
Built for living

Catering for family, surfboards and dogs

BY SHARYN MUNRO

From the track in, only the roof is apparent of the large family home that Janelle and Geoff Coleman built. Backing onto a mini-jungle, rimmed with gardens, and fronting a pool and a horse paddock or two, their home nestles comfortably and discreetly on their one hectare block.

Theirs is one of four such bush blocks in what was a private subdivision twelve years ago, of ex-Department of Education land on the NSW Central Coast. Close enough to the beach for surfer Geoff, and with room to fulfil horse-lover Janelle's needs, it was a rare opportunity.

Originally the couple tried to organise a group of like-minded friends to buy and develop the whole five hectares together, drawing lots for blocks. It became evident that there would be problems and the idea was reluctantly dropped. A relative of one of the group bought the lot.

About a year later, having subdivided it and put the communal road in, he needed to sell the blocks. The couple knew him, as Janelle had been riding her horse up there, and over the campfire one evening Geoff asked him how much he wanted for this rear block. It turned out to be about what they thought their current home would fetch.

At the time Geoff and Janelle were living in a project home they'd had built in a nearby suburb. They'd moved there from Sydney, where eight years previously they'd owner-built a colonial style house with verandahs all round and they'd felt that they didn't want to owner-build again so soon. However, the project home was so badly designed and built that they decided they'd definitely be building their own place when they found the right bush block.

Shed city

Well, now they had, and could afford it by selling this house, without taking out a mortgage, but what to live in meanwhile? Geoff, an electrician, was working for a large Sydney building company, commuting daily. He got hold of three very run-down site sheds, fixed them up in Sydney and had them transported on to the block.

Connecting them with tin roofs, they set up an outdoor shower and moved the family, 12-year old daughter Dannika and 7-year-old son Bryce, to live on the site. One or more of Geoff's older sons would come and stay for various periods too.

They were to live thus for the next three years while they built their house, although during this time a small colony of sheds also sprang up amongst the trees. Janelle had yearned for a shed on their last suburban block and now she had the space she would gradually make the most of it – a big storage shed which eventually held a bathroom (although never finished, since they all liked the outdoor shower), a toilet shed, a shower shed, a shipping container, a chook shed, a tack shed, and later, a stable.

They had intended to manage without electricity for a while, because of the cost of bringing the power from the main road, but Geoff decided to do it himself. No easy task, dragging large cables, let alone negotiating costs with the other three landowners, not all of whom were ready for power.

Thinking ahead

Janelle and Geoff had a good idea of what they wanted to build: a large central family living and dining area open to the kitchen; one wing off that for parents and one on the other side for kids and

guests; wide verandahs all round; a large roofed outdoor area; spacious carport; big poles inside and out, and roughly rendered brick so it looked as much like a rustic muddie as possible.

They wanted the house up off the ground, partly for the feeling and the site but also because this is funnel web spider country and a slab is an open invitation for them to walk in and visit!

Initially they'd hoped to engage a known local architect to bring some original ideas into the design but when she was unavailable they virtually just had the plans drawn up around their own ideas, by Howard Leslie, a friend's father. It went through Council with a few changes: for example, they had wanted to have a system of hanging chains and drains instead of gutters – not allowed.

Meanwhile they'd been doing what they could afford – the house foundations and brick piers, the septic system and the *Envirocycle* greywater system. Ross Holloway, a builder, and surfing mate of Geoff's, agreed to help him out as and when needed, as a skilled labourer really. Geoff had quite a lot of annual leave owing so he'd take two or three days off in a week as a stage was reached, calling in Ross and an occasional son.

Proud poles

Treated pine poles were to be used for the 36 verandah supports, because of termites, but of a much larger diameter (200 mm) than was structurally necessary. Geoff had to insist on this, wanting that sturdy look – Ross, used to more conventional building, thought he was mad. These poles were concreted into the ground on a bed of blue metal.



1. A house at home in its leafy surroundings.
2. Large decks and pool cater for outdoor family living.
3. The hammock's waiting if lolling time can be found.
4. Colourful entry - minus paint from doggy demands.
5. Round windows add interest to straight walls.
6. Green fingers + temperate climate = lush garden.





7



8



9



10



11



12



13



14



15

7. Lofty outdoor covered dining area.
8. Distinctive fireplace and wood storage.
9. Bi-fold glazed doors look good, let in light and allow greater flexibility in use of spaces.
10. Recycled floorboards and bush poles.
11. Open plan, light-filled dining area accommodates lots of family and friends.
12. Well-considered cook's kitchen in rich timber and smart stainless steel.
13. Much-used pool was installed 3 years ago.
14. Practical mix of clear and opaque louvres in bathroom.
15. Clothesline tucked away in a forest clearing.

At the stage when they had the treated timber frame and the brick walls up, but no roof, which was not good for the framework, it all seemed to be taking forever, with the mozzies holding them hostage in the site sheds, both of them working and trying to save the money for the next stage – but not managing to do so. They decided to borrow money after all.

The *Colorbond* roof went on. Getting the angles and joins right for some of the roof sections, like where the very high carport attaches to the verandah, was quite a challenge, recalls Geoff.

The main room is a huge bay window really, with an equally lofty summer dining verandah extension adjoining it. The two giant poles that carry this room's 6m long laminated timber ridge beam, at a height of 4.5m, are 400mm diameter turpentine trunks, cut for wharf timbers and bought from State Forests. They tried to get that beam up into place without a crane but had to give up as it was just too dangerous.

When Janelle and Geoff chose the poles these still had their bark on, and looked so good they decided to leave it on and just spray a sealer over the top of it. Getting the poles up on to their cement footings was 'fun,' and concreting around them caused a few headaches too, with a barrowful of cement falling down one hole and the first wired-up rough cylindrical 'frame' allowing most of another barrowful to ooze away at the base.

Non-carpet floorboards

The floors became all timber, apart from wet areas, because a friend heard of an old carpet warehouse, c. late 1800s, being demolished in Sydney. Instead of the going rate of \$45-50 per sq.m, they could get the brush box flooring for \$12 per sq.m – if they took the lot. Between them they did, with a giant sling soon dumped in the paddock. Janelle then spent weeks getting ancient packed-down carpet fibres out of the grooves, finding one of her stiff 'Dandy' horse brushes the best tool for the arduous job.

The boards seemed to have been ripped off their nails, as they didn't need de-nailing, but every one had to be pre-drilled and individually nailed, as in the old days. So laying the floors took about three and a half weeks instead of the one week it would have taken with



Above: Signatures of previous tenants!

Right: Decks extend living areas outdoors.

Below right: Back area – parking for cars and surfboards and the mower.



new boards. At least they could now walk about safely in the house.

Bathrooms were done, but there was no kitchen sink yet because Geoff was waiting for some special granite leftover from a job in Sydney for the benches – but at this stage the family moved in anyway – away from the mozzies. They sold the site sheds.

Then Janelle's sister, Maree, won a trip to Paris; Janelle wanted to go too, with their mother, and take Bryce. While she was away seemed a good time for Geoff and daughter Dannika to get the floors sanded and finished. They moved all the furniture out onto the summer verandah and themselves into a neighbour's hut for the three days that took.

Unfortunately the sanding contractor's helper didn't quite have control of his machine, and gouged out chips all round the plasterboard walls – above the skirting board line. The 3-4 coats that Geoff wanted, to fill in the gaps between the varying edges of the boards and to give a clean finish, somehow didn't happen. It hurts when you do employ other people and they don't get it right, the way you would yourself.

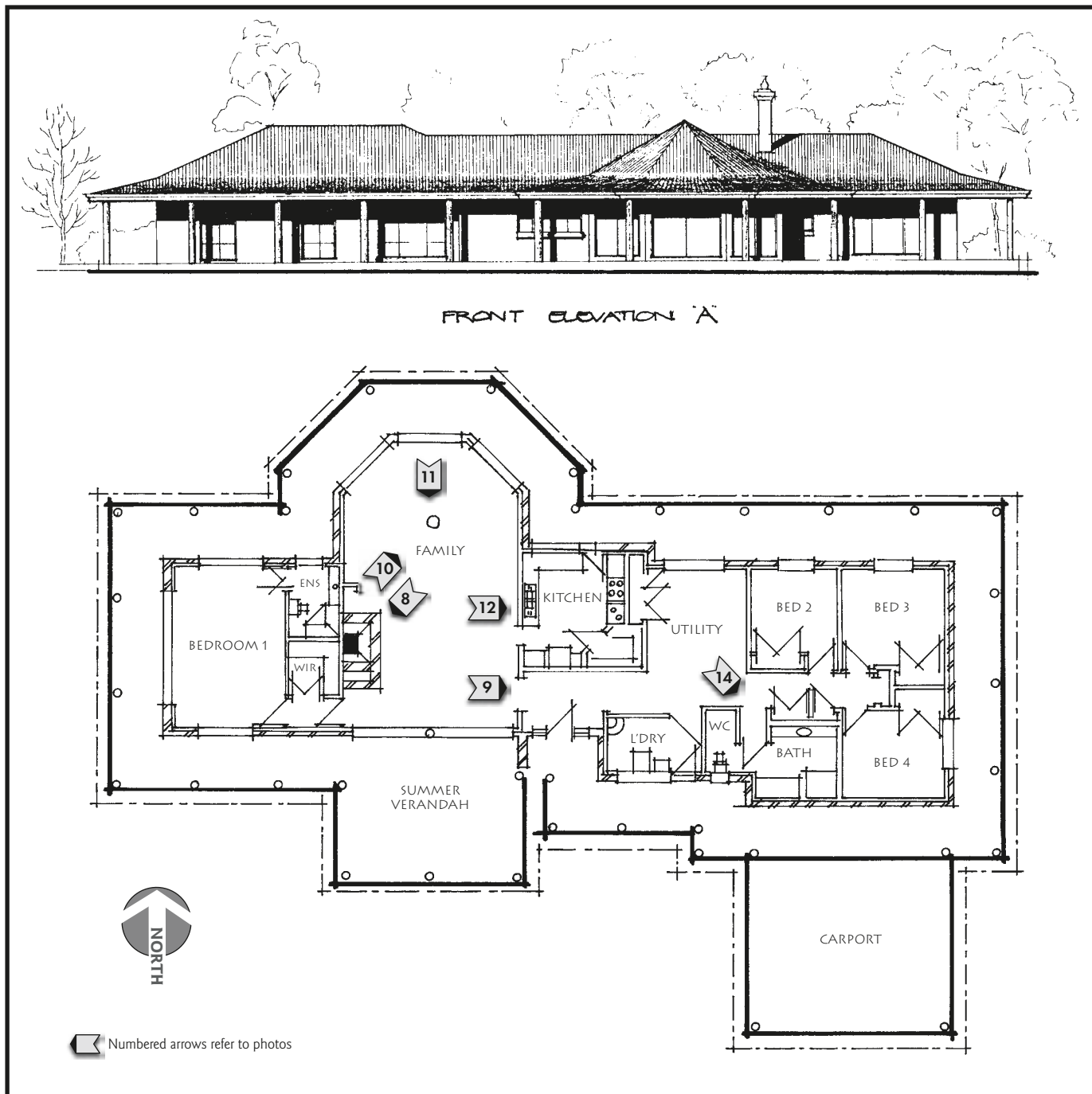
Evolving outdoors

The 1.9m wide verandahs were without decking boards for a few years due to lack of money – there's an enormous area of them. All external timbers were treated with *Intergrain DWD*. More open decking was added on the

eastern side, when the pool went in, which was all done for Dannika's 21st birthday, three years ago. Like the garden and its interesting levels and pockets, new areas have evolved over time. Leftover materials, like pavers, would stimulate creativity for where and how to use them.

At the rear, they found that the southerlies blew right along there, especially spoiling the use of the extended summer verandah, so they've added partial panels of Slate Grey *Colorbond*, laid sideways. The very high carport later had a two-level storage unit built into one corner – mainly to house the many surfboards this family owns – but also to give a too-tall verandah pole something to hold up, rather than cut it off.

The carport leads to the main entry door (well-scratched by importunate



dogs) off the back verandah – so is it really the front verandah? Janelle & Geoff can't decide but don't care – this house is very relaxed. That western verandah is full of oft-used items conveniently parked or dropped, which is what verandahs are for.

On the eastern verandah are chairs and tables and loungers and a hammock – and the dogs, who seem to move to wherever the action is. The side verandahs hold more chairs and small tables – and a punching bag (Janelle is learning boxing!)

Walls, windows and heat

External walls were meant to be roughly bagged and are, providing great accommodation for spiders. Painted an ochre colour, the walls are given added interest by an occasional round window let into them. These were planned to be leadlight one day, but like many one-day options for owner builders, time has altered their tastes and their keenness.

Windows and the many French doors generally are black aluminium. Where these are set amongst fixed

glazing, as in the main room, they have proved problematic because screen doors cannot be made to fit them, which annoyingly reduces their summer usability in this mozzie-loving jungle.

Above that glazed western wall it is all glass, which they are considering double glazing as too much heat is lost through this in winter. The house is heated by a slow combustion fire set into a large brick chimney unit, with a raised hob – for sitting and back warming – and ample wood storage. It is made of special blue-black bricks that Geoff had set his

heart on, but which turned out to have been discontinued. Consequently they were unable to get quite enough to do the job, and sandstone slabs and bagged other bricks had to fill in.

The internal brick wall was bagged with a colour mixed in to the cement which gives a more subtle and natural look than the painted external walls.

The thick mantelpieces are salvaged slabs from the old Capitol Theatre in Sydney. Sanding the nailheads off, Geoff deliberately left the nails in as part of its history. Similarly, inside the entry hall he made a dado wall of those carpet floorboards, but only belt sanded them lightly compared to the floors. This leaves a little of the age patina, though only a fraction of how dark and dirty they were when delivered, says Geoff.

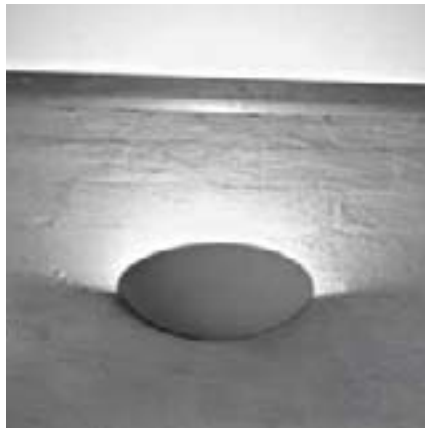
They paid to have the plastering done, as there are lots of strange angles in the ceilings, for the many recessed double-glazed skylights – they wanted a light-filled house. However, even with the argon gas as insulation, Janelle finds that in mid-summer heat still enters through certain skylights. For control of their artificial lighting, Geoff installed the latest in smart switches, a prototype C-Bus system from Clipsal, with fingertip push-buttons and linked switching.

Cooking and dining

There are lots of built-in cupboards in the house – never enough, says Janelle. Kitchen and bathroom cupboards were custom made from recycled oregon, partly over melamine shells. Janelle wanted a large pantry, all drawers, a roller shutter to hide everyday items like the toaster and kettle and the ‘doings’ for tea and coffee, and steel mesh panels for upper cupboards. A chest-height granite-topped bar behind the sink partially separates the kitchen from the main room but doesn’t exclude the cook.

That main room is dominated by a 12-seater wooden table, the perfect size and shape for the room. Secondhand, it was found by chance when they went to look at a bed for private sale. They bought both. The table is clearly the hub of this home, and with views out through all the glass to the jungle beyond, why would anyone want to leave the table? Not to mention the feasts Janelle lays out upon it.

The other key features of the room are the poles – de-barked. The bark remained for a few years, and they used to wonder



Above: Uplit bagged wall texture.
Above right: House nestles between horse paddock in front and jungle behind.

where the little bugs were coming from. Then Janelle, quietly sitting there on her own one rare day, tracked the source of the tiny sounds she kept hearing. It was coming from the poles – and it proved to be a healthy population of borers, steadily munching away.

Removing the bark from the standing poles took ages, but the decorative tracks on the bare trunks look great. Janelle had got used to working at great heights when she painted the ceiling in the main room, from a scaffolding. It’s a great summer house, they say, but that high ceiling adds to the problem of heating it in winter.

House changes with needs

Janelle and Geoff are about to remodel the house, now the kids have grown up. They intend to knock out a wall between the open study/computer room and the fourth bedroom, to make a larger young adults’ lounging area. To avoid an ugly patched area of different floorboards, Geoff will take them all up. Using other boards for a central inlay, he should have enough to re-lay the old boards over the rest of the new floor area.

Reflecting on their time in ‘Camp Coleman,’ Geoff marvels, not at how easily they adapted to roughing it, but how quickly they re-adapted to ‘luxury’ once more. After three years of outdoor showering, it took no time at all for them to turn back into ‘wusses,’ shivering if the bathroom louvres were left open, and rushing to close them.

The couple estimate they did about 80% of all the work on the house



themselves – but ‘they felt the pain of it all’ says Geoff. Fitting in owner building while still working at his paid job often involved him directing work or answering queries from Sydney via mobile phone, while clinging to a roof truss.

So when they lie in bed and look out at their private jungle, so close by through the many windows of their room, they can think of the mozzies and the site sheds, and know that they have earned every bit of this ‘luxury’ – their ensuite, and walk-in dressing room, are just behind the bedhead wall. There’s nothing so pleasant as looking back after the long-drawn-out hard yakka of owner building is over! ■



• Howard Leslie and Associates

Architectural services.
02 4384 4653

• Ross Holloway, builder

02 4369 0866

• C-Bus wireless lighting

Enjoy the benefits of home automation with minimal re-wiring.
1300 202 525, www.clipsal.com.au

• Envirocycle

Recycled domestic and commercial wastewater system.
1800 688 588, www.envirocycle.com.au

• Intergrain DWD

A water-based UV-curing acrylic polymer, for exterior use on doors, windows and decking.
1800 630 285, www.woodart.com.au
under Timber Finishes.

• Skylights

Ideal for overhead, out-of-reach places. Options include double glazing and argon gas filled.
1800 683 589, www.velux.com.au