

bushbunker

Two architects forsake suburbia for sustainable living in their own green valley.

Words **Cindy Lord**

I wanted a house that floats above the landscape, and for the landscape to feel like it's coming into the house," says Chris Bligh of the thinking behind this simple rural residence, nestled near the end of the Cedar Creek valley near Samford.

Bligh and his wife Sonia Graham embarked on their dream building project three years ago after spotting the lush two-hectare block for sale on the internet. Living in a cramped inner-city cottage on a handkerchief-sized block in Red Hill, they were ready for a move. "After we had our first child I thought I would go crazy if I didn't get out of there," Graham recalls.

"It was the first block we looked at," Bligh adds, "and it was such a unique block and so green. It had lovely black topsoil and a natural spring. The estate had been done quite sensitively – they had left the trees and rocks and that was partly why we were drawn to it – so we made an offer the next day."

With that impulsive decision, the couple went from being young urbanites to the overnight owners of a country patch and two cows called Les and Stan. The two architects threw themselves into the project and came up with a simple house design on a tight budget of about \$180,000. Vegetarians who live by a green ethos, they kept the internal floorplan to a humble 127 square metres. "Size is a big consideration environmentally because you use less materials," Graham says.

Sitting under a single sloping roof that gathers rainwater and dumps it efficiently into a 63,000-litre underground rainwater tank, the house is essentially a box of unpainted fibre-cement, indented with patios and decks.

"The raw walls become a background colour that blends with the colour of the granite," Bligh says. "We kept the materials palette limited – fibre-cement, pine timber painted black, and natural oiled timber on doors and sliding windows."

The house is "in conversation" with its surrounds – natural rock stairs settle it into the landscape, while rooflines "fit with the folds of the hills and valleys". Inside, the cave-like living room has framed views of a boulder-studded hillside. Textured and warm, the bagged concrete walls are a "reverse veneer" added for thermal mass, as is the polished concrete floor. Bligh explains: "Usually the bricks or blocks are on the outside; we've put them inside to trap the heat in winter."

To keep the house eco-friendly, plantation timbers were used. Non-toxic paint, passive solar design and solar hot water were other green initiatives. Tasmanian-born Graham has been regenerating the creek gully with the help of her two young children, and they have an orchard planted with citrus, pawpaw and tropical apples along with a permaculture vegetable patch.

The house is still a work in progress – a meditation deck off the master bedroom is currently under construction – and managing the acreage keeps them busy. But despite the hard yakka, the couple has no regrets about their tree-change. "We don't feel the need to leave home as much anymore," Bligh says. "Some weeks I only have to get in the car once." ■



Main picture Architects Chris Bligh and Sonia Graham work out of the office attached to the carport. The neighbouring house at the back is further away than it seems. **Above** Rustic views are framed by large picture windows in the lounge. **Left** Outside comes inside as the bathroom features a slide-away batten screen.

Photography
David Kelly