

# Hang On

Teetering precariously on the edge of a cliff overlooking the ocean on the South Coast of NSW, an early 19th century miner's cottage has been given the chance of a second life thanks to its owners' ecological sensibilities and the meticulous attention to detail by Dunn + Hillam Architects, writes Jane Riley.











**top** Viewed from the back garden, the cottage looks like a tree house nestled into the bush. **bottom** A vast South Coast national park is one of their neighbours. **opposite page** The original narrow, rotting, soft-wood deck was replaced and extended to increase the living space.

While the owners had made the decision to move out of the inner-city Sydney suburb of Newtown four years ago, the weatherboard cottage on a private 2400-square-metre site was an unexpected purchase. “We saw the house by chance in the newspaper and made an excursion to look at it but didn’t expect to buy it one week later,” says Swiss-born Michi. “We bought it because we liked the way it felt and didn’t want to turn it into anything else.”

Michi and his partner and two young children lived in the house for a couple of years before making any changes but knew from the outset that any renovations they did would be carefully considered and based around the philosophy of: if it’s working well, keep it.

“It was all about getting the building to work properly and using as much of the existing building as we could,” explains architect Ashley Dunn of Workshop 1.

But while they were, says Ashley, “mindful of doing no unnecessary work for aesthetic reasons”, the house had been “added to and messed about with so much it was hard to see what its original form was”.

With its unassuming façade of the original, weathered timber walkway, uneven stone path plus a rambling vegetable garden and forlorn-looking scarecrow, one could be forgiven for thinking that not a lot had been done at all since the family had moved in. It is not until you get inside that you can appreciate the thoughtful, measured modifications that have been made.

The main shape and size of the four-bedroom, two-bathroom, 160-square-metre house was not altered at all. Instead, they made the girls’ bedroom a little larger and included built-ins; moved the laundry to the deck; replaced and extended the verandah; added an outdoor stainless steel bath; included a wood-burning fireplace in the living space to heat the whole house with a cleverly designed music nook behind it.

Some structural work was required as well. In the guest room this consisted of adding a new ceiling beam, cleaning up and resheeting the now-hidden fireplace so it can be used one day if desired; and in the living space, part of the ceiling was relined but only individual boards were replaced and two roof lights were installed to bring more light into the south-facing room.

But the main challenge was making the house stable, which included replacing rotting footings and redirecting run-off from the road, which was causing the rot, into the stormwater drains and adding new piers that “form bookends to stop it falling down the hill”. To make it more self-sufficient they added insulation under the floors and double insulation in the roof and walls; installed 20,000 litres of water storage in tanks under the house and a heat pump hot water system. →



“Shoring up the building wasn’t difficult – it was the decision we made to have everything on show that required precision,” says Ashley. “So the balustrade lines up exactly with the structural grid, the structural grid lines up with the footings, and the footings are all cast in the ground and encased in terracotta pipes so you can see the formwork.”

It is the attention to detail in the construction that sets this house apart. “We wanted the structure and materials to have a presence – to be solid. So we made the decision to split everything and expose the junctions,” says Ashley. “It’s very obvious the way it’s been put together which goes with it being a weatherboard cottage.”

They lifted the deck roofing off the existing roof to encourage airflow and ensure that in summer there is no hot air trapped on the deck; the roof sheeting runs over the top of the rafters and the gutters hang separate, as if floating in the air. Even the timber columns on the deck are split in two so you can see through them.

By reconfiguring the kitchen’s orientation and adding a sliding glass door onto the deck and an outdoor sink, barbecue and dining area, the family gained an extra living space which is enjoyed daily most of the year. Recycled Jarrah has been used throughout – for the kitchen bench tops, sink drainers and the narrow shelf housing the owners’ green glass bottle collection, plus the decking timber. While all of the original pine floorboards were kept, tidied up and stained with Sikkens Ebony floor oil, the kitchen boards were in such poor condition they were replaced with recycled Jarrah to coordinate with the bench tops and help demarcate the space.

Bespoke suspended cabinetry in hoop pine with Jarrah edging was designed for the guest bedroom/second living to house the owners’ books, the television and sewing machine; and in the music nook for Michi’s extensive record and CD collection, record player, and niche seating – which now has stable footings below that stop the record player from jumping.

Changing as little as possible meant keeping the things that still worked: the kitchen was built around the existing freestanding oven, and the guest ensuite and bedrooms and bathrooms to the right of the entrance have not been touched. Even the extensive garden, including two grassed platforms and some flourishing banana trees, which meanders to the beach, is being nurtured back to its original coastal state minus weeds that came in from the neighbouring council reserve.

The owners’ love of all things secondhand extends to much of their furniture, such as the dining table made from a French train carriage floor and chandelier brought back as hand-luggage from Switzerland. They even liked the original green walls of the guest room so much they colour-matched it.

While, as Ashley says, “it was a simple renovation”, it was the joint owner/architect focus on paring back, the materials used and its construction that have ensured the old cottage stays true to its roots and will remain standing for many more years to come. 🌿





A gift from one of their daughters' godmothers, the Swiss chandelier takes pride of place in the owners' multi-functioning spare room.





# Specs:

**Architect**  
Workshop 1 Dunn + Hillam Architects  
www.workshop1.com.au

**Area**  
Gross floor area: 160 m<sup>2</sup>  
Site area: 2390 m<sup>2</sup>  
Deck area: 88 m<sup>2</sup>

**Deck**  
New deck structure: Iron Bark  
Decking and balustrades: recycled Jarrah from Australian Architectural Hardwoods www.aahardwoods.com.au  
Deck: finished with Lanotech, www.lanotech.com.au  
Balustrades: 50 mm x 10 mm stainless steel flats with stainless steel cables.  
Japanese bath: stainless steel  
Footings use reclaimed terracotta pipe as permanent form work

**Kitchen**  
Cabinetry: hoop pine ply with tallow wood veneer  
Bench tops and shelf: recycled Jarrah  
Sink: a custom design with Jarrah draining racks  
Hardware: all Blum  
Floor: recycled Jarrah  
Cupboards, drawers, floor: all finished with Livos Ardvos www.livos.com.au  
Bench tops: finished with Livos Kunos countertop

**Outdoor dining**  
Cabinetry: hoop pine ply with tallow wood veneer  
Bench tops and shelf: recycled Jarrah  
Hardware: all Blum  
Cupboards, drawers, floor: all finished with Livos Ardvos  
Bench tops: finished with Livos Kunos countertop  
BBQ Electrolux Integrated Barbecue EQBH100AS with Roasting Hood

**Living, Music Nook, Bedrooms, Hall**  
Floor: original pine sanded back and finished with Sikkenas as follows:  
2 thin coats Cetol HLS with Ebony Stain, followed by 2 coats Vloerlak Floor Varnish  
Walls and ceiling: re-sheeted with 12 mm plasterboard and insulated then painted  
2 x velux electric roof lights with double glazing and venetian blinds  
Ceiling lining boards repaired and painted  
Fire: Cheminees Philippe Radiante 705 firebox (provides all heating)  
All joinery hoop pine ply with recycled Jarrah edging all finished with Livos Ardvos

**Plus ...**  
20,000-litre rainwater storage under house (self-sufficient)  
Roof re-guttered with Smartflo gutters, www.smartflo.com.au  
Bush fire diesel-powered pump fitted for fire fighting  
Electric pump and rain bank fitted to supply house  
Roof and ceiling void insulated with R2 insulation  
Hot water supplied by a Quantum Domestic Compact 340L heat pump, www.quantumenergy.com.au/products/domestic-hot-water/domestic-range-224.aspx  
All under-floor areas have been insulated with Astrofoil, www.astrofoil.net  
Building is heavily insulated, easy to keep warm in winter and stays cool in summer.  
Cross-ventilation has been improved so a constant airflow through building in summer is achievable using sea breezes.  
Structure is all screwed and bolted together and only large sections of timber have been used so that the building can be dismantled and all pieces re-used in the future if necessary.



## Floor Plan

- |                |                   |                   |
|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| 1/ entry       | 6/ kitchen        | 11/ deck          |
| 2/ bedrooms    | 7/ pantry         | 12/ storage       |
| 3/ bathroom    | 8/ outdoor dining | 13/ japanese bath |
| 4/ living room | 9/ BBQ            | 14/ fireplace     |
| 5/ music room  | 10/ laundry       | 15/ veggie garden |





