

GRAND OPENING

WITH DECKS THAT CAN BE RAISED TO SECURE THE HOME, THIS YARRA VALLEY PROPERTY IS NOT
WORDS RACHAEL BERNSTONE STYLING GLEN PROEBSTEL PHOTOGRAPHS SHARYN CAIRNS

JUST A MODERN, DOMESTIC FORTRESS - IT'S ALSO A FAMILY-FRIENDLY EXAMPLE OF ECO DESIGN



DESIGNER'S TIP
 SPACE LOUVRES
 ON SLATTED TIMBER
 SCREENS SO THEY
 ALLOW IN WINTER
 SUN BUT EXCLUDE
 SUMMER HEAT



The Finemans', low-maintenance country weekender (opposite page) requires no painting or staining, and the sustainably sourced timber will weather with character. (Above left) Charles and Alane love to watch Jack (six) and Sam (five) roam about the property. The kitchen (above) is elevated above the living room to capture views of the rolling hills in the distance. A slow-combustion heater in the double living space (left) warms the entire house, thanks to heat-shifter ducts positioned in the walls, which move hot air into the bedroom pavilions.

When Charles and Alane Fineman arrive at their weekender, they don't just walk through the front door; instead, they lower the decks, like a modern-day version of the drawbridge, opening their house to guests and the rolling landscape. Overlooking a picturesque dam, their timber-clad house is on a 280-hectare working farm in Victoria's Yarra Valley. The property is situated between national parks and a state forest, making it accessible for bushwalkers, bikers and other visitors in the adjacent woodland. So, even though the house is more than two kilometres from the main road, security is a concern.

Using off-the-shelf components, such as winches and pumps, Andreas Sederof, of Sunpower Design, devised the unique fold-up decks that protect the home and allow the family to, literally, batten down the hatches when necessary (as seen overleaf). The Finemans also looked to Andreas for his expertise in environmentally sustainable design, and at their request, he incorporated many eco-friendly features that make the weekender comfortable and easy to maintain.

The original brief was for a house that was off-the-grid, but the energy needs of the working farm necessitated connection to mains electricity. The property (which was previously a scout camp and trout farm) is independent for water, though: rain is collected from the roof and stored in two nearby tanks for use in the house; a windmill on the lake pumps supplies up to four storage vessels for firefighting purposes; and an all-waste Biocycle system treats greywater and blackwater for re-use on the garden. →





DESIGNER'S TIP

HOUSE FOUNDATIONS CAN NOW BE POURED USING ECOBLEND CONCRETE, WHICH IS NOT ONLY STRONG AND THERMALLY SOUND, BUT CONTAINS BINDERS THAT ARE MORE ENVIRONMENTALLY SYMPATHETIC



Achieving this degree of self-sufficiency was no mean feat, given the Finemans' spatial requirements for their own family unit as well as gatherings of relatives and friends. "We originally wanted to build a larger house with a guest wing, but we decided that would be bigger than we needed for the four of us," Alane Fineman says. "We gutted the log-cabin toilet block from the old scout camp and turned that into a bunkhouse. We've been known to accommodate eight couples with 11 kids all at once, but the whole point of this house is to get everyone to run around outside."

To that end, three separate but linked pavilions open onto the grassy slope that leads down to the lake. Fold-up decks on the master-bedroom and living wings extend these rooms into the landscape, while the guest wing is shielded by slatted timber security screens, which slide open to reveal large glass doors.

"One thing I love about the house is that you can see the view from every room," Alane says. "The kitchen and dining are elevated above the living area, so you can be in any space – even the bedrooms and ensuite – and see the hills in the distance."

The house is comfortable all year round, thanks to Andreas' passive-design solutions. "I had no idea of the impact of the solar efficiencies that Andreas designed, and I didn't think they would make that much difference," Alane says. "Having everything facing north with double-glazed windows means that, on sunny days in the middle of winter, we have to open the doors because it's so warm."

The passive elements are enhanced by a slow-combustion heater in the living room, which heats the bedroom wings via a system of heat-shifter ducts in the walls. "Andreas kept saying the house would be warm, but I couldn't see how with one heater. But it's incredible how, once you get that thing going, it warms the whole house."

Even Andreas was taken aback by the success of the home. "I've been doing this for 30 years, and it always surprises me when houses work so well, even though it shouldn't! In some ways, sustainable design is like motherhood," he explains. "You have to do 20 things at once to balance the aesthetic versus sustainable aspects."

In keeping the structure as sustainable and low-maintenance as possible, Andreas chose untreated radially sawn silvertop cladding and decking. This wood is derived from native regrowth and plantation sources, while radial sawing produces more timber from smaller trees. The facade requires no painting or staining; left untreated, it will weather and mature like the fence posts and old windmill in the surrounding landscape.

The frequency with which the Finemans let down their 'drawbridges' and the praise they receive from their guests is testament to Andreas' skills. "Friends say it's like coming to a hotel," Alane says. "It's such an easy place to relax and unwind." ❖

The Finemans' property was burned in the devastating fires that ravaged Victoria in February this year. When the fires were at their most fierce, Charles worked through the night, extinguishing spot blazes that threatened the bunkhouse and a hayshed, while a sprinkler system protected the main house. About 80 per cent of their pasture land was decimated, and they lost a hayshed, kilometres of fencing and 10 cattle from their herd of 450. "But, all in all," they say, "we were very lucky."

Encased in fold-up decks and sliding timber screens (above and opposite page), the house is well secured. When those same protective timbers are opened up, however, there are generous views from every room, even the ensuite (above left). The picturesque drive (below) runs for two kilometres off the main road, so the family and their guests can escape the city completely. "Many of our friends' kids don't get a chance to run around outside like they can here, so they just love it," Alane says.

