

Toowoomba retreat

Opening for Sustainable House Day and named after the owner's former family *bach* in New Zealand, this grand nature retreat is the start of a new chapter.

WORDS Emma Scragg

AFTER INUNDATION OF THEIR

Brisbane home in the 2011 floods, Chris and Marlene Norris sought higher ground. Resilience was at the forefront of their minds when they commissioned the design of their new home at 670 metres above sea level on the edge of the Great Dividing Range, not far from Toowoomba.

"I originally had a vision of what I thought the house would look like, overlooking the escarpment," Chris reflected. Building designer Ross Campbell literally turned Chris' original vision around, ensuring the home responded to its climate of hot, dry summers, frosty winters, chilly winds and frequent mist and drizzle, setting it back from the edge to reduce howling winds and bushfire risk. "It's quite different to what I envisaged, for the better," says Chris.



The house is set back from the edge of the escarpment to avoid howling winds and to reduce bushfire risk. Two long, north-facing wings of single-room depth each have living spaces at their eastern end to take advantage of the expansive views.

“The large area of glass required for the view was at odds with gaining optimum energy efficiency so I needed to get the basics right in terms of orientation, improved glazing et cetera, to achieve a high star rating,” says Ross. His resulting plan with two long wings of single room depth maximises northern aspect while providing separation between the main home and secondary wing. Low-e glass was used strategically, in combination with thermal mass, heavy-duty insulation and internal blinds. Double doors enable the house to be compartmentalised for privacy and thermal efficiency.

Due to the site’s regular cooling breezes, Ross designed the outdoor room with openable glazing on two sides to make the space usable year round. A north-facing pergola with deciduous vines complements

this space, providing an alternative outdoor area close to the kitchen while improving solar control for the house.

In addition to selecting materials to blend into the surrounding landscape, durability and low-maintenance were important to Chris and Marlene, who plan to spend their next 20 years at Wakarara. Finishes are generally simple and appliances and fittings chosen for their reliability and water or energy efficiency. Special touches have been added: local Helidon sandstone for the fireplace and main entrance, elegant built-in cabinetry, and feature pendants. The only exception to low-maintenance externally is the pair of hardwood entry doors, shielded from the west by a metal louvre screen.

Thinking long term also meant considering accessibility. Hallways and

doorways are oversized to allow easy access, and the powder room, cost-effectively shared with the master bedroom (no toilet in the ensuite), is designed to be wheelchair-friendly.

Chris and Marlene are delighted with how the house performs and feels. It has abundant daylight thanks to generous window openings, a light colour palette and high ceilings. The 15 degree rotation towards the north-east ensures that the house is “nice and toasty in the morning even after only half an hour of sunshine, when outside can be bitterly cold,” says Chris. He has established 160 square metres of food garden to provide for the majority of their fresh produce needs. Additional herb beds close to the kitchen and natural landscaping will soon complement their site and their beloved new home. ⑤



④ Low-e glass was used to the living wing, in combination with thermal mass from the tiles, concrete slab and heavy duty insulation to walls and ceiling and internal blinds to counteract heat gain and loss through glazing.



“We chose a raw material palette of hardwoods – spotted gum and blackbutt – and we recycled bricks from the lean-to we pulled down for the new paved courtyard.”