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Australia in Sonoma

A Bit of the Outback, Transplanted to Wine Country

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN

THE human need to concoct architectural fantasies runs deep. The compulsion seems particularly acute in California, land of perpetual self-invention, where Tuscan villas preside over Napa Valley hillsides, and movie stars about ersatz Bavarian castles with Mediterranean swimming pools behind British ges in Beverly Hills.

Within this Lonely Planet school of design, in which houses pretend to be in other places, the more obscure the better, few can compare with a compound inspired by the Australian outback that Linda Dodwell, an intrepid motorcyclist, adventurer and st, has built on five acres near this city in Sonoma County with the aid of a Melbourne architect.

A dilettante she is not. Ms. Dodwell, 63, may well be the only client in America to have become architecturally smitten while riding solo 10,000 miles on a BMW motorcycle between Melbourne and Perth, her



DOWN UNDER Inspired by Australia, Linda Dodwell, left, built a compound in California. A galvanized bathtub has a spot on the veranda, above, and, far left, six tanks under the house catch rainwater.

of quicksand in a 1968 Hillman Hunter sedan. The race began in Beijing and — after a jaunt up to an Everest base camp — wound up with celebratory martinis in the Place de la Concorde.

Compared with such escapades, hiring a dozen Australian craftspeople to design elements like a eucalyptus-leaf weather vane or marquetry panels depicting silver-leaved gum trees for a billiard room modeled on the Cabinet rooms of Parliament House in Canberra, is but a trifle, an art project writ extremely large.

"I was drawn to their ironic sense of humor," she said of her initial

bike outfitted with a bungee cord for hauling art and other loot while she herself was "covered with desert and bugs like you wouldn't believe," she said.

Nor is she easily deterred: witness her 43-day ride with a friend in the 1997 "Peking to Paris Motor Challenge," in which she and the woman traversed 12 countries, 22 rivers, 2 continents and the odd run

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extravagantly floral, hand-painted wood pedestal (\$32) that would provide a boost as

chance color, like blue, but it's a Moroccan hippie kind of thing," he said. **ELAINE LOUIE**

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attraction to Australians and their culture. "People there don't take themselves too seriously, even though they've had a rugged go of it."

Ms. Dodwell, who "divorced well" as she delicately puts it (she has since remarried) made her first trip to Australia in 1989. She had become seriously interested in motorcycling as an art student in her 30s in San Francisco, and became determined to ride one after confessing her desire to do so in front of 300 women seated around a bonfire at a New Age workshop in the Sierras.

"My previous life was dissolving," she said. "I went to Australia to clear out the cobwebs."

She soon became the Beryl Markham of the BMW set, her eye becoming attuned to the nuances of the landscape, especially the ubiquitous water tanks that are "part of the iconography of the rural Australian house, a matter of survival," said Michael Rigg, the architect whom Ms. Dodwell hired after reading about him in an Australian newspaper. (The tanks, which harvest rainwater from the roof, have also become a fixture in Australian cities in recent years, thanks to government rebates intended to address water shortages.)

Ms. Dodwell spends weekends at the five-building compound, to which she commutes from the fashionable Pacific Heights neighborhood of San Francisco. Until her recent marriage to Tommy DeHennis, a San Francisco mechanical engineer, she spent years dividing her time between the Left Coast and Down Under, restoring a bungalow outside Melbourne, which Mr. Rigg helped design, and renovating a cottage in Birdwood, near Adelaide.

She became intimately familiar with Australian craft and art, collecting the work of well-known sculptors like the late Rosalie Gascoigne, the first Australian woman to show her work at the Venice Biennale. She made Nicolas Roeg-worthy forays into the hinterlands, once stumbling upon a painting by the late Aboriginal artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye in the attic of a bush gallery in South Australia.

It was thus not a huge leap — though it was certainly an expensive one — to imagine bringing her passion for things Antipodean (up to and including top-loading Fisher & Paykel washer-dryers) to building a house in California.

"I figured if I could bike 3,000 miles across Australia, I could do anything," said Ms. Dodwell, the daughter of a New Jersey state trooper who grew up in Union City, N.J. "I've got bragging rights, which is not a bad thing if you are a woman of a certain age."

Mr. Rigg visited the site every few months, and worked with Shawn Montoya, an architect based in Petaluma, Calif., in a process that began in 2000 and took five years. Much of the compound was designed and assembled in Australia, including the exquisite marquetry panels by Michael Retter, a veneer craftsman, and the artist Tony Bishop, whose work she had admired in the Parliament building in Canberra. ("We kept the shipping lanes open," Ms. Dodwell said.)

For Mr. Rigg, observing his own culture through his client's eye allowed him to re-examine Australian vernacular design. Ms. Dodwell saw

She saw beauty in a water tank, in wattle-and-daub and in a crocheted plastic table.

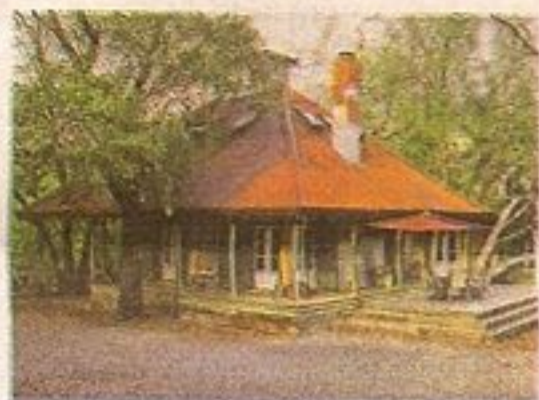
beauty in aspects of the landscape that many locals take for granted — for instance, the water tanks, which in Australia are typically hidden away at the back of the house. She also appreciated the widespread use of recycled materials. "Only Linda would have collected a handmade dressing table made out of crocheted plastic," Mr. Rigg said.

Located on the site of a 1906 homestead, the compound was conceptualized around a familiar scene in rural Australia, where it is quite common to see two houses sitting next to each other, "one before the family made money and the one after," as Mr. Rigg put it. Australians developed an instinct for "keeping things that might come in handy later, especially in unpredictable periods of drought," he said. Because of the isolation of the outback, materials were routinely reused. "There was an idea of 'making do,'" he said. "Wood was a scarce resource. Metal was used over and over."

In her mind, Ms. Dodwell spun a narrative, "a culmination of the variety I saw on my trips through the outback," she said.

With its corrugated roof and a veranda that surrounds the entire exterior, the main house is modeled on the tropical Queensland vernacular type known as "the inside-out house," a 19th-century building style in which the structural framing was exposed, much as it is in a barn, reversing the Victorian custom of a grand facade.

The guest house is meant to recall humble ear-



HUMBLE, AND NOT The back of Linda Dodwell's 7,200-square-foot main house, top, as seen from the guest cottage. The cottage, above, is designed to recall early homesteads in rural Australia. At center, Ms. Dodwell and Shawn Montoya, a California architect who served as the project's on-site supervisor.

ly wattle-and-daub homesteads and outbuildings of rural Australia, in which clay was applied over timber saplings and walls were lined with burlap (the settlers did not have DVD players, however).

The garage, which is heated and has a shower, is modeled on stone and brick buildings put up by German immigrants in South Australia, especially the wine-growing Barossa region.

While homesteads in the outback had shearing sheds and other lowly outbuildings, this being Sonoma Ms. Dodwell built herself a small tower to use as an art studio and massage room. A Robb Report version of the third world, the folly was inspired by "timber shacks in different places, especially Ecuador, and the way the light comes through," she said.

The interiors of the main house are a shrine to Australian art and craft. Although Ms. Dodwell considers the work of modern Australian architects like Glenn Murcutt, a Pritzker Prize winner, "sexy as anything," she enlisted artisans to design quirky spins on traditional décor, such as a cast-concrete bathroom sink basin with an embossed platypus on the bottom, or colorful door thresholds painted to resemble Aboriginal dot art.

Throw pillows on the living room chairs and sofa are covered in, yes, kangaroo — a pelt used for footballs and sports shoes that, not surprisingly, has spawned controversy in Australia. (This is true even though so many kangaroos have lately migrated to suburban sprinkler-fed lawns because of drought that a lot of Australians now consider them pests. "They eat the grass of country houses," Mr. Rigg said.)

The pool table is composed of rare Tasmanian timbers, the legs in an emu-egg motif. "Most billiard rooms are dark and smoky and oozing male-ness," Mr. Rigg said. "This was Linda's room, so it had to be light, subtle and colorful."

In the bedroom, a plaster frieze of wild waratah flowers was adapted from an old hotel in Melbourne — the use of native flora and fauna typical of Federation style ornament, a period of Australian decorative arts that reflected confidence in the identity of the newly federated nation.

At her wedding to Mr. DeHennis, which took place on the property in 2003, before the main house was built, Ms. Dodwell served barramundi fish flown in from the Northern Territories, Australian lamb and "Bush Tucker" cocktails, the phrase for things made with plants and fruits from the Australian bush.

Since her compound sits in wine country near some of the finest vineyards in the nation, she did the only logical thing: she imported sparkling shiraz from South Australia.

Weddings, schmeddings. That's true commitment.



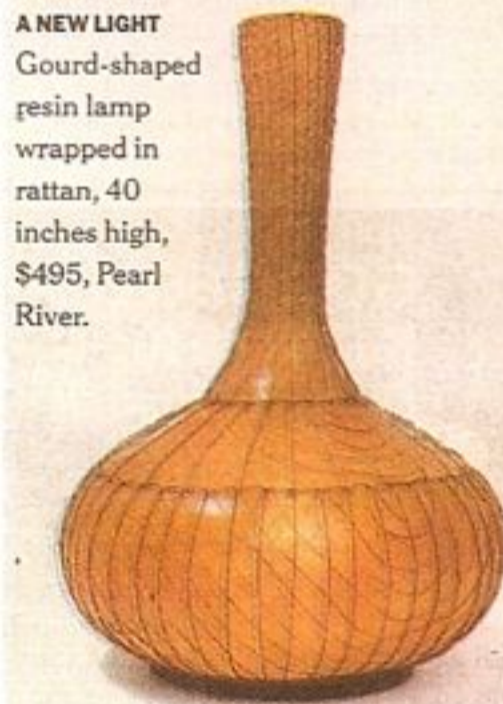
OFF THE CHAIN Simon Doonan checks out room dividers made of bamboo loops at Pearl River Mart in SoHo.

ABOVE, RUTH FREEMAN/
THE NEW YORK TIMES; BELOW,
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LARS KLOVE
FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



BREAKFAST IN BED
Fourteen-inch-square
lacquered wood trays, \$44.50
each, Pearl River.

A NEW LIGHT
Gourd-shaped
resin lamp
wrapped in
rattan, 40
inches high,
\$495, Pearl
River.



ARTISTIC MORNINGS
Cup and saucer, \$8 each, Urban
Outfitters, 526 Avenue of the Ameri-
cas (14th Street); (646) 638-1646.



MIXED METAPHOR
Moroccan leather pouf, \$225, John Derian, 6
East Second Street (Bowery); (212) 677-3917.



ANNOUNCING DINNER
Brass wind gong, 28 inches in diameter,
\$265, Pearl River Mart, 477 Broadway
(Broome Street); (800) 878-2446.

CHINOISERIE
Ceramic garden
stool, 19 inches high,
\$145, Pearl River.



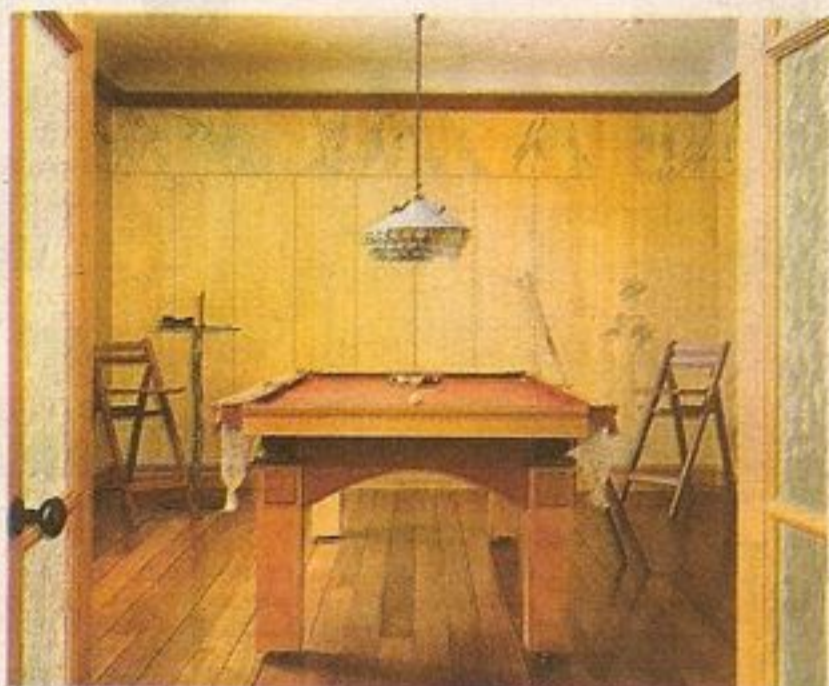
NEW AGE
Basmati rice design on a pillow,
\$32, Urban Outfitters.



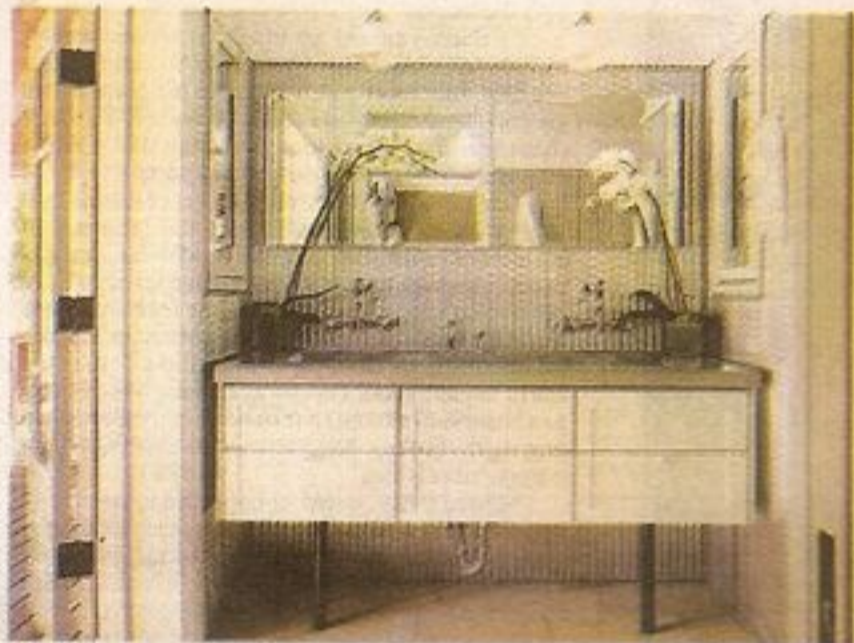
AFFORDABLE UNDERFOOT
Cotton dhurries, 5 feet by 7 feet, \$68,
Urban Outfitters.

roma: Wine Country Outback

WOOD AS ART Marquetry panels in Linda Dodwell's billiard room, below, depict silver-leaved gum trees. The table is made of Tasmanian timbers, with legs in an emu-egg motif.



ANIMALS, TOO Throw pillows on the furniture in the living room, left, are covered in kangaroo pelts, and the wall panels are Australian sassafras and dark oak. A painted threshold, below, resembles Aboriginal dot art.



ROOM TO REST Ms. Dodwell's master bathroom, above, has metal walls, a reference to the scarcity of wood in the outback. At right, she put a tub in the master bedroom to take advantage of the room's abundant natural light. Below, seating on the veranda.

