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GREEN ACRES

Building your own house. Growing your own vegetables. Watching your kids spend their afternoons in a treehouse instead of in front of the television. Following a greener, more sustainable way of life is a dream for many of us. For the Fisher family it's a dream come true.

PHOTOS: MICHAEL WEE **WORDS:** HELEN HAWKES

SEVEN YEARS AGO GRAPHIC DESIGNER ANNA FISHER AND HER husband Christian, an architect, were living a typical urban lifestyle in Sydney. "We had a lovely, older-style flat in Coogee, on the second floor," say the couple, both 40. "But it was smallish and we were working long hours and doing a lot of commuting and eating takeaway food." >



“There’s a dairy farmer next door and the Fishers leave their gate open so his cows can come in for an extra feed in winter and keep the grass down in summer.”



Christian and Anna, here with Sam, 3, Mia, 7, and dog Leila, used local earth and timbers in their hand-built house. They saved money by doing a lot of the work themselves and making good use of leftover building materials. The broad sliding door, for example, was made with offcuts of timber salvaged from the building work.

It was the arrival of daughter Mia in 2002 that prompted a rethink.

“Christian had always wanted to move back to the country, he grew up in Taree [in regional NSW], but it wasn’t really till Mia came along that I wholeheartedly agreed,” says Anna. “I was at home, carrying a screaming baby, shopping bags and a pram up two narrow flights of stairs. We needed more space and less stress!”

Holidays spent in the little town of Bellingen, on the mid-north coast of NSW, led to a six-month hunt for a property where they could build their own home. They wanted their house to have eco-friendly features but, at the same time, they had a tight budget – they were leaving their jobs in Sydney with only a little money.

They eventually bought 3.8 hectares of pasture and native forest for a steal, just before the last property boom. Their land is tucked in at the end of one of Bellingen’s streets and the lack of traffic means Mia can play safely on her bike with friends.

There’s a dairy farmer next door and the Fishers leave their gate open so his cows can come in for an extra feed in winter and keep the grass down in summer. The family can gaze over the rich, green country through their three-bedroom home’s abundant windows.

It took them a year to build the house. During that time they lived at Taree, where Christian’s mother still resides, and would take the three-hour drive back and forth to a caravan on the property.

“A lot of the labour was ours,” says Christian. “We helped make 5,000 pressed-earth bricks on the property. That reduced our costs.”

Pressed-earth bricks are similar to mud bricks and have what architects and >





The family share home-grown produce and kids' clothes with the neighbours. Play spaces, too, are a communal pleasure, and the Fisher kids often hang out at a neighbour's treehouse. Their home isn't connected to town water but Bellingin's high rainfall fills a 20,000-litre tank and is used sparingly by household appliances chosen for their water efficiency.



designers call "thermal mass". In other words, they absorb some of the heat that's in the air on a hot day and release it slowly overnight when the temperature is cooler. The house also has lots of big windows to the north, making the most of the sun's light and warmth, and only one tiny window on the western side, which protects the home from the intense heat of the late afternoon sun. There's no air conditioning and ceiling-mounted fans are used only occasionally in summer – they're not often needed.

When it came to the material for the floors, doors and window frames, recycled timber was out of the question. "We simply couldn't afford it." Rather, the Fishers sourced mixed hardwoods – mainly blackbutt – from the local mill and dressed it themselves to use for the home's timber framing. Spotted gum was chosen for the floors.

Always with an eye on their budget, the couple used offcuts as well as some wood they were given by a friend to make a handsome dining table and a broad sliding door. The stainless steel benches in the kitchen were sourced from a commercial kitchen company at a fraction of the cost charged by standard kitchen suppliers.

Clever decisions like these allowed the Fishers to build their home for around \$200,000, not including the garden or the pool.

Like many people on country properties, the Fishers aren't connected to the town water supply. They rely on Bellingin's high rainfall, 1,517mm a year, to fill two concrete water tanks: a 20,000-litre tank to supply the house and a 5,000-litre one for the garden and pool.

Anna stringently researched appliances, finding the dishwasher that used the least water and installing a three-star-rated showerhead in the bathroom to minimise water consumption. Other eco-friendly choices are a natural gas stove, Solahart solar panels to heat water and lined curtains for insulation.

The Fishers have been in residence for five years now and the *Muraya* and the lilly pilly they planted on most of the boundaries to give them shade and privacy have grown into bushy specimens.

"We also planted natives to attract birds. The first year living in the house we had lots of red-back spiders, but once the natives grew we didn't have any," says Christian.

"We're not perfect ... But I think it's just about doing as much as you can."

There are passionfruit vines, mango, mandarin, grapefruit, lime and kaffir lime trees and a vegetable patch. Herbs such as oregano, basil, rosemary and chives – many of them a gift from Anna's mum, Shirley – are dotted around.

"We were novice gardeners but now Mia will only eat lettuce from our garden – she doesn't like the taste of the stuff from the



The Fishers planted a bird-friendly native garden and found that their worrisome population of red-back spiders disappeared after the birds arrived. The home is built of pressed-earth bricks they made themselves and its design makes the most of the sun's warmth and light. Large, shaded outdoor "rooms" mean it's easy to stay cool in summer.

supermarket – and both she and our son Sam like to plant seedlings," says Christian.

Outdoor play is encouraged; there are limits on television viewing and computer games, but Mia prefers riding her bike and playing in a neighbour's treehouse or on a trampoline. There is also the family dog – Leila, a border collie-kelpie cross – to play with.

Around the house, other small touches reveal Anna and Christian's commitment to sustainable living. They buy dry food goods in bulk and use Earth Choice cleaners for the kitchen and bathroom.

All of the used paper from the couple's home office goes to the children's drawing table, and Anna recycles birthday and Christmas cards to create collages and her own cards. Comic pages from the newspaper and colourful catalogues are used for gift wrapping. "Pumpkin Patch is great for girls' wrapping paper!" says Anna.

Living in an eco-aware community helps the family's efforts to cut down their impact on the planet. "My neighbour, who has four girls, regularly brings down a box of clothes," says Anna. "One neighbour has potatoes and chooks that lay eggs which I swap for my herbs and chillies."

And both Christian and Anna have bartered their professional skills (they have a business called Fisher Design) in exchange for services such as massage and hairdressing or for produce.

"We're not perfect," says Anna. "For example, we have a plasma TV that was handed down to us by the family. But I think it's just about doing as much as you can." >