash' of secondhand windows and doors, including free large sliding glass doors that only needed new runners and rollers.

The steel posts got transformed: where they were visible, he has disguised them with adjacent small turpentine posts. The end of the RSJ under the deck has a decorative timber capping; big old timber brackets from a demolished local grandstand look as if they are doing a good job of holding up the deck, when in fact it is totally self-supporting on the cantilever.

Artful iron

The new exterior was clad in the same square section Heritage Red metal sheeting as the existing studio. Similarly, the walls and ceilings were insulated and lined with quite rough old corrugated iron, but Robert doesn't use corrugated iron as rigidly as most people. Instead of having it meet at wall corners in traditional right angles, he lets it flow around the corners in curves: less cutting, better visually.

Used as ceiling lining under the deck, it undulates to cover the RSJ, which to Robert always look 'like dead bodies'... and anyway, far too modern. And then he works his paint magic on it. This means that it doesn't matter





how battered the tin was, it ends up giving one the impression of being surrounded by a pale rosy sunrise, with a myriad of soft hues of blue and green and mauve and lemon somehow woven through it.

Robert may use steel and tin for their structural benefits, but he refuses to let them have sway in the realm of aesthetics.

Living it up in the bush

Now the stairs inside the studio lead through the door to a self-contained loft penthouse, perfect for one or two. It is a large open carpeted space... bedroom, kitchenette and living, with a slow-combustion fire and a wall of glass leading to the deck. There was just enough space to partition off a small ensuite and an almost-walk-in wardrobe.

The old tin does its job as shower lining too, with silicone sealing it at the base to the tiles. Two narrow timber and plate glass doors, from a bank probably, have been put to good use, one as a low horizontal window under the slope of the roof, and the other as a tall and elegant framing of the view beside the sliding glass doors.

But the best part of this penthouse is through these doors. The tiled deck is about five metres wide, and overlooks the billabong and the surrounding bush. This is teeming with wildlife... moorhens, wood ducks, King parrots, rosellas, brown pigeons... dropping by for the feed Robert liberally distributes (but not so liberally as to make them dependent, he adds).

Above: Inside Robert's tin penthouse - what more could a man need?!

Above left: Tin curves gently round the downstairs reading corner.

Left: Robert on his deck with water views.

Below left: Nature bathing, Robert-style.

To take full advantage of his private paradise, Robert has placed his claw foot bath out on the deck. It has timber covers when not in use, but when the weather permits what a delight bathing must be! In fact the deck is constantly used for dining and relaxing. Robert often cooks in the freestanding metal fireplace, which also means he can enjoy the ever-changing reflections on the billabong even in winter.

This deck is edged with decorative steel railings, which Robert spotted, covered in vines, propped up against the fence in an old nursery. He bought the lot for \$50, had them sandblasted and repainted and set them in between timber posts, capped with a timber rail. Later he added a set of outdoor timber steps from one side up to the deck.

His one regret about the deck is that he didn't allow enough fall for drainage: he has found that one and a half inches over 5m is not enough in storms.

Downstairs, in the 'cellar,' he has made the rear into a well-lit workroom for certain processes such as lacquering, equipped with an exhaust fan, benches, and ample storage fitted along the top of the cement retaining wall. As in just about every room he has built, he has installed a wood fire. Charming old timber windows add interest and 'age' to the tin walls.



Above right: Light and lofty studio interior as seen from the penthouse landing.

Above: 'Once a jolly photographer built by a billabong.'

Right: Deck designed for hot or cold nights. Below right: Lower level tin curves over RSJs and timber poles hide vertical steel.

The room is undivided, but the front section by the glass wall looking out to the billabong is set up as accommodation for lucky guests, with a bed and a most inviting reading corner. The ceiling is quite low, but with so much glass and outlook the room doesn't feel at all poky. As in the studio, old timber boxes painted with a soft patina of colour are used as shelves and tables.

Queen of the Billabong

Outside, below the deck, is yet another outdoor living and cooking area. The excavated flat area is gravelled, but with timber walkways and a timber dining area beside a tiny fuel stove, a 'Caledonia Queen.' This would have originally been meant for coal but with the large amount of fallen timber like wattle on the property, it is easy to keep up the small size fuel to feed it.

Tiny though the Caledonia Queen may be, Robert says she works beautifully and pumps out a great deal of heat. It is obvious that he does not allow cold weather to stop his participation in the life of his billabong. And the other inhabitants are clearly used to human involvement: beneath the busy bird feeder, a wallaby is peeking inquisitively over the side lattice gate as I take photographs.





Above: Old wares, old windows – a visual feast for a downstairs guest.

Right: The tiny old Caledonia Queen is still a powerful cooker and heater



A large turpentine tree felled by lightning forms the edge to this space above the bank running down to the water. Timber slabs form steps to the original ground level outside the studio as well as providing seating by the stove. The extensive timber work not only defines the new area, but provides a visual flow with the original building and its landscaping.

Buy now, build later

It took him 20 years to get his pent-house, but about 18 months ago Robert did move out of his tiny rustic cabin nearby and into his lofty tin pad. This quaint original house, further round the billabong (see O.B. 99), will soon have an ensuite, outdoor composting toilet and shower added and will then be available for casual rent, as is his other bush hut with attitude at the far end of the Old Brush property.

Unlike these homemade cabins of salvaged materials, his studio building

has been erected to a great extent by employing good tradesmen, partly because it is a semi-public area and houses his valuable work, but mainly due to the material used. Steel and tin are hard to work with unless you have the expertise, the right heavy duty tools, and the strength.

Seeing land values and building costs soar, Robert advises anyone contemplating a bush retreat to get the land now, even if you can't afford to do anything with it for ages. Put up a basic shed and start collecting freebies and bargains, while you camp on it or just enjoy BBQs and picnics there, as he did here for years. Eventually you'll have enough to build something... maybe even a penthouse?

The Old Brush reserve is near Kurri Kurri and the Hunter Valley vineyard areas and is open to the public for picnicking and bushwalking, as well as for accommodation with a difference. Phone Robert or Gail on (02) 4938 0288. ■

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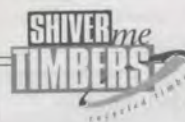
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