



Dreams take shape in cedar

BY SOPHIE LOVE

Buying a block of land is an exercise in dreaming. We don't see what is there. We see what will be when our dreams have landed, taken shape and been built by our willing (if not necessarily able) hands and those of the ones we love. We suffer the status quo for a while and then our frustration at not seeing our dreams made concrete forces us into frenzied action ... for a while!

But maybe I speak only for myself ...

When I came to look at Avalon in 2007 I had an intention, finely crafted and firmly written in my intention book, for the land and the home I was to buy. There had to be room to grow, for the fulfilment of all my long nurtured and cherished dreams. Don't laugh if I share them with you - the polo pitch, the club house, the big house, the horses, room for me to run every day and ride. The running has been happening but I can't remember when I last rode my beautiful horses. And when I wanted to grow, I never imagined I would be growing a family by meeting and mating with a fine man, marrying him and growing a baby.

That certainly slowed me down but hastened my demands on others to do more, finish more, make progress, be ready! We renovated a house (*see TOB 161 Oct/Nov 2010*) and then with the imminent birth we had to move our home office out of the baby's room and elsewhere so plans for an office were drawn. My husband, Ged, is a builder (as well as an electrician and solar expert) so we just had to agree on a size and plans. We knew from living in a very small house that size, in buildings, is everything!

Design process

There was then a long period of walking into spaces wherever we were and gauging their feeling and usefulness and then measuring them. The tape measure went everywhere with us! No friend's house, no office visited, no client house for Ged was unnoticed and all were mentally stored. I did hours on Google looking at cabins and we even went to Sydney to look at pre-fabricated cedar cabins. We were both appalled at the quality but we were impressed with some of the spaces and we finally decided on a space 6 x 7 metres with a large open multi-purpose space, a bathroom/shower area that is 2.4 x 2.4 metres and the kitchenette to be sited along one of the 2.4 metre internal walls. I had long ago decided on a site because the new office is to become the polo club house when the polo

field has been laser levelled and the big house built 'on the other side' (of the property!). This may not happen in my lifetime I am thinking now, but then I was younger and more naïve.

The site was a hump of land protruding from a slope overlooking the river flat that one day will be the polo field. I envisaged the building sitting flat on this hump. I never said that, I just thought it was obvious! I thought they would have to flatten the hump out a bit to build the office. Ged had other ideas.

The site is approximately 350 metres from the house and as we are all solar powered and rain or river watered, that meant digging a trench to the site for power and water. The farm track from the house to the site is very rocky so the trench was dug mainly in the rich chocolate alluvial soil of the flat.



*Treated pine frames and trusses on piers
- with space for 18 calves beneath!*



Materials

We decided on western red cedar because I love weathered timber and cedar doesn't taste good for termites (we have somewhat more than our fair share of white ant nests). We wanted lots of windows so that we felt part of the view and environment, not shut off from it. Ged chose the roof colour (Wilderness) and then we both made a terrible mistake with the windows. We chose casement windows which never close properly and as we one day intend to have a deck all around the building, leading to the door on the river side, outward opening windows are a ridiculous choice. Oh well, we live, make expensive mistakes and hopefully learn...

I had fallen in love with Higgins' beautiful wool insulation, so that was always going to be part of the equation and we had used it in our house renovation and had heaps left over! Under the *Colorbond* roof is a standard foil backed insulation blanket and then Higgins' recycled plastic polyester batts and the walls are all insulated with wool. The internal walls are plasterboard. The treated pine frames and trusses came from TimberFast in Taree, so did all the WRC cladding. The windows and doors came from Trend but we would consider Stegbar in the future, who are making beautiful timber windows and doors these days. And I am so in love with the recycled timber sliding window in my bathroom that I only want sliding timber windows from here on in.

White ant attack

The timber floor is a bit of a mish mash! Earlier in the house renovation, I had been advised to buy timber flooring



*Above left: Colorbond roof, foil backed insulation blanket and polyester batts.
Above: Western red cedar cladding to finish.*

from an auction in Sydney and we both got very excited about the prices. I was supposed to be getting Tasmanian oak flooring for bargain basement pricing. But it was appalling quality and a lot was split or badly discoloured, so it sat in the garage for over a year.

Needless to say the white ants had a party in there, so when we finally decided to use it in the office, there wasn't much left. We salvaged what we could because funds were pretty low and then made up the difference with boards of similar narrow width and colour from our local, fabulous, sawmill. We just took down a sample to Gary Ostler and asked him to match with it, if he could. Gary thought he had something way down the back and discovered while he was looking that the white ants were into timber in his store too so he gave us what we needed for nothing, in gratitude!

The floor was of poor quality and really needed sealing with a tough skin so we went for the more toxic chemicals. I had plenty of paint left over from the renovation and really wanted the same clean but warm colour of the Dulux *Clotted Cream* so used that throughout. I got very bored with painting and had so little time with a young bub that we asked our friend to recommend us a painter and he sent along the exceptional Nat who brought a mate and did the whole space in a day perfectly.

Chief builder was actually not Ged, because he was too busy installing solar systems, but Ged's great friend and incredibly talented carpenter and all round Mr 'can do and fix it,' Scott Knight.

How high are those piers?

The treated pine piers went in a long time before the rest of the building was erected (probably a year) and another friend of Ged's, Gary Howard, from the Central Coast came up to finish off some things on the renovation and help Ged put the piers in. Gary turned up crook that morning and was literally green so we sent him to bed for the morning. In the afternoon he was a bit better, but he still only barrowed a few loads of concrete compared to Ged's hundred or so! When they were all in, I drove past and had a minor conniption: 'Why are they all so long?' They were three and six metres high and I wasn't interested in building a Queenslander. 'Don't worry, they will all be cut down to the right size.' Okay, I thought, what do I know about building practices?

But when they were finished and proudly called me up to look I had a true blue pink fit. Ged and I had a big argument that night and I realised (again!) that when you are telling a man about your vision for something he is building you can't be sketchy and trust that they understand you and can somehow download the image in your mind's eye into theirs. No, you have to draw pictures, decide measurements and then make them follow a plan!

The building that I saw sitting on the earth, hugging it and reaching out from it, is a crazy circus stilt walker! The cows love it - 18 calves or four full grown cows can shelter under there in the rain. It took me about a year to get over the shock but I guess now I just look at it and see how it will look when the barn below is all closed in and the plants and the verandah are there to shade and shadow the high rise piers...

Feng shui mistakes

When we had got to lock up we asked our lovely builder friend, Dennis Andrighetto, who has been studying feng shui for the past couple of years to come and do a consultation for both the renovated home and the new office. The house needed a few minor tweaks as it is perfectly placed with the river curving around it but the office was built the wrong way round! To say that was a blow was an understatement and the piers were too high so that all the air and space below could undermine the work taking place in there. So we

have had to try and remedy that by painting nine centre piers bright red to try and ground the building and we have changed our verandah plans so that we eventually make what is now the front door, the back door and walk round the building to the front door (which is currently four metres up in the air because of the long pier disaster... don't mention the war!)

We got our good friends at Customline Joinery to make us a cedar stable door so we can still use the back door opening but keep the bottom door closed and use it as a door and window as the sun streams in from the west in the afternoons. We were supposed to enclose the piers and space below the office this year but funds have been low (possibly because of the bad feng shui in the office!) so 2011 will see final completion of the office. And I think we will turn it into guest accommodation and build another, smaller office, closer to the house.

What's next?

It isn't finished yet - Ged has instructions that the shower and loo must be functional by Christmas as we have friends coming to stay immediately afterwards. That means digging the septic tank out of its site on Ged's old farm and relocating it somewhere here and putting in shower surrounds and cobbling together a little kitchen area. I have cleaned up Ged's old kitchen cabinets and they are fine but we haven't got a work surface and won't have until next year so gluing floorboards together is what will probably happen. As always on the farm, it is only when we have visitors that there is a mad rush to get things done as I get more raucous in my demands and more impatient as the list

of all the chores that have to be done 'one day' never seems to get any smaller, but ever longer.

It's a beautiful space. Light, warm, cool in summer with the windows open catching all the breezes. It's a wonderful place to work, so peaceful and calm and beautiful. And the space is exactly right. Not too big, not too small but just perfect. Not just for the office, but for guest accommodation, the club house, or whatever its next or future purpose may be in its long and interesting life.

The great thing about owning land is the scope for improvement and imagination. The bad thing is that your imagination can run away with you and it can be hard to come to terms with the timeline reality of building and land improvement projects - but maybe it is all meant to teach me patience. I should be good and patient by the time I am done! ■

If you like Sophie's writing style and want a more in-depth look at the highs and lows of owner building go to her blog at

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