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LIVING SCULPTURE



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Living sculpture

With an affirmation that 'all we need is in abundance now' guiding the building process, artist and owner builder Sioux Dollman has used her contagious energy and warmth to inform an inspired building process, with remarkable results. Her eco-built straw bale home reflects her values of beauty, simplicity and functionality and is more than a living sculpture; it is a home that is a monument to artistic talent and self-belief.

BY LINDY SCHNEIDER
PHOTOS BY SIOUX DOLLMAN



“ **OUR HOME...**
*With gratitude and love we live in flow and abundance, ease and grace on our magical journey of joy and peace...our magical fairy temple for love, creativity and imagination.
Beautiful, helpful, skillful beings, permits, money, materials are in **ABUNDANCE NOW.**
Thank you with all our hearts.* ”





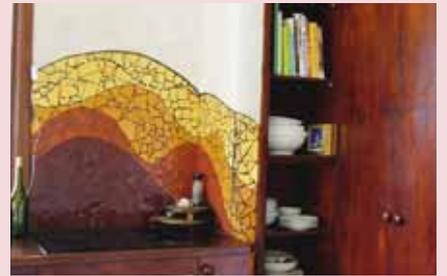
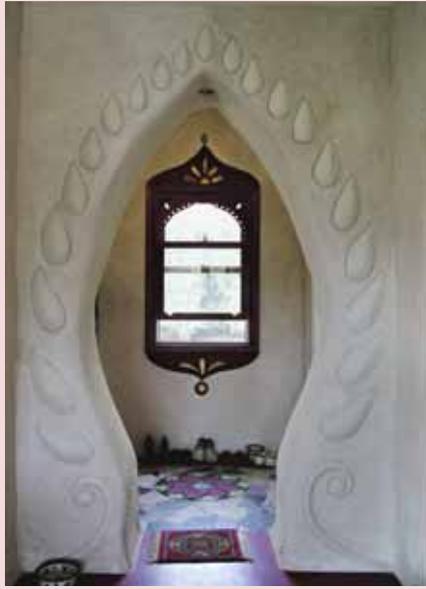


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Envirosep

Finding the place

Sioux's decision to live and build in Warburton in the Yarra Valley (70 kilometres east of Melbourne) was 'a leap of faith.' She relocated from the inner suburbs of Melbourne to the picturesque village, which is nestled at the foothills of Mount Donna Buang. 'I came for a weekend away,' she says, 'and I was so enchanted by the town's natural beauty that I decided then and there I was coming.' Driven by a 'voice of the heart,' Sioux rented a house while she waited for the right land to manifest. A few months later the block, a rarity in the green belt council zone, appeared.

She purchased the 2000m² block of land outright in September 2006. Sioux spent two months converting an existing shed into a living space for herself and her daughter. 'It felt important to me to live on the land I was to build on,' she says, 'to be really close to the process and to be connected to this little patch of earth that was now mine. Making the shed comfortable for me to live and work in was essential as I wanted to enjoy the building process.'

Situated on the outskirts of town, the elongated, rectangular-shaped block had a long north-facing boundary that offered a perfect perspective for the solar passive home she intended to build. With a wintertime creek running through it, the block also had a magical quality with an established fern gully providing a character to the land that appealed to Sioux and her belief in playful whimsy.

Finding the right architect

As a working artist, Sioux has a defined ability to visualise and a deep reverence for beauty. As a first time owner builder, and first time home owner, she knew she needed the help and support of like-minded people to see her ideas articulated, and she knew she wanted to use local people and materials wherever possible.

Sioux first met local eco-architect Alwyn Williams, of Soft Loud House Architects, when Alwyn approached her with an idea for rendered artwork on the exterior of public buildings. Sioux's large scale sculptures, mosaics and acrylic paintings had caught his attention and he respected her artistic ideals and capabilities. Together they developed a specialised render mix and

application process which supported unique 'relief art' characteristics to buildings and a new way of working for Sioux. She had also found her architect.

'I wanted to engage an architect because I didn't know enough about building,' says Sioux. 'I intended to attempt this massive project on my own and I didn't have any knowledge of permits and building practices. I knew my time would be better spent on other elements of the project. Alwyn had a vast amount of knowledge when it came to sustainable design. I knew I wanted my home to be a passive solar design but I didn't know about all the ways that could be achieved.'

Design process

Alwyn started the house design process by asking Sioux to list a series of words that reflected her feelings about her home. 'Beautiful, simple, functional, fire resistant, cost efficient' were words Sioux offered. At one stage in the process Alwyn said, 'You're not a possum, Sioux. You don't have to camouflage yourself out here in the bush. Your house is an expression of your self.' Sioux returned from that meeting with the realisation her home could be a living sculpture to inhabit and bring to life in her own unique way.

The resultant plan was for a two storey, two bedroom, straw bale, simple rectangular house of 130m². 'I moved a few things around during planning, took a few walls out and relocated the laundry but for the most part, the planning process was easy,' says Sioux. 'There were functional things I needed, such as high ceilings - so I could do cartwheels with roller blades on,' jokes Sioux, 'but I also started to see the house as a blank canvas that could carry my own individual mark.' Rendering was to be part of that mark.

Sioux's evolution as a working artist, something she feels she was born to do, has been influenced by the work of Spanish modernist architect Antoni Gaudi and Austrian architect Friedensreich Hundertwasser. One of her mantras is a quote from Hundertwasser: 'A straight line is killing mankind,' and these words reverberated in the design process as she incorporated her appreciation for 'roundness.'

Alwyn also made a three dimensional cardboard model of the house so Sioux could feel her way into the dimensions

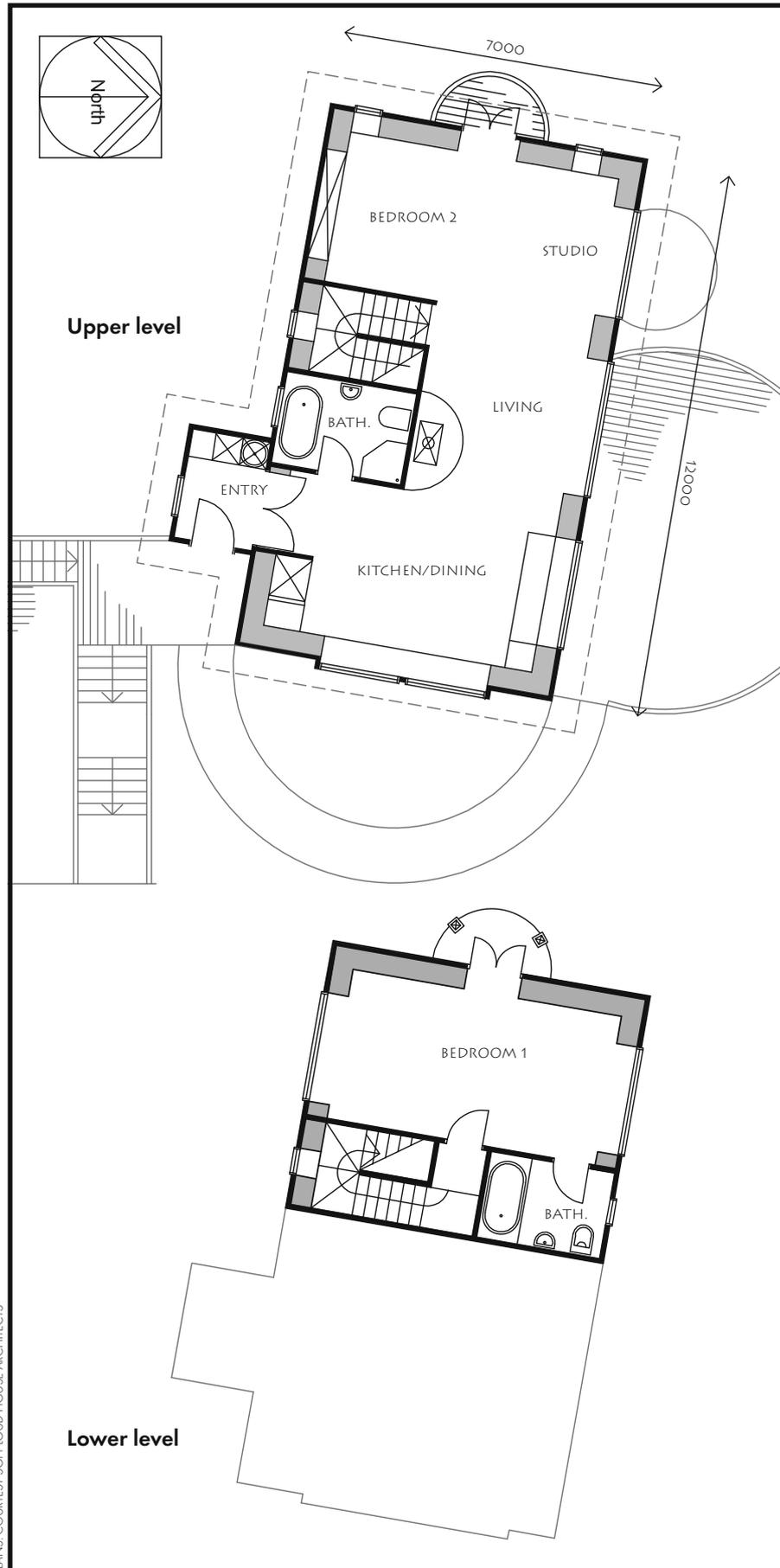


of the rooms and sense of space. 'In my mind, I walked around my home and lived in it for months before it was even built,' says Sioux. 'I have an inherent capacity to visualise and I knew this house inside out - it felt 'old' before its time.' The model provided Sioux with design inspiration, and her whimsical ideas for relief art using render on the exterior started to evolve.

The project team

The next twelve months were spent planning and excavating the site. Sioux also got to know the local builders and tradespeople she could invite onto her project team. She knew her team needed to be open-minded but also open-hearted. To work on this non-standard project, the team needed to be able to understand her vision, and to be able to problem solve in creative ways. As project manager, Sioux knew she wanted to enjoy the process, learn along the way and know that her team shared her sense of wonder in being a part of a build that was very different from the typical 'matchbox' house.

She found these qualities in Aron and Martin of Metamorphic Solutions, two local builders who had specialist skills in straw bale and earth-based homes who also appreciated her bold vision. 'I wanted a fun experience of building. People talk about how stressful it is to own build. I wasn't buying into that,' says Sioux. 'Every morning, we started on site with a coffee and we truly got to know one another. The guys were like my hairdressers,' says Sioux, 'I used to blurt out everything to them!'



Martin wishes all building projects could run so smoothly but notes that Sioux did her homework. 'I'd tell her what she needed to find out and guaranteed, she would go off, research everything she could, make decisions and always have the materials we needed on site so we could keep working. She never skipped a beat,' says Martin.

'We never saw a problem as a problem, just as a way for finding a new creative solution. As a team, we all worked that way and we had a great time because of that. We also had a job to do and we were on a tight deadline, so working in harmony and with humour was the only way to get there.' Sioux thinks her sense of humour helped the permit process. Anxious about a permit she had been waiting on for a year, Sioux rang the council early in December 2008 and said, 'I want the permit by Christmas, or you will have to take me out to Christmas lunch.' It arrived the next week. 'The time between pouring the slab to obtaining the 'Certificate of Occupancy' was eighteen months,' says Sioux, 'the maximum time I could take and still satisfy the conditions of the First Home Owner Grant scheme which applied to the project. That set a very firm deadline for us.'

Rendering before the straw bales are in

As an owner builder Sioux did an incredible amount of work herself. Apart from the six month period during which she rendered every day, she also installed all the straw bales, set all the wire mesh in place, did all the painting and most of the floor tiling. 'I think it is because I am small that I have such a fascination with the large,' says Sioux, her hard work and achievements impressive on any scale.

With the timber frame in place, the next step was to encase the frame in builder's foil and bird aviary wire. The render was then applied over the wire on the exterior. 'We did this process a little differently to a traditional straw bale home where you render over the bales. We were building in a wet climate and it's important to keep the bales dry. The best way to do this is to render first, then use the bales to infill the frame from the inside.' One hundred straw bales, sourced from a farmer

in Shepparton, were used at a cost of \$500. This part of the process took one day with the help of friends.

Special render

The render, a lime-based mix that Sioux and Alwyn developed specifically for her artistic work, was applied in three coats to the exterior and interior walls – the final coat was a ‘sponge finish’ and the surface Sioux performed her magic on. ‘It’s like icing a giant cake,’ says Sioux, ‘you mix the render in a concrete mixer until it starts to fold back on itself, just like a cake mix.’ Sioux’s concrete mixer is called ‘Bluebell’ and most of her tools were named and given personalities as part of the team.

Rendering is laborious work. ‘Sometimes when I lug buckets of heavy mix up scaffolding or I am hand trowelling on render, I think why am I doing this?’ says Sioux. ‘But on this project, when I sat with my ‘small tool’ and started coaxing the design out of these materials, I felt like the house was talking to me. It was magic and it was my heart speaking.’

Building to minimise fire risks

In addition to the deep, curvaceous window ledges the straw bale home offers, the thermal mass is great for both moderating temperature and bushfire resistance. Although the Warburton area has been given a ‘medium’ fire risk classification for building, Sioux, having lived through Black Saturday in the region in 2009, decided she would build to higher specifications than required. All exterior balconies and posts are made of steel and are to be covered with render, tile and pebble finishes (for a sculptural effect), windows are hardwood with double glazing and tough mesh fly screens (windows and screens were one of the major costs of the project at \$25,000) and she has installed double insulation in the roof cavity and a *Colorbond* roof. Rendered exterior walls also offer improved fire protection.

Services

The eco-built home has many sustainability features including a 330-litre solar hot water system, which is connected to the wood heater and has

a water jacket system (the Australian-made *Nectre*). This provides year round convection hot water heating using a system of copper pipes.

A solar power electrical system has been incorporated into the design as well as access to grid power. The intention is to switch to full off-the-grid power when Sioux can afford an extra investment in solar panels.

The septic waste system is a three tank, reed bed system, which uses enzymes and bacteria to process waste. Sioux chose the *Envirosep* SP 2000 system for its functional design and easy fit with her needs. She was told that ‘a scoop of dog food’ down the toilet is advisable every now and again to keep the creatures happy.

Snail tank

Sioux is fully reliant on tank water with two tanks (20,000 and 11,000 litres) in place. A third tank, another 20,000 litres, is to be installed, providing Sioux with another sculpture opportunity. This tank, to be located towards the front of the house given the restrictions of the block, will become Sioux’s ‘golden, bejewelled, crystal, Versace-styled, water carrying snail’ – another example of Sioux’s good humour and ability to convert a difficulty into something imaginative.

The *Hebel* panel floor (1800mm long x 60mm thick) is topped with painted timber tongue and groove, set on battens which adds an additional insulating air cavity. Termites are kept at bay with *Kordon* treatments on all the stumps and the underside of slab. The house has been given a six star efficiency rating.

No straight lines

The home is a visual delight with every perspective made beautiful by her work. Sioux has covered every straight line of timber with render, so she encouraged the builders to leave their own visible mark on her home. Twenty-eight, hard-carved timber rafter tails, affectionately known as the ‘curlyworts’ provide a finishing touch to the roofline.

LED lights glimmer throughout the building and decorative, heart-shaped alcoves have been created by making shaped wire frames that are indented into the straw and then rendered. Sioux has designed timber cutwork ‘inserts’ for the windows to ‘knock off’ the

Artistic rendering tips

Sioux and Alwyn’s ‘render recipe’ has more lime (and less cement) than typical mixes to create an ecologically sound product, a longer drying time and greater flexibility when applying.

Their mix is:

- 1 part white cement (Brighton Light)
- 2 parts lime
- 9 parts concrete sand

Lime can be harsh on the skin so Sioux found shoulder length rubber gloves a necessity.

Have two people to help you. Keep the mixer going with fresh batches of render to help streamline the job.

Invest in scaffolding. Sioux purchased a 2.4 metre lightweight system with a 7 metre span.

Render tools are readily available from hardware stores and more detailed work can be done with palette knives, potters tools and by hand.





corners. In her quest to remove straight lines, she has also hand painted designs at the top and bottom edge of each window, framing them with a sense of flow and nature. Her colour scheme is earthy and warm.

The large open-planned kitchen/living space has vaulted ceilings and a feature wall behind the fireplace. To enter the light-filled room from the mosaic tiled entry foyer, you pass through a rendered, shaped door arch Sioux calls 'the belief gateway.' From this vantage point, the extent of Sioux's work fills you with awe.

Exterior features

On the exterior, bell shaped flowers and bees emerge from every surface and wrought iron, heart-shaped railings encircle the balconies that take advantage of the mountain views. At either end of the home are two bell-shaped canopies, a recycled fibreglass pagoda that Sioux has cut in half and painted with a copper based paint with a green patina. The edges of these canopies or 'frilly knickers of the home' are encrusted with crystal mosaic and gold leaf effects. Every aspect of the home is a moment of wonder.

Costs

Sioux has invested \$240,000 in her project including all architect costs, fees and materials. She purchased a Buildsafe insurance policy specifically for owner builders and was able to obtain finance by using the existing equity she had in her block of land 'otherwise the banks didn't want to know her.' Her builder Aron marvelled at her ability to 'take something inexpensive and turn it into something beautiful.'

Off-cuts from the house flooring became a base for the three dimensional rendered balustrade in the stairwell, a

simple wardrobe kit from a hardware store became beautiful when Sioux added a surround, and a cut-to-size ply kitchen is a functional and stylish, mess-resistant space that is also a canvas for Sioux's mosaic tiling. The total cost of the kitchen, including the sink and oven was \$5000.

A building plan and a 'things-to-do' list headed up with a 'magical building affirmation' are a unique 'Sioux touch' but a sense of fun and a willingness to do something beautiful are also keys to the success of this project. Sioux now has a specialised skill in rendering and has worked on many projects such as the Mansfield Steiner School and Upper Yarra Community House. With just a few finishing touches to go on her home, she is now available for render commissions and 'how to render' workshops. She laughs that she now has a 'red card' for Occupational Health and Safety although she is not sure it is as effective as the 'bubble of light' that she usually feels protecting her.

Sioux's philosophy on the connection between beauty, art and building is clear. 'The essence of art is that it sustains life. Sustainability is not just about planting a vegetable garden or recycling rubbish, it is about creating beauty on the inside as well,' Sioux says. 'Through art and beauty we are able to create a shared sense of life, love and wellbeing. I think it is vital that we surround ourselves in beauty. Our homes need to sustain us and bring us joy.'

- Find creative ways to make negatives into positives
- Avoid straight lines - in rooms and in thinking
- Only ask advice from people who believe in your vision
- Know what you can compromise on - inexpensive can still be beautiful

- Find a team of tradespeople that want to 'join' you, not just show up
- Have fun with the process
- TRUST

Sioux's living sculpture reminds us that our homes are more than the materials they are made from. ■

Author *Lindy Schneider* is a writer, creator, content maker. Her website is www.wordstolife.com.au



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