
Japanese spirit in the Aussie bush

BY ALEX EDWARDS

By the age of five, I was 'helping' my father build our home. Later on I was forever building cubbies, so it was no wonder that I'd build my own home one day.

As a teenager, when my classmates were dreaming of becoming the world's best lover or policemen, I was dreaming of being free. I was 19 in 1973. The alternative lifestyle was in full swing – my exit to freedom from the mundane mainstream of a 30-year mortgage and all its trappings. But how was I to build a house without selling the next 30 years of my life to a bank? Pay cash! So the only alternative was to go to a mining town, and save as much money as I needed to be mortgage free.

One year later, armed with a fist full of cash (\$18,000), I set out looking for land. I'd arrived in Australia from Canada five years earlier, and had spent that time living in various longitudes and latitudes. I came to the conclusion

that a subtropical climate was best suited to my make up – anywhere from Gympie to Kempsey. I'd always wanted to live in the forest, have a big garden and privacy. No power, 4 hectares, good soil and dense forest were the criteria. After three months I found it in the Sunshine Coast hinterland – two hectares of wet sclerophyll bush next to hundreds of hectares of state forest.

On my way to Australia, I had a month stopover in Japan. Their sense of aesthetics moved me like nothing before and was to have a profound impact on my life. I had to build Japanese.

Planning

Being a somewhat monastic, solitary type I wanted something tailor made. How much space do I actually need? So I went down to the beach, made lines on the sand, walked around and laid in them. Sixty square metres would do. It

just so happened that was the minimum size for a dwelling in my shire.

A bulldozer was brought in to create a suburban size clearing, and the north eastern aspect was chosen as the house site.

Before I drew up the plans, a certain amount of preparation and thought was required. What is a house? Essentially it is a shelter. A shelter must be welcoming, so quite a bit of attention was given to a porch. Besides being handy in inclement weather, it welcomes and creates a transition between the inner world and outer world – something that is very important to the Japanese. The interior should have different spaces for different moods; at least one fairly spacious room for moments of grandeur, and then a small space like a bay window or niche area where you can cocoon. These ideas were pretty universal, but to build something Japanese I had to read the 'bible' of Japanese traditional architecture, 'The Japanese House' (Yoshida Tetsuro, 1935, out of print).

Then I spent a lot of time at the local library studying how to square and level the concrete stumps that would provide the base on which to build, as well as learning about basic building techniques. Finally I put the plans in to council – \$35 and five weeks later, I turned the first sod.

To get a degree of authenticity I had to respect certain traditional measurements. Japanese architecture has been modular and standardised in design for over 1000 years. Japanese culture is the only one that uses asymmetry as opposed to symmetry as its essence. The idea comes from the concept that everything is in a constant



state of change. Hence if something is perfect the next stage is imperfection. Therefore if something is not yet perfect it holds the anticipation that it will become so.

For a first timer, it is an attractive style of architecture to undertake due to its apparent simplicity. Let's not kid ourselves, though – Japanese carpentry is nothing like its western counterpart but more akin to cabinet making, using very intricate interlocking joints where nails are superfluous. Achieving such mastery requires a very long apprenticeship. For a young bush carpenter like myself, the idea of creating such an authentic product never entered my wildest dreams.

Construction

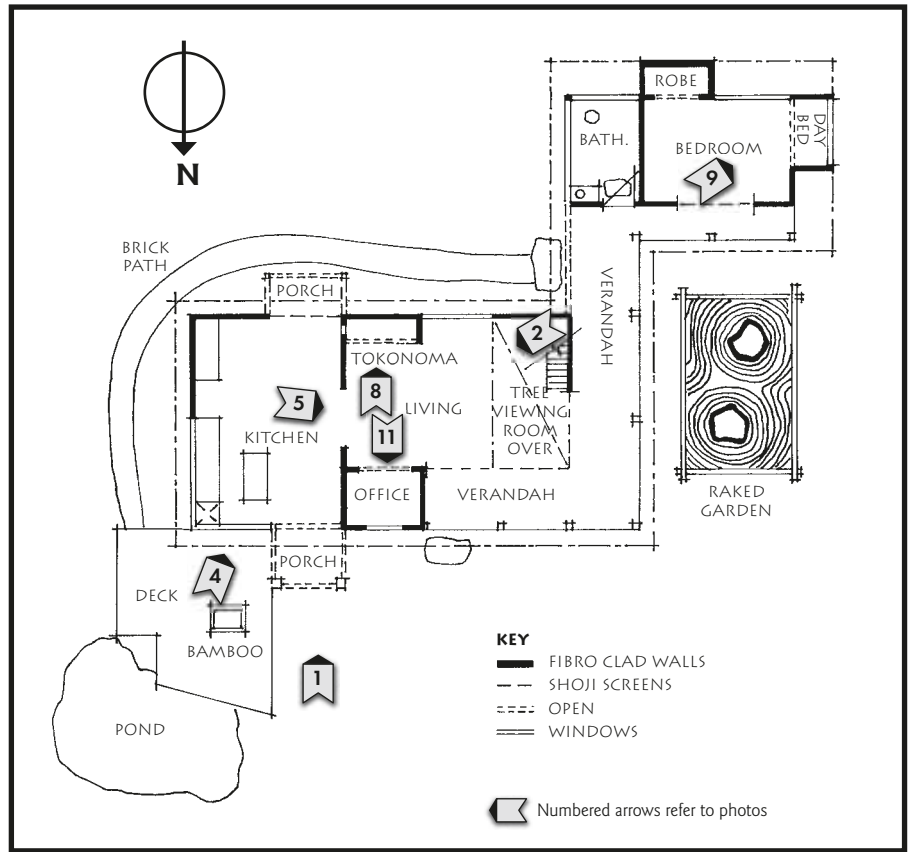
I arrived on my site with a station wagon and camping gear.

I bought a few basic hand tools, as there was no power. Next came all the material for the house; concrete stumps, second grade brush box tongue and groove flooring, 100x100mm dressed pine for the frame work, fibro sheeting for the inside and outside walls, second grade cypress pine for the ceiling, pre-made trusses for the hipped gable roof, *Zincalume* for the roof, one tank stand and a 10,000 litre tank. Total cost in 1979 was \$4200.

The frame of the house is exposed 100x100mm dressed pine, creating 2x2m lower wall sections that are criss-crossed with structural braces. These sections are either covered with fibro cement sheeting on the inside and outside, or left open to house rice paper covered wooden sliding screens (called shojis) or windows. The upper wall section of 300mm becomes the wall plate.

The hardest thing about building a house on your own is actually getting things in place, and then keeping them level while being nailed or fastened. At times self-satisfaction runs thin, but you keep going and eventually get there.

Another problem was my beginner's insecurity. My neighbour, twice my age, would come around to be sociable and would then take the opportunity to casually grab the structure, shaking it like a demented baboon to try to get it to move. Such an unorthodox framework could not possibly be satisfactory. Nearly three decades later it still stands proudly. A further point of contention was that more than a third of the walls would be removable and be



covered with paper... Well! His criticism made me all the more determined to stick to my guns.

Shojis

The next big project was designing and constructing the shoji screens, which are quintessential to Japanese architecture – basically an interlocking lattice of 8x20mm timber in a 30x30mm frame, covered with rice paper.

The paper, mostly found in specialty paper shops, or kindly sent by friends in Japan, came in 28cm wide rolls. You can therefore create any lattice pattern you like, as long as there is a support for the edge of the paper. The shojis run in 5mm deep hand-chiselled grooves rubbed with wax, which allows them to slide as smoothly as any complicated rail and wheel mechanism from your friendly local hardware. Traditionally the paper is changed every spring to refresh it, but if the owner of the house is romantic, lazy or poor, any accidental rips and holes are simply patched up. In time, this turns the shojis into a lovely mosaic patchwork of different shades. The paper never really shuts out the outside world; sounds come through, shadow plays of sunlight are performed



Sukiya style architecture

Japanese architectural style, originally used for teahouses, based on an aesthetic of naturalness and rustic simplicity, buildings in this style are intended to harmonize with their surroundings. Timber construction is employed, with wood left in a natural state, sometimes with the bark still attached. Walls are typically made of clay. Great attention is paid to detail and proportions, and the effect is one of refined simplicity.

From www.encyclopedia.com

on them and yet there is privacy. I covered a few shojis with clear acrylic sheeting to allow more light into the house, as the forest is very dense and close to the house.

The beauty about shoji screens is that they allow the house to be transformed to suit the season. For nearly nine months of the year, I remove the shojis completely and store them, giving the house an open pavilion feel perfectly suited to the humid Queensland summers. During the cooler months, they are replaced and give the house a cosy cocoon-like feeling. Clearly the design is more suited to summer as the materials have poor insulation properties, however a gas heater easily does the job of providing additional warmth.

A house with a third of its walls made of paper, without handles or locks, requires a certain degree of philosophical adaptation. Needless to say, insurance companies don't cope at all! Security would be an issue with most people but I have chosen minimalism as a philosophical and aesthetic concept, so there isn't much to steal. The positive aspect is that thieves don't break windows or locks to get into the place.

Life in the forest

The lighting was originally oil lamps and candles, except for a gas light in the kitchen. A *Rayburn* slow combustion stove provided heating, cooking and atmosphere. The ablution block was a simple self-standing roof structure, with a bucket in the ground as a

Tatami mats

Tatami mats are a traditional Japanese flooring. Made of woven straw, and traditionally packed with rice straw, tatami are made in individual mats of uniform size and shape, bordered by brocade or plain green cloth.

Information from en.wikipedia.org



squat toilet and the basic bush shower arrangements. For some unknown, possibly romantic, reason the alternative lifestyle rejected modernity and idolised the bad old days. Make do and lack of comfort was the motto. I survived it.

The original building project took exactly one year of working on my own. Of those 12 months, eight were spent in a tent, washing in the creek, cooking on an open fire in the garden where I'd become one with the wildlife. The joy of finally moving off the dirt to a clean flat floor was a moment I'll always cherish.

New urge

As the years went by, I longed for more comfort and space, and the lust to be creative surged again. Another pavilion was added and linked to the main house by a verandah. This section was done on a tighter budget and with less impact on the tree population; as much material as possible was scavenged from the local tip, or purchased at the demolition yard. This pavilion was to shelter a bedroom and bathroom. It stands roughly one metre off the ground on 100x100mm hard wood stumps and is an adaptation of the *sukiya* style, known for its sense of lightness. The floor platform is 100mm thick, as opposed to the main pavilion that is 200mm thick.

The framework was creosoted, protecting the timber and in keeping with Japanese traditional timber colour. The walls are painted with the best quality paints. One day I was at the tip and a young chap was throwing away nearly full tins of paint into the bin. I jumped down into the bin and threw back up to him the tins of pale colours that I could have tinted. So the house was painted inside and out for the price of tint. I went for traditional Japanese colours, which are usually earth and nature tones.

The rooms are not large but due to the minimalist, uncluttered décor, they appear much larger.

Bathroom

The unusual bathroom came from my dislike of the clinical look and high maintenance of the western bathroom; the place where you clean yourself is nearly always finished with white ceramics showing every hair and soap suds. I wanted a bathroom that was as maintenance free as possible.

Looking for an alternative lifestyle?

A few tips to owner builders who may be starting up and envisaging an alternative lifestyle to go with it.

Don't buy land in an area where there is no power thinking it will be peaceful. Everyone has generators!

I found that permaculture works fine when you are regenerating a degraded area. In a natural environment like the bush, it only works until the forest reasserts itself, sending out tree roots that zap all moisture and nutrition from your garden patch.

The wildlife runs the show. They have 24 hour a day surveillance on your produce. It's not a matter of just planting a few extra plants for the wildlife. The wildlife increases with the amount of food you grow.

To avoid having to deal with a complicated waterproof floor, I used the ground itself as the floor. The 100x100mm base of the wall sits off the ground on concrete stumps with ant caps. Where the shower water runs, I built a rough 1x1m slab with a run off into a poly pipe in one corner, so that the water could be channelled to the garden. Then I covered the whole of the ground with about 50mm of river gravel, leaving an air gap of about 30mm to the wall base. The shower is an adaptation of the traditional Japanese shower where you fill a bucket with water, sit down, in this case on a smooth flat top rock, ladle water over yourself, soap up and rinse off, using very little water. The wooden floor adjacent to the bathroom is half a metre above the ground. I used a big rock as a step up to the verandah, which serves as a hall to the bedroom. Unfortunately, due to the number of trees, solar hot water is out of the question so I use gas. From the composting toilet, the most basic one on the market, *Nature Loo*, I can gaze at the surrounding forest through two ceiling-to-floor glass walls.

The water supply consists of two 10,000 litre tanks, one serving the kitchen and the other the bathroom. The top of the tank is flush with the bottom of the gutter and the bottom of the tank is above the highest tap eliminating the use of pumps. The

problem with living amongst the trees is that the gutters are always full of leaves. I've not found anything satisfactory to solve the problem other than getting up on the roof once a month with a broom. Even so, the water always has a weak tea colour and organic taste to it.

Tree gazing room

Years later, a second storey tree-gazing room was added to the first pavilion. This room is a blend of traditional tatami floor coverings (reed grass matting) with modern floor-to-ceiling glass walls on two sides. All this use of glass came about during a visit to the demolition yard, where a large stock of glass sheets was going for \$20 a piece, cheaper than fibro at the time. So the design changed dramatically midstream, in keeping with the spirit of owner builder, home made houses.

Solar

About four years ago the Queensland government introduced a rebate scheme for solar energy plants, so I took up the offer - 10 panels supplying 2.1 kWh daily, six batteries and a 240-volt inverter. Over the years the trees have grown significantly and now the clearing is sunlight deficient a lot of the time. The panels receive a good five hours of sunlight per day in summer, but hardly an hour in winter. I must be careful with the iron. Electricity has brought the place and my lifestyle into the 21st century with the flick of a switch. Now I wouldn't live without it!

In the forest, there is always at least one mosquito, so a coil is left burning in an inconspicuous corner of the house and this is more than adequate. At night I sleep under a mosquito net. As for incandescent light, one would expect the house to be flooded with moths and sundry but it's not the case. My theory is that in a forest environment where nature is relatively intact, there is a balance between bugs and bug eating creatures hence the population is kept in check.

During the last 25 years I've evolved and so has the house with me. I've ended up with something that suits my greying years but has kept its alternative simplicity with the original Japanese character. All in all, it has cost about \$16,000 but has given me about a \$1,000,000 worth of satisfaction. ■



1. The original pavilion still stands proudly after nearly three decades.
 2. Surprisingly spacious living area with office nook and kitchen beyond
 3. Back to nature bathroom.
 4. This kitchen never feels crowded.
- More photos next page...



5



6



7



8



9



10



11

Continued from p.37...

- 5. The beauty of shoji screens is that they allow for the house to be transformed.
- 6. With the shojis removed, an open pavilion is created. The ladder provides access to the tree gazing room overhead.
- 7. A water urn near the front entry.
- 8. The tokonoma (small raised alcove) is essential to traditional interior decoration.
- 9. The day bed in the bedroom provides additional storage underneath.
- 10. Filtered forest sunlight plays on the traditional raked garden.
- 11. The view of the forest from the office window is perfectly framed.
- 12. Arranged flowers in the tokonoma.



12