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Life & Leisure

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LIVING IN A PERFECT WORLD



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For city folk with a bit of country in their blood, a farmhouse weekender gives them the opportunity to reconnect with the heartland and all that makes it tick. But in the wake of the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria as well as subsequent fires, cyclones and floods across Australia, this indulgence has been tinged with fear, guilt and much commiseration.

Three years after the fires that took 173 lives and more than 2000 houses, Victoria's hills are green again, lessons have been learnt and building codes revised. Moreover, the first of the rebuilt homes are revealing a regenerated take on the humble homestead.

One such house – Finnon Glen in Chum Creek, a peaceful slice of the Yarra Valley – is the ultimate case in point. Interior designer Fiona Lynch's family farm was destroyed on Black Saturday. The family is thankful the house was empty that day – still, the loss was formidable. "It was devastating," Lynch says. "The farmhouse had been in the family for 45 years and it's where we all come together."

The rebuilt Finnon Glen is what all weekenders should be: warm, low maintenance and at peace with its surroundings. A wide purple door pivots to an interior washed in filtered sunlight and refined finishes. Playful piano-key joinery

details lead the way into a bright communal living space and huge sliding doors capture and release the view over the hills. Lynch's resolved interior for the country weekender perfectly embodies good times. No doubt, she is looking forward not back. "Looking at the positive side, the rebuild posed us a new beginning," she says.

Spotted gum and sen ash veneer blend with the natural surroundings. Moleskin-coloured laminated joinery adds a bit of sophistication while the exposed plywood edges mix in a little roughness. "People go to the country to be relaxed," Lynch says. "Natural tones and a few unfinished edges help to create that feeling." It's no surprise that the house was recently given the Melbourne Design Award for best residential interior.

With four bedrooms, a bunk room, three bathrooms and a study, there is substantial space for up to 21 people to stay – as well as space to be apart. The bedrooms and bathrooms flank the central living, dining and kitchen areas so whole wings can be shut off for smaller, more intimate gatherings. An acoustic sliding door closes

MAIN AND ABOVE: The Kilmore house, by modular housing firm Intermod, appears to be almost floating on the land. Its design incorporates a variety of bushfire-proofing measures.

WORDS BY Anna McCooe

PHOENIX DESIGN

In the aftermath of the Black Saturday fires in Victoria, a new breed of stylish and safe country house is rising from the ashes.



PHOTOGRAPHY (LEFT) COURTESY OF BATES SMART ARCHITECTS & (RIGHT) BY DEREK SWALLOW (KILMORE HOUSE)

off the bunk room so the children can sleep peacefully (or make their own noise) as dinners linger into the night.

Lynch and her design partner Mardi Doherty say low lighting enhances the farmhouse experience. "Soft lighting incorporates the house into the environment," Doherty says. "When the lighting is a little dimmer than in a typical city home, a weekender feels more removed and relaxed."

The duo's scheme of wall lights, pendants, floor lamps and very few downlights emits an almost palpable warmth while the Toss B fittings from Hub Furniture offer no distraction from the view. "The house gets amazing light," Lynch says. "The sky is always changing and we didn't want to compete with that."

Strong lines throughout express what some would term a masculine architecture. "There's nothing fussy," Lynch says. "It's not trying too hard. We didn't want the house to be a showpiece – it's just a working country home."

Finnon Glen was a collaborative project between Doherty Lynch and Jackson Clements Burrows Architects (JCB) who designed a robust rectangular construction, clad in black metal. JCB worked on site to relocate the house from the top of the hill (the worst location in case of fire) to lower ground and oriented the building to frame the views over Healesville, Toolangi and Kinglake.

The plans were donated by JCB as part of the Architects Bushfire Homes Service "We Will Rebuild" program that involved 19 notable



architects providing free plans to those who lost houses in the 2009 fires. Each plan conforms to the updated national building standards for bushfire-prone areas and is at the cutting edge of sustainable practice.

The design by Brisbane architectural firm Donovan Hill for Happy Haus is one such that is reshaping the mould. The Dhan house, as it is known, is designed and constructed in Queensland, transported by truck and installed on site in just four to 12 weeks. This is indeed a fast fix for an enduring, architecturally designed home.

Other designs include an underground house by John King Architects, which sits in the lie of the land to guard it from flames, while the Seed House by John Wardle Architects takes on an elliptical form to minimise flat

ABOVE, FROM LEFT: Bedroom with a view in a transportable Dhan house, designed by Brisbane architectural practice Donovan Hill for Happy Haus; an exterior view of a Dhan module.



surfaces where embers might settle.

The Kilmore house by Nick Carr's modular housing firm, Intermode, sits amid burnt tree trunks on a paddock cleared by the 1983 Black Wednesday fires. On Black Saturday, the five-bedroom, three-bathroom house was one of the lucky ones. The owners had just collected the keys to their new house as the oncoming blaze reached the side of the highway – then the wind changed direction.

Carr believes a country house can respect nature while still engaging with it. "It's about encouraging the interaction and experience of nature without extensively disturbing it," he says. The Kilmore house does this with a series of low-lying pavilions that appear to be almost floating on the land. The living zones and sleeping pavilions are separated by protected courtyards, decks and covered glazed walkways.

Of course, safety is paramount. Carr suggests such measures as fitting sprinkler systems into eaves so that structures can be rapidly drenched, protecting subfloor areas from embers and using bushfire-rated materials such as fire-tested aluminium window frames. "I also recommend including bore water supply and diesel pumps in case of electricity failure during a fire," he says. "Location is vital, too, so it's about marrying an open space with the best natural light and the most breathtaking views."

The plans were part of a program in which 19 architects provided free plans to those who lost houses in the 2009 fires.



CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN: The Finnon Glen house was oriented to frame views; interiors are bathed in light; the clean lines of the kitchen convey a relaxed mood.

