

Building on the Edge of the Earth

It's a primaevial urge, to make your own home – as old as humanity itself or older, even. In my twenties I decided I would build. Perhaps I had always this innate compulsion: my mother kept a clipping from a local newspaper, with its grainy newsprint photograph of me as a six-year-old, hair sticking out at odd angles from my head from her do-it-yourself haircuts. I'm wearing my grey school uniform and tie, my face with a curious smile, holding some children's building blocks in front of me for the camera. I wanted to be a builder when I grew up, I told the reporter visiting my primary school.

Amazing it is indeed that the desires of a tiny soul might find their expression, in just a twinkling of a star later in the overall scheme of things.

A couple of decades on, with some basic skills but little more – everyone in my family seems to either work on cars or construct something – I embarked on an alternative, passive-solar home building project. The site was on the rural plains north of Melbourne Airport – rugged, undulating country sprinkled with livestock, dotted with ranch-style houses.

I envisaged a robust home to suit. Soon, I had my heart set on adobe (cement-stabilised) and exposed salvaged steel, building mediums that seemed to polarise opinions around me then, just as now. Their strength and authenticity appealed to me. The rough-fashioned, organic texture of puddled mud brick walls against the straight lines of steel, the two contrasting elements beside each other in their brutal glory, makes me smile. Someone who loves plasterboard walls, decorated cornices and delicate ceiling roses might grimace. You either love adobe or you hate it, and I still love it as dearly now as then.

My partner was not quite so taken with the whole owner-builder thing. In hindsight, I can see she was utterly nonplussed by my enthusiasm and humoured me, as if this might somehow make it all go away. Perhaps building, with its mess and practical demands, seemed at odds with the artistic man she had come to know. She gave her support, hesitant though it may have been, which was enough for me. I didn't need much encouragement from her or anyone else to build; I wasn't deterred in the least by my friends' scepticism or downright disbelief in my abilities, though these might best have given me pause for thought.

'The house that Jack built,' one friend snorted.

I tried not to roll my eyes.

Another was more forthcoming with his thinking.

‘Who’s going to build your house?’ he asked.

‘I am,’ I said.

‘No, I mean, build. Who’s actually going to build the house, you know, do the bricklaying and stuff?’

‘Yes, me,’ I replied.

There was silence for a second or two, a double-take of wide eyes and a mouth opened in surprise just long enough for me to register.

‘Can you build?’

‘Why not?’

My great-aunt Hazel, known in the family and elsewhere for her frankness, didn’t mince words.

‘Pay a builder to do it, Carl. It’s just not worth the trouble,’ she told me, her features wearing a serious, impatient look.

She knew my mind was already decided. I heard her out, but disregarded her advice. Of course, I can do this, I thought.

If I may be kind to myself, my confidence was born of innocence – or ignorance, if I were to be less kind.

Physics and physical realities put the strongest of self-belief to the test. I had chosen one of the most demanding, labour-intensive mediums of building, without knowing in that visceral way, the sheer laboriousness of it all. Had I grasped the amount of effort involved in adobe – especially the thick, header-bond walls I planned – I might have opted for a frame-and-cladding design, and got away from the project in a quarter of the time. Or less.

I underestimated the harshness of the site, too. Beyond Melbourne Airport are the dry, rolling foothills of the Great Dividing Range. It’s among the windiest places in Victoria, which is a windy part of the world by almost anyone’s reckoning. My plumber Malcolm rather unkindly said my building site was at ‘the end of the Earth’. In winter, cold winds whipped across the open landscape, funnelling between the hilltops from higher land in the north. Alternately, frigid south-westerlies tailing from the Roaring Forties chilled the landscape. Then in summer, there were the baking-hot northerly winds that sear the flesh and send farmers mad. It was either hotter than Melbourne, or bleak and colder; exposed and so all the more lonely when I worked alone.

And alone I was, for much of the first phase of the build. Just as those thick walls took shape, the adobe reaching halfway up the reclaimed steel art-deco window frames, my partner called time on our marriage of six years. It was a very modern parting: no great drama, no hard feelings – she wanted her freedom, she said, granting me mine in the mud and bitter cold of the bleakest seasons. I was to be a single (and sad) builder, for a while.

Thankfully, my neighbours a kilometre away on either side – Chris and Helen, Frank and Pat – were wonderfully supportive. The odd cheery chat with Mike, who lives at the end of the road, lifted my spirits. Visits with a cup of tea or meal here and there and a talk were invaluable, for moral support as much as practical assistance. A borrowed tool or piece of equipment and advice helped me along nicely where I would have struggled.

This was one factor that I hadn't reckoned on, but was crucial to the success of my project. Rural folk, even if they're really city-born migrants to the countryside, evince a breadth of generosity that is hard to imagine in the suburbs. And age is no bar when donating a hand, labour of the hardest kind when needed, out in the country. Frank and Pat, then in their late sixties, helped me get a steel spiral staircase (rescued from the old Palladium nightclub in Melbourne) into the house. Try as I might, I couldn't make it fit through the door. It should have been an expensive job for a crane. But together one morning, the three of us rolled it up and hoisted it over the half-built adobe walls, in one immense effort. We celebrated with a cup of tea and biscuits afterwards, such was the feeling of achievement.

Another event is singed onto my memory as if by a branding iron. One scorching-hot day, I drove down my country lane towards the site in my Chrysler Valiant Regal, towing a tandem trailer overloaded with more than three tonnes of heavy steel sections. It had been a torturous trip, travelling slowly to save the trailer's tyres, hoping the police wouldn't stop me. As I drove that last kilometre, I wondering how on earth I would unload it all. My neighbour Pryor gave a curt wave from his tractor seat as I passed.

The Regal was on the verge of overheating as I approached the building site. I dabbed the brakes; the vehicle surged forward, tyres ground on gravel, the massive weight behind pushing the locked wheels onward. I felt a cold sweat as the steel juggernaut halted. Just a couple of metres more and it would have plummeted down the steep grassed slope beyond the driveway. I breathed with relief. As I got out of the Regal and leant on the trailer, the sheer mass of the steel seemed to weigh on me. I felt tired just looking at it. I had barely made it there, and now, I faced the near-impossible task of unloading it myself.

I heard a diesel engine's rumbling. Glancing up, I saw Pryor on his tractor, hat on his head, the slasher high in the air behind as he headed towards me on the driveway. He had stopped his work and come to help without asking. I could never have thanked him enough. The steel lengths seemed to be stuck together, welded to the trailer in the heat. It took us more than a gruelling hour and a half, grunting, panting and cursing, to pry and coax it all off.

I had some constant company throughout my building – my son Zac's trusty Staffordshire Bull Terrier, Kardinal. With canine bodybuilder muscles and a tender heart beneath his shiny black coat, Kardinal made a perfect tradesman's dog. I had to keep this lovable ruffian under control, though: whenever I let him roam free, he couldn't help but chase cattle and sheep, and even the odd horse. He chewed through ropes as though they were liquorice sticks and broke collars like a strongman, so I kept him chained with his bespoke riveted leather harness to a column in the centre of the house for most of the day. There, he sat in the sand covering the patterned concrete slab, watching me work with the satisfied devotion that only a dog can possess.

Working alone might have been tiresome, but it meant I could work in a way that suited myself, in rhythms and times of my own liking. A night owl, I would sometimes work late into the evening with the generator chugging away, illuminating the site with floodlights. Too far away to be bothered by the noise, my neighbours could see from their bedroom window the paddock lit up in the distance, grinder showering sparks outward and the blue flickering light of the welding arc as I worked. 'Carl's at it late again tonight!' they'd say to themselves, bemused.

For month upon month, I toiled, and it took its toll. As I finished the adobe of the first storey, I was mentally and physically exhausted. A single person working with masonry has to mix the mortar – thick adobe walls need tonnes of it – throw the forty-pound bricks up onto scaffolding, then climb onto the scaffolding to lay them. Then climb down again to cut bricks, and mix more mortar. It might have been as enjoyable as it was hard work, but progress was painfully slow.

Cutting and welding heavy steel sections salvaged from factories and transmission towers likewise was no mean feat. I used pieces of round treated pine fencing posts as rollers and a crow bar to move them around the building site on my own. How much easier, and quicker, would it have been to fix feather-light weatherboards to a frame with a nail gun?

The solution was simple: I needed help. I asked my contacts if they knew anyone with the requisite skills and hardiness. My mud-brick supplier, Rob

Bakes, kindly introduced me to Graeme Fraser, a.k.a. G.J.. 'I wouldn't recommend him unless I was absolutely confident of his ability,' Rob told me. His confidence was well-placed. A geologist with a MacGyver spirit, G.J. could make a broken-down car start with old speaker wire, which he did on at least one occasion with his Holden HQ ute. He was just the kind of man the farmhouse needed. We worked together for the following year, building the high gable ends, the loft and fitting out the farmhouse, using makeshift methods, jury-rigging and improvising as we went. I shudder to think what would have happened had a safety inspector visited and seen our scaffolding, which was fashioned from upside-down shed trusses strung between reclaimed columns.

The house seemed to build itself, at any rate, while demanding a steadfast over-engineering of just about everything. M12 hold-down rods? Be damned! M16 galvanised threaded rod rose through the adobe, past barbed wire layered in the mortar courses, from the slab to the roof beams. Galvanised 510 Universal Beam turned on its side made the most gloriously overdone lentils; lengths of 360 UB (colloquially known as 'I' beam) take their place as floor beams where 250 UB would surely have sufficed. The philosophy of the home seemed to be, nothing done in half measures is worth doing at all. It must be authentic, and built to last.

The result was a somewhat brutalist, rustic farmhouse, finished with quirky art-deco flourishes. Naturally, the art-deco reclaimed windows and doors lent the place a sense of age from the moment it was finished – it seems that it has been there now not for years but for generations. Somehow, the farmhouse exists in its own temporal space. Surely, it exacted time from me and others, demanding it for the service it would proffer to this and future generations, perhaps.

Life moved on at the regular pace, though, as I built: I remarried, and not long afterwards, a new baby, Hamish, arrived. I enlisted my partner Rajeshni's help, mostly in the final push to finish the farmhouse. Raised in the tropical climes of Fiji, Rajeshni shivered while mixing mortar, rendering walls and making cups of hot coffee. Fresher than I, she brought some new energy to the project when it was needed. As did others. My old friend Robbie came to help here and there, and his son Trystan brought his skills to the place when they were most needed.

Kardinal played his part. It felt as if he was essential to the building process, though obviously only for his moral support. That's the compelling reason tradesmen keep dogs, if this needs mention. Long after the house was finished, Kardinal stayed. Indeed, he was there at farmhouse's beginning, and there till his end. He even marked the farmhouse as his with a paw

imprint in concrete. He saw my son Zac grow from a child to a teenager then an able young man, though he was forbidden to cross the suspended walkway to Zac's bedroom above the kitchen.

Kardinal finally passed away at the grandfatherly dog age of fourteen; he was in a basket at his favourite spot, beside the east column near the French doors where he always sat. I sometimes see him in my dreams – I imagine he's visiting me. Or perhaps he is still there in the house, near where he is buried alongside the fence.

I like to stand there when I can, gazing out east across the vast rolling paddocks, textured grey outcrops mingled with grass. The first trails of urban sprawl now reach in the far distance where there was once only open country. To the horizon are darker hues of green, the hills of Kinglake and the Yarra Ranges. I hope the natural eucalypt forests there remain; that we somehow find a greater sense of the world and our place in it, before we change it for our convenience.

Of course, people must find a place to live. May it be for the better, for them and the environment. People, like birds and possums, will always have an urge to make their own homes. If we make our homes ourselves we know, in that fully knowing, deep-seated manner as animals do by instinct, the energy that we invest, and the impact of it all. Maybe in doing so we will find as I feel I did, a greater sense of belonging, of being part of the land rather than living in something placed on top of it. Or simply, we might know the meaning and the suffering of seriously hard work. And the value of friendship.

To see the gallery of the building process, [click here](#)