

Calling Australia

When an American woman fell in love with country Australia, she just couldn't help taking the idea of it back to California.

When Linda DeHennis, an American woman with an independent streak, headed off on her tour of Australia on a motorcycle in 1990, she never imagined that what she found here would change her life so much. She fell in love with the landscape of our wide brown land. She loved the people, the way of life, the wines, the food and the artworks she discovered on her travels, so much so that she ended up setting up home here, living first in Victoria and then in South Australia.

Linda's ideal lifestyle is to spend six months in Australia and six months in America, but while she's in the US, she likes to retain a sense of Australia around her. When it came to building a new home on her property in California, Linda wanted it to have the characteristics of a true Aussie country homestead. So she called on her favourite architects, Michael Rigg and Warwick Sassman from Melbourne firm Urban Spaces, who had previously renovated both her first home in Melbourne and her house in Birdwood, South Australia.

Michael and Warwick designed the house from go to whoa, incorporating not only many typically Australian characteristics and materials, but also commissioning many Australian artisans to create such things as light fittings and furniture. Shawn Montoya, from Californian architectural firm Montoya & Associates, was the local project manager/





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architect.

Set on a sprawling property in the Sonoma Valley, just north of San Francisco, and surrounded by California bay and American oak trees, the house is built in typical outback farmhouse style - timber walls and floors, with a galvanised-iron roof and wide, wraparound verandahs.

One of the most striking things about the exterior of the house is the set of six corrugated-iron rainwater tanks, each capable of holding 4000 litres of water, standing sentry beneath the front verandah. Like Australia, California is prone to water shortages and bushfires, so this water, diverted run-off from the roof, is used both for irrigating the surrounding garden as well as for protection in case fire comes within range of house.

The home is split over three levels. On the ground level, a large home cinema, a

caterer's kitchen and storage area, a bedroom and bathroom are neatly hidden away behind the water tanks.

Broad steps lead to the raised verandah, which is seemingly supported by the tanks, and the front door. The verandah offers shade and a cooling perimeter around the house, and each room on the lower level has glazed doors opening out to it via glazed doors.

The large entrance hall features an open void through to the second level. "The hall is located at the centre of the house, with rooms radiating outwards from there," Michael explains. A dramatic eucalypt-inspired chandelier made by a group of Australian craftspeople hangs from the double-height ceiling. "The gumnuts with fibre-optic lenses were designed by Nathan Thompson and crafted by artist Peta Hilton in Melbourne. The iron gumleaf decorations



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were made by Broken Hill artist Wayne Robbie. It's really a wonderful piece," says Michael. Centred below the void is a table and bookstand made of wrought iron, polished redgum, brushbox and silky oak by South Australian furniture maker Bernie Koker.

From the entry hall, doors to the left open to the dining area, kitchen and to the large living area beyond, with its views out to a stream and flood plain where wild deer are often seen grazing in the early mornings and at dusk. The room feels much larger than it is thanks to the soaring double-height ceiling that follows the lines of the roof and a mezzanine study overlooking the space. Two leather sofas, made locally, are set on an Australian wool rug by the fireplace and softened by lots of cushions made of felt and kangaroo skin that were specially selected by Michael

and Warwick. A card nook contains a beautiful bespoke cabinet and paintings by Australian artists adorn the walls. "Linda has one of the finest collections of Australian art outside Australia," Warwick says.

Adjacent to the living room are the kitchen and dining areas, which are divided by a ceiling-height dresser [carvery?] Linda bought in South Australia. It's made of Ripple Iron (zinc-coated corrugated steel), jarrah and blackwood, and deliberately assembled as a series of mismatching cabinets. The kitchen cabinetry [made of karri wood and tallowwood?] are similarly one-off pieces, put together in the way that traditional Australian homestead kitchen cupboards would evolve. A large stove that can cater for big dinner parties and a broad blackwood island bench also make practical design statements.

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The dining area features a large oval-shaped blackwood table and kangaroo-hide upholstered chairs.

The main bedroom continues the Aussie homestead theme with a polished brushbox floor, a four-poster bed (in Queensland silky oak) and a custom-made plaster frieze with a waratah design at picture-rail height. The bedroom also has an ensuite, dressing room and private study.

The decor in the billiard room next door was inspired by the Australian plant motifs Linda had seen at Parliament House in Canberra. “Linda asked the two artists responsible to create wall panels for the room,” explains Michael. “West Australian weeping gum was the main motif South Australian artisan Tony Bishop used for his design, combining it with Aboriginal patterns and bird images. Michael Retter (from Sydney) then inlaid Tony’s work

with veneers of banksia, redgum and acacia to create the wall panels.” The billiard table itself was crafted by Victorian David Evans, of Harry Evans & Sons, using silky oak and Huon pine with polished emu eggs as leg decorations. “The baize was selected to match the red desert sands of central Australia,” says Michael. “South Australian artist Bruce Howard, who is well known for his sculptural furniture in corrugated iron, crafted the unusual lamp.”

Upstairs, there’s a walkway around the void to the lower floor where many more paintings by Australian artists are hung in gallery style. There’s also a third bedroom, bathroom and mezzanine study.

But the homestead is not the only building on the property. Nearby, there are separate guest quarters with two

