



Soul space

'Ahimsa' – river rock retreat

BY SHARYN MUNRO

The river loops protectively around this small flat peninsula, where thin rainforest foliage splashes bright dapples through the green light that is too glowing to be called 'shade,' and bellbirds call ceaselessly, their tinkling like tiny temple bells. Here in a clearing sits a small oval building, its rock walls green-tinted, looking as if it might have grown through the forest humus, pushing up rounded river rocks and fallen tree logs, raising a large flattish stone or toadstool for its roof as it did so.

This is 'Ahimsa,' the retreat Griselda Browne built, with help from many different friends, over about five years. The name is Hindu for 'no harm done,' which seems to me to be a sustaining thread in Griselda's way of life. She had always liked it as the name of her friend Marie's meditation hut. Ahimsa was meant not only for Griselda's own use but for that of anyone who needed a peaceful space, especially effective in this magical setting.

The idea for the retreat began with such a need, back in the mid 1980s. Griselda's close friend, Sister Angela, was the nun largely responsible for the building of the Anglican mud brick monastery at Stroud in NSW. With the

building done, and now battling cancer, Sister Angela really needed six months time out – solitude.

Sister Angela's space

She and Griselda walked over the 200 hectare property owned by Griselda and her husband Ormonde, seeking the right spot. They chose a little point of land enclosed by the river, an oasis of calm amidst the bustle of the river's flow. This point was fenced off from cattle; Sister Angela brought in a small caravan as her dwelling, and Griselda's old tent was erected as the chapel. It was a very wet year, Griselda recalls – I think of leeches – but her friend was undaunted.

During her time here, Sister Angela, a sculptress amongst many other talents, used forest logs and strangely shaped bush timber and vines to make the Stations of the Cross (the stages of Christ's last journey, which pilgrims walk, stopping at each to contemplate and pray).

A tin trunk was placed along the path, for the exchange of letters and supplies, so as not to disturb that solitude. Regardless of precautions, Griselda says 'all sorts of people found her!'

When the six months were up, they agreed that a more permanent refuge from the world should be built here for others, as it was such a spiritually facilitating place. Perhaps Sister Angela had made an impression on it, as it had on her. From experience I know 'place' can be interactive. Griselda admitted she had always wanted to build a little hermitage, so she and the capable Sister Angela began.

Slow rocking begins

Griselda chose the oval, a very organic shape, as many seeds are oval, not round. They dug out the foundations for an oval about four metres across at the widest central point and about five and a half metres long. Trailer loads of rocks were collected from along the river, and although Sister Angela had to move on, Griselda kept going.

She hadn't build in rock before but knew she would do a double layer wall with a cavity, and that the rule was 'two rocks over one or one rock over two.' She kept repeating that to herself and 'just kept going round and round!' She did not use formwork; every now and then a larger rock would straddle the two layers

and tie it together. Between every three or four rows she stretched barbed wire around the whole circuit, for strength, well tied to door and window frames.

During these years the family lived in Sydney during the week, making the long journey home by train and car every weekend, while daughter Polly went to the Conservatorium High School and Ormonde still worked in Sydney. About once a month Griselda would steal a whole week here – to revive – and to work on the stone house. It would take five years to complete.

The walls had plenty of time to settle as she could only do a little at a time. She set the door frames in for the two partly glazed second-hand doors, and had to remember as she went to make provision for the casement windows and for the sapling sections to go through the walls to support benches and shelves, inside and out, and for pegs.

Friends contributed ideas as they came to help, and inclusions like alcoves or odd rocks just ‘evolved.’ In one alcove, where a gap existed, a friend painted a small flower on glass and inset that in lieu of a rock.

The small fireplace arch was formed over part of a steel tyre rim. The fireplace, at one point of the oval, was lined with firebricks and the chimney built up using non-exploding, non-river rocks around a metal flue, then clad with river rocks and ending with a rock ‘hat.’ Neighbours Jack and Jean were regular helpers with this. Outside only a slight bulge betrays its presence as it blends into the walls rather than being distinctly squared off as brick chimneys usually are.

I can vouch for its non-smoking drawing capacity as Griselda had lit it earlier.

Several ladders with planks in between formed the scaffolding. Sue, a friend who came up from Sydney about once a year, had the knack of spotting the perfect rock for a given space. This was especially valuable as the walls rose higher, as she could just pass it up to Griselda, saving the more usual climbing up and down in the trial and error method.

The rock floor was laid last, after the roof went on. Plastic was laid and a thick layer of sand added before doing the rock jigsaw in setting concrete, no easy task, as they were all different thicknesses. She inset a large flannel flower motif into the floor, as this was Sue’s favourite flower. Only later did Griselda learn that

it would have been much easier to place and set the rocks into a dry mix and add water once all in place!

Roof regenerations

When the walls reached a height that she felt gave the oval the right proportions, poles were collected for the roof frame and, designed and led by neighbour Max, a flattish faceted tin roof was laid and lined with blue foil insulation. The roof and its supports extended beyond the walls to form a verandah all round, with vertical poles supporting them.

But Griselda says it was always inhabited – either by a large diamond python or a plethora of rats.

Eventually, after about 12 years, the roof had to be replaced, and another neighbour, Guy, had the idea of using hessian and concrete. More poles were found and a new frame erected over the old, making it slightly higher, so the walls had to be raised another few rounds of rocks. A small fixed window was inserted as a skylight, which from the outside looks as if it’s lifting its hood and peeping out.

Thin wire was criss-crossed between the rafter poles and hessian soaked in a thin sand and cement slurry was lifted up and draped over the frame and wire. It was unwieldy, recalls Griselda, and there was quite a lot of slumping as it was so heavy. After two such layers a thicker mix was rendered over the ‘skin’ and formed the present rock-like roof. She says it has cracked a bit and is very uneven in thickness, so leaks a little, but it was an experiment.

She is considering coating it with tar to seal the leaks. As this roof is not lined no creatures can hide in there, but a little mouse seems to have found its way in and hides behind the books on a shelf. Only a minute hole is needed for our opportunistic fellow residents of the bush. Once a possum came down the chimney and was trapped inside. It then tried to gnaw its way out, as the bottom of the door frame testifies.

Personal envelope

While Griselda boils the billy for our cup of tea, I enjoy just being in this space. If stone can be the fabric of a comforter, that’s what this small oval feels like inside – a personal envelope of security and peace. I think the lack of corners does have an effect.

I am immediately drawn to sit on one of the two log-end seats by the fire and the open window. A low stone bench softened with cushions is built on to the wall on the other side of the fireplace.

It is a supremely uncluttered space. At the opposite end of the oval, below a small stained glass window, Griselda had inset supports and planks for a bench and shelves, now hidden by a colourful cyclamen and purple curtain. She regrets setting in the actual top planks, as having warped now, they are difficult to replace. Above it a single shelf holds a candle or two; cups hang from hooks below it.

One alcove holds a kerosene lamp, another a few books, including a ‘visitors’ book, a testimony from 1988 on of those who have loved their time at Ahimsa. The words ‘healing’ and ‘balm’ keep occurring, and the language is often poetic, such as ‘the trees pinned the stars in their hair’ quoting from Christina Stead, or ‘a timeless garden of chiming song’ as indeed it is. The bellbird song overlaid even the river’s burbling over its small rapids.

It is the lack of furniture that keeps the space simple – in fact the word ‘pure’ comes to mind. Pure space. When Griselda stays here she rolls out a thin foam mattress on the floor, which I think would be fine, as to bare feet it feels like a massage, with the gentle undulations of the smooth rocks.

She had always loved sleeping outside under the stars and still loves being in the bush. Staying at Ahimsa is like camping: cooking on the fire; washing in a dish that drops into the recess in the fixed bench at the back of the hut, beside a small screened cupboard; water from a barrel, or the creek; bathing doubtless in one of the still pools that the creek rushes into for a rest now and then; sitting on the simple bench outside, back against the stone wall.

In the small clearing beside the hut is a circle of stones of special significance, starting with the spirit stone, loosely based on the Koori Creation Circle. Here, Griselda says, ‘We enter from the North, beside the Spirit Stone, and move around the precisely placed stones, contemplating each aspect of creation.’

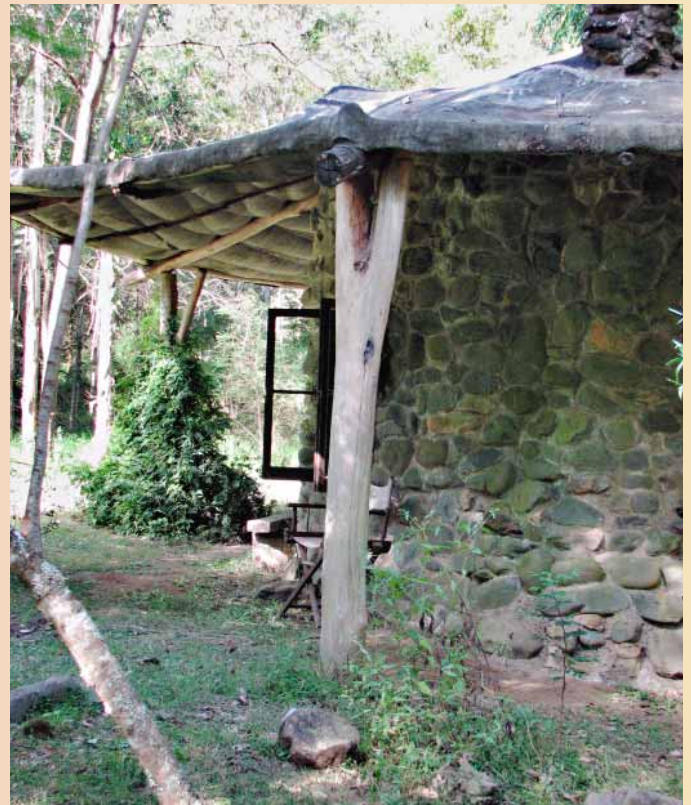
Ahimsa is damp and green, as a rainforest dwelling must be: I love the way the rocks and even the cemented hessian have taken on a green tinge, become part of the surroundings. The fire soon dispels any negatives from this inside.



It is not too far to walk here from her own beautiful mud brick cottage (TOB 148 Aug/Sep 2008), just far enough across a paddock and through the bush for it to feel like elsewhere. While her new home was being built by herself and family (daughter Polly and her husband Dougal) she came less often

to Ahimsa. Now, with only the garage/studio yet to be finished, Griselda intends to spend one night a week down here. She has a lovely meditation space at home, but, as she puts it, 'Ahimsa's calm is different.'

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Griselda would like to acknowledge here her gratitude for the help she received from a rolling cavalcade of friends and neighbours, and while some spent more time at Ahimsa than others, they are all a part of it. Even now, when she needs a hand, individuals such as Linda, Tricia or Michelle appear and arrange a working bee.

I suspect it's a case of 'Be-done-by-as-you-do'! ■

